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If You Thought You Knew the Location of Sodom and Gomorrah...Think Again

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On a morning in early summer 761 BCE the sun's leading edge sent hazy spikes of light across the gray-blue sky above the distant Transjordan highlands. The familiar crunching sound of leather-soled sandals on the gravelly path pierced the otherwise silent, still air of the Judean Wilderness, somewhere near Hebron toward the Great Rift Valley. The lone figure silhouetted against the dawn stepped with care over the uneven terrain, and made his way to a precipice overlooking the now silvery surface of the Dead Sea. Below him was the oasis of En Gedi. Slightly to the south along the eastern shore of the salt lake was what he'd come to see—the parched white glare of the Tongue, the Lisan. This was close enough for the Levite. The rest he could capture with his mind.

He recalled how as a child he'd traveled through that very area with his father, a respected priest and scribe who served the Jerusalem Temple. Together they'd walked amongst the ruins of a once-great city not far east from the Lisan. He remembered large blackish lizards sunning themselves on the stones of crumbling city walls and buildings that must have been houses and temples, still impressive, but eerie.

"Yahweh destroyed this and other cities that once thrived here," his father had told him. "Evil cities. Men who mocked Yahweh's holiness with their immorality. He destroys such men. Never forget the desolation of this place—even today it is uninhabitable. Remember that Yahweh's wrath mocks evil men." He remembered his father's words as he thought he could just make out the ancient ruins from his high vantage point. "S^edom and 'Amorah," he whispered to himself. His imagination soared.

Back in Jerusalem Yod sharpened his reed pen, stirred his charcoal-and-gum ink, and positioned the half-filled parchment scroll in front of him. His brief journey to the Dead Sea fresh in his mind, the young priest/scribe continued the ancestral saga he'd begun months before: "The patriarch Abraham and his nephew Lot moved their families and flocks to the area of Hebron, but the place was too small to accommodate their large numbers. So Abraham gave Lot the choice of lands. From the edge of the plateau east of Hebron, Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the valley southeast of the Salt Sea was well-watered and lush with crops and vegetation. So Lot traveled around the southern end of the Salt Sea, then northward toward the cities of the valley and pitched his tent near S^edom. The cities of the valley were evil in the sight of Yahweh...Then Yahweh rained on S^edom and 'Amorah brimstone and fire..."

And so Yod ("J") spun glorious tales of creation, the great flood, and legends of Hebrew ancestors he'd heard since childhood. "After all," he thought, "the Judahite Kingdom ought to heed the wisdom of its ancestors, and not fall prey to the evils of the apostate Israelite Kingdom to the north."

The End

The scenario I've just described is a reasonable re-creation of the writing experience of the so-called "Yahwist,"¹ author of the Torah J material, and the main contributor to the Genesis story of Sodom and Gomorrah (these are the Greek spellings; the Hebrew is closer to those given above), set during the Middle Bronze Age according to a face-value reading of the biblical chronology. Indeed, most scholars interpret the Sodom and Gomorrah episode as an aetiological legend explaining why the southern Dead Sea area remained desolate and virtually uninhabitable during the late Iron Age (the time of J), but had obviously been the home of successful cities and villages during a much earlier period (in fact, the Early Bronze Age, as at Bab edh-Dhra² and Numeira).² Of course, a writer like J would have had absolutely no clue when those EB sites had flourished, but merely would have known that in his day they stood as a silent witnesses to a bygone era that, according to local tradition, came to an abrupt end when, during the days of Abraham and Lot, Yahweh sent fire and *goprit* (lightning? sulfur?)³ out of heaven to destroy the entire region where evil cities once thrived.

If there ever was a perfect set-up for an aetiological legend to develop, this was it. Anybody living during the Iron Age and familiar with the Dead Sea area would have known about the impressive ruins at Bab edh-Dhra and smaller neighboring sites. They also would have known that the southern Dead Sea region was terribly dry, hot, salty and mostly uninhabited. Why would they suspect that such an area once supporting ancient cities was now, in their time, a tortured landscape practically devoid of life? No mental extrapolation needed—the area was still a wasteland in the Iron Age because Yahweh had burned up the Cities of the Plain in his fierce anger! As far as I can see, if you're going to spin theories about J and his aetiological legends, then the southern Dead Sea area is the *only* place that would have crossed his mind.

The reason that J, during Iron II, couldn't possibly have thought of locating the Cities of the Plain (Heb., *kikkar* = disk, circle) immediately north of the Dead Sea and east of the Jordan River

¹ The foundations of the documentary hypothesis—particularly as formulated by Wellhausen—is virtually accepted out of hand by most ANE archaeologists and historians. The sheer complexity and "beauty" of the DH—presented most eloquently in the 20th century by Noth and von Rad—has dominated Hexateuchal studies, most notably the book of Genesis, for over a hundred years. See J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Meridian, 1957); G. von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966); G. von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972); and M. Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972). The DH, however, has not gone unchallenged. In fact, in this writer's opinion, the DH should be given a quiet funeral. Between the cogent criticisms of the DH by Cassuto and Harrison, the unifying chiasmic structure of Genesis and the whole Pentateuch as set forth by Kikawada and Quinn, and the fact of a host of Middle and Late Bronze Age historical synchronisms and elements of cultural specificity embedded in the Hexateuchal narratives as set forth by Kitchen and Collins, the documentary approach to the OT can only survive in an atmosphere where the DH itself is isolated against critical analysis. See U. Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961); U. Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham: A Commentary on the First Chapters of Genesis 11* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964); R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969); I. M. Kidawada and A. Quinn, *Before Abraham Was: The Unity of Genesis 1-11* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985); K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); and S. Collins, *Let My People Go: Using Historical Synchronisms to Identify the Pharaoh of the Exodus* (Albuquerque: TSU Press, 2005).

² The EB destructions were ubiquitous throughout the Levant, with many cities never rebuilt. Not a few scholars consider the story of Sodom's destruction a legend spun around a vague, collective historical memory of the collapse of the EB world of the late third millennium BCE. See W. E. Rast, "Bab edh-Dhra and the Origin of the Sodom Saga," in *Archaeology and Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Memory of D. G. Rose*, ed. by Perdue, Toombs, and Johnson (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987); and W. E. Rast, "Bab edh-Dhra" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. by D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1993). If the demise of EB civilizations in the Near East were the result of a fiery event, such as a comet fragment or small asteroid impact, as some astronomers now believe, then such an historical memory could certainly have lodged in the regional folklore. See B. Peiser, "Comets and Disaster in the Bronze Age" in *The Journal of the Council for British Archaeology* 30 (1997) 6-7. Most archaeologists tend to ignore, thus are generally unfamiliar with, such theories of catastrophe.

³ J. A. Naude, 1730, *ö NIDOTTE vol. 1* 889.

is simple and straightforward: during Iron Age II, several significant cities and towns flourished in the area, as demonstrated by archaeological survey work and recent excavations on the eastern Jordan Disk (Kikkar), notably at Tall Nimrin and Tall el-Hammam.⁴ During Iron II, the area just north of the Dead Sea and east of the Jordan was a lush agricultural plain supporting a significant population spread over about 150 square kilometers. Because of the fact that the eastern Kikkar was a veritable "garden spot" in Iron II, neither J nor any other Pentateuchal compiler would ever have thought to locate Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim there. Toward the southern end of the Dead Sea, yes. On the eastern Kikkar of the Jordan River, no wayô period.

It's right here that the "aetiological legend theory" of Sodom and Gomorrah dies on the sharp edge of sheer logicô Occam's razor. Additionally, theories about a southern Dead Sea location for the Cities of the Plain are found bloody and lifeless by the same blade. Why? For the simple reason that the text of Genesis 13 unequivocally locates the five sin cities on the eastern Kikkar north of the Dead Sea. Whatever your theory of Torah textual development, if it can be solidly demonstrated that (1) the writer of the Sodom saga actually does locate the Cities of the Plain north of the Dead Sea⁵ in an area that was verdant and well populated with cities and villages during the Iron Age, and (2) the eastern Kikkar does in fact possess a string of Middle Bronze Age cities and towns matching the biblical description of the Cities of the Plain,⁶ then it isn't likely that the story is an Iron II aetiological legend. It would, however, suggest that theories about a southern Dead Sea location for the Cities of the Plainô W.F. Albright, G.E. Wright and othersô are nothing more than modern legends spun by scholars who didn't bother to perform a detailed analysis of the geographical data embedded in the text of Genesis 13, but in typical aetiological fashion projected the story onto the desolate southern Dead Sea region. Now wouldn't that be a bit of irony: Genesis 13 preserves factual information about the geography of the eastern Kikkar from the Middle Bronze Age, while modern scholars have been the ones spinning aetiological yarns about the locations of Sodom and Gomorrah (!).

But it seems that this is precisely what has happened.

So, what does Genesis 13 say about the location of Sodom and Gomorrah? Plenty. Serially, the data lines up like this:

1. Abraham and Lot had traveled to the area of Bethel/Ai, on the central highlands, about 12 miles north of Jerusalem, WNW from Jericho (v. 3).
2. While in the region of Bethel/Ai, Abraham and Lot decided to part ways, and "Lot lifted up his eyes and saw the whole Kikkar of the Jordan..." (v.10). The Semitic term *kkar* is not a geographical term at all, but refers either to a circular, flat disk of gold or silver (usually translated as a "talent") or a disk-like loaf of bread (a pita or tortilla). The term was *applied* to the southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea because in that area the valley widens into a disk-shaped alluvial plain about 25km in diameter.

⁴ See J.W. Flanagan and D.W. McCreery, "First Preliminary Report of the 1989 Tell Nimrin Project," *ADAJ* 34 (1990) 131-152; Flanagan and McCreery, "Preliminary Report of the 1990 Excavation at Tell Nimrin," *ADAJ* 36 (1992) 89-111; Flanagan, McCreery, and K.N. Yassine, "Tell Nimrin: Preliminary Report on the 1993 Season," *ADAJ* 38 (1994) 205-244; and Flanagan, McCreery, and Yassine, "Tall Nimrin: Preliminary Report on the 1995 Excavation and Geological Survey," *ADAJ* 40 (1996) 271-292. See also S. Collins, M. Luddeni, and G.A. Byers, "The Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project End of Season Activity Report, Season One: 2005/2006 Probe Excavation and Survey," DoA Jordan, 2006.

⁵ S. Collins, "The Geography of the Cities of the Plain," *Biblical Research Bulletin* II.1 (2002).

⁶ S. Collins, "A Chronology for the Cities of the Plain," *BRB* II.8 (2002).

When standing near the edge of the Jordan Valley just east of Bethel/Ai, the entire expanse of the Kikkar is clearly visible.

3. The Kikkar was watered like "the garden of Yahweh, like the land of Egypt" (v. 10). Without a doubt, these analogies were selected to describe the well-watered Jordan Disk because the area is fed not only by numerous wadis, streams and springs, but also the Jordan River experienced an annual inundation just like the Nile in Egypt. Indeed, the Jordan was a Nile-in-miniature.
4. Lot chose the well-watered Jordan Disk, and from Bethel/Ai "journeyed eastward" (v. 11) and "settled amongst the cities of the Kikkar" (v. 12). This is a precise and unequivocal description of exactly what obtains when one travels eastward from Bethel/Ai— you wind up crossing the Jordan River, and land on the verdant eastern edge of the Kikkar where several cities were built just beyond the reach of the annual overflowing of the Jordan.
5. Lot "moved his tents as far as Sodom" (v. 12). The Hebrew preposition translated "as far as" suggests that Sodom was located about as far you could go eastward on the Kikkar without mounting the Transjordan Plateau. The Cities of the Plain hugged the eastern edge of the Jordan Disk.

As if this weren't enough to firmly establish the location of Sodom and Gomorrah north of the Dead Sea on the eastern edge of the Jordan Disk, there's more. When all the Cities of the Plain are listed together, they *always* appear in a particular order— Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim. There has to be a reason for this formulaic order, but what is it? Logic would dictate that, like Bethel/Ai, I have two doublets, with the larger cities mentioned first. Thus, Sodom was a large city with Gomorrah as a satellite. The same for Admah (big town) and Zeboiim (satellite, perhaps two villages in close proximity, thus the plural). When you add to this the fact that Sodom/Gomorrah is always mentioned before Admah/Zeboiim, it makes sense that Sodom was bigger than Admah. That Sodom is often mentioned alone suggests that was the prominent, dominant city of the group.

Another part of this equation is the south-to-north order in which Transjordan cities are listed in the Pentateuch (see the "Arabah to Jordan Road" in Num 33:45-50). If this directional order holds true with the Cities of the Plain, then the following geographical configuration would be encountered as one moved along the N/S Jordan Valley trade route coming from Egypt, then northward along the eastern shore of the Dead Sea onto the Kikkar: Sodom (largest city), short distance to Gomorrah (satellite of Sodom), longer distance to Admah (second largest city), short distance to Zeboiim (two towns in close proximity). This reflects the logic that Sodom and Gomorrah would be very close together, as would Admah and Zeboiim. But because they're coupled into two "doublets," it follows that there was a larger distance between the doublets than between the main cities and their satellites.

Thus, the Middle Bronze Age geographical framework for the Cities of the Plain as presented in Genesis 13 is not only crystal clear as to their location on the eastern Jordan Disk, but also as to their relative sizes, and the order in which they appear along the ancient Jordan Valley roadway moving south to north.

At this point, several questions arise that must be answered *with facts*:

1. Would an Iron Age II Judahite chronicler meticulously locate the Cities of the Plain on the eastern Jordan Disk? Answer: *No, because the area was a thriving collection of cities and agricultural operations at the time.*
2. Could the geographical data about the Cities of the Jordan Kikkar embedded in Genesis 13 have originated in the head of an Iron Age II storyteller? Answer: *No, because he would have located them, in aetiological fashion, at the Dead Sea's desolate southern end where abandoned EB ruins existed in his day.*
3. Is there a string of at least four or five Middle Bronze Age cities on the eastern Kikkar that match the detailed Genesis 13 geographical parameters? Answer: *Yes, and they line up not only in number and occupational profile, but also in relative size and distance following south to north.*

The answer to the last question might surprise some people, but not those familiar with the archaeology and history of the eastern Jordan Disk, the focus of our ongoing research and excavation.

There are at least fourteen major archaeological sites on the eastern Kikkar, with dozens of smaller ones scattered around them. There are ancient cemeteries and extensive dolmen fields throughout the area, particularly along the eastern edge where the Kikkar abuts the foothills of the Transjordan Plateau. Because of its abundant water resources and alluvial soils, the eastern Jordan Disk was an occupational bonanza for most of its history. Its occupational profile is particularly interesting in the light of the Genesis 10-19 narratives. Numerous sites date back to the Neolithic Period. The grand site of Tuleilat Ghassul defined life on the eastern Kikkar during the Chalcolithic Period. Early Bronze Age sites abound, dominated by the massive EB city at Tall el-Hammam (part of our current excavation project). Several sites contain the ruins of Middle Bronze Age cities/towns, particularly Tall Nimrin and Tall el-Hammam. The Late Bronze Age seems conspicuously absent throughout the eastern Kikkar. There are numerous late Iron Age sites in the area, with the Iron II city at Tall el-Hammam seemingly the dominant force in the period.

If you recall that Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim are listed as great cities long before Abraham's day (Gen 10), and link that with reports about the area being a wasteland during the Late Bronze Age (Num 21:20⁶ and remember, there's no indication that the Israelites encountered *any* inhabitants on the Plains of Moab, the eastern Kikkar opposite Jericho), then the occupational profile of the Cities of the Plain would be: *EB occupation, MB occupation, no LB occupation, and perhaps Iron Age occupation* (an EB-MB-IA profile). This "biblical" profile of occupation shows up at no less than five sites that string along the main N/S trade route⁶ three by extensive surface surveys and two by excavation. The largest of these sites are Tall Nimrin and Tall el-Hammam, with the latter being the largest Bronze Age site in the region. Excavations at both T. Nimrin and T. Hammam reveal that the MB destruction is followed by about five centuries of inoccupation.⁷

Recall the relative sizes and south-to-north configuration of the Jordan Disk cities implied in the biblical text: *Sodom* (biggest city), short distance north to *Gomorrah* (small town), longer

⁷ See Flanagan and McCreery, "First Preliminary Report on the Excavation of Tall Nimrin," *Journal of Biblical Archaeology* 1993; Flanagan and McCreery, "Preliminary Report on the Excavation of Tall Nimrin," *Journal of Biblical Archaeology* 1995; Flanagan, McCreery, and Yassine, "Tall Nimrin: Preliminary Report on the Excavation of Tall Nimrin," *Journal of Biblical Archaeology* 1995; Flanagan, McCreery, and Yassine, "Tall Nimrin: Preliminary Report on the Excavation of Tall Nimrin," *Journal of Biblical Archaeology* 1995; Flanagan, McCreery, and Yassine, "Tall Nimrin: Preliminary Report on the Excavation of Tall Nimrin," *Journal of Biblical Archaeology* 1995; Flanagan, McCreery, and Yassine, "Tall Nimrin: Preliminary Report on the Excavation of Tall Nimrin," *Journal of Biblical Archaeology* 1995. See also Collins, Luddeni, and Byers, "Tall el-Hammam 2005/2006," *Journal of Biblical Archaeology* 2006.

distance north to *Admah* (big city), short distance north to *Zeboiim* (two small towns in close proximity). Now, compare this to the actual configuration of eastern Kikkar sites with the EB-MB-IA profile, moving south to north: *Tall el-Hammam* (biggest city, fortified), short distance north to *Tall Kefrein* (small town), longer distance NNE to *Tall Nimrin* (big city, fortified), short distance ENE to *Tall Mustah* and *Tall Bleibel* (two small towns in extremely close proximity split only by the Wadi Nimrin). If this is merely a coincidence, then there isn't a scintilla of hope of ever doing any serious historical geography in conjunction with the biblical text!

If the biblical text indicates that Sodom existed alongside several adjacent cities/towns in a particular place (eastern Jordan Disk) during a particular period (Middle Bronze Age and earlier) with some particular architecture (fortification with city gate), and the archaeological evidence strewn across the eastern Jordan Disk is in sync with all these parameters, what are we supposed to do with this? Deny it? Ignore it? No, I've got a better idea. Let's put the damned Cities of the *Jordan Disk* on our maps where they really exist, and quit spinning our own aetiological legends about Sodom and Gomorrah being located along some still-inhospitable, God-forsaken stretch of southern Dead Sea shoreline!

What we now know about the archaeology of the eastern Kikkar, particularly from excavations at Tall Nimrin and Tall el-Hammam, is well enough to put an end both to the Albrightian⁸ legend of the southern Dead Sea location, and the Finkelsteinian⁹ legend about aetiological legends.

⁸ W.F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine and the Bible* (New York: Revell, 1935).

⁹ I use Finkelstein to represent the traditional "minimalists" who view virtually all of the Hexateuchal literature as non-historical. See I. Finkelstein and N. Na'aman, eds., *From Nomadism to Monarchy*, eds. (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994); and I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Free Press, 2001).