My Journey to Locate the Genesis Pentapolis North of the Dead Sea

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I have always been a northern resident, growing up in Canada, although I visited the southern United States numerous times. I’m definitely not a “southern boy”, but this was not always the case when it came to the identification of a suitable candidate for the destroyed city of Sodom. In this regard you might say I’m a “southern boy” turned “northern renegade”!

BACKGROUND

My interest in the Pentapolis goes back over 35 years to my first archaeology course and the choice of Sodom and Gomorrah for my first archaeology paper. I was a student at Ontario Bible College (now Tyndale University College and Seminary) at the time (1979), and my professor, Gordon Wright, said that I should meet an archaeologist who had claimed to have identified the location of Sodom. His name was Bryant Wood, and he was in Toronto at the time working on his PhD in Syro-Palestinian archaeology at the University of Toronto and also guest lecturing at Toronto Baptist Seminary. I arranged an appointment and had a wonderful conversation and interaction with Bryant. Bryant provided copies of his magazine article from the Bible and Spade magazine, of which he later became the editor. After doing my research, I came to the conclusion that the best candidate for Sodom at that time was Bâb edh-Dhrâ (BeD) at the southern end of the Dead Sea (Southern Sodom Theory SST). The argument seemed compelling and since I did not doubt its historicity it was the best candidate at that time. In 1979 I had not given the date of destruction a lot of thought or consideration.

In 2006 I had plans to join the excavation at Khirbet al-Maqatir (Ai?) with Dr. Wood but it was cancelled due to security reasons, so instead I joined the Tall el-Ḥammām (TeH) excavation during the first season. I had no idea at the time that Dr. Steven Collins believed this site to be Sodom (Northern Sodom Theory NST), but soon came to hear him explain and appreciate his reasons for his hypothesis. It was during those nine seasons that Scott Stripling and I also identified the Roman/Byzantine remains at Tall el-Ḥammām as part of Livias¹ and located TeH on the Madaba Map.²

I’ve had the privilege of teaching archaeology for Liberty University online since 2009. One of their assignments is to compare the arguments for the southern and northern locations for Sodom. However, out of a frustration at marking their papers and finding students continually mentioning the same fallacies about the location of Sodom, I wrote a book in 2014 titled Key Facts for the Location of Sodom: Student Edition: Navigating the Maze of Arguments. The book provides sixty-two facts which deal with the popular misconceptions about the location of Sodom. It would be an understatement to say that I have become intimately familiar with the intricacies of the arguments for the southern and northern locations of Sodom.

NOT A DEBATE OVER MINIMALISM

First, this is not a debate by a maximalist vs minimalist, as both Dr. Wood and Dr. Collins are maximalists and agree that the story of Sodom, as presented in the biblical text, is both historical and reliable. Also, the southern/northern debate is not new, although the sites of Bab edh-Dhra and Tall el-Hammam were not known to the following early writers. The southern location was argued by the

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likes of Thomas Fuller (1650), Peter Graham (1836), William F. Lynch (1849), Louis Félix de Saulcy (1851), Samuel Wolcott (1868), Georg H. Ewald (1869), Charles Clermont-Ganneau (1846–1923), Sir Charles Warren (1899), William F. Albright (1891–1971), and James Penrose Harland (1943). The northern location has been argued by the likes of Charles W. Wilson (1869), Edward Henry Palmer (1871), Henry Baker Tristram (1873), Selah Merrill (1876, 1881), William F. Birch (1879), Claude Reignier Conder (1879–1883), William M. Thomson (1882–85), George Grove (1884), John Cunningham Geikie (1887), E. Power (1930), and Père Alexis Mallon (1929–1934).3 However, Wood and Collins draw from many of the same arguments advanced by these early pioneers to support their research. Most, if not all, of the following arguments are not new and have been argued by many before me, but I will summarize some of them here.

MOOT ARGUMENTS
Second, many of the arguments for the location of Sodom are moot issues that do not make a significant difference toward locating the site north or south of the Dead Sea. Many of the arguments used to support Bâb edh-Dhrâ as Sodom in the south are equally true of Tall el-Hammâm in the north. I would consider these moot arguments, although some may be stronger in supporting the NST.

Both were large cities
Both were large cities in their region (in their own time period). Sometimes the claim is made that “Bab edh-Dhra is the largest site from the pre-Hellenistic period in the area,”4 as it covers 10 acres. Certainly this is true if one is talking about the southern end of the Dead Sea. However, after eight seasons of excavations at TeH, Collins put the size of TeH into perspective when he explains: “With over 100 acres of Bronze Age occupational footprint and over 60 acres of that situated behind an enormous defensive system, Tall el-Hammam was—on average over its 3,000-year history prior to its destruction toward the end of the Middle Bronze Age—the largest continuously-occupied city in the southern Levant.”5 TeH was certainly a large city-state controlling the southern Jordan Valley in the EB and MB periods.

Both have a large cemetery
Bab edh-Dhrâ has a large cemetery (Khberet Qazone), with possibly half a million people buried there from various periods. However the EB IA, B shaft tombs, which make up the bulk of the graves,6 predate the EB II and III occupation of the city of BeD.7 The EB cemetery is much smaller.

Also, next to TeH there is a large dolmen area known as the Al Rawda Field.8 Some human bone fragments were found in five of the twelve dolmens excavated in 2011, but dolmens appear to be

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3 For a list of their sources see David E. Graves, Key Facts for the Location of Sodom Student Edition: Navigating the Maze of Arguments (Moncton, N.B.: Graves, 2014), 57–59.
used only for ceremonial purposes and not as burial tombs. However, the evidence for Sodom’s cataclysm should reveal human remains in the destruction layer; not neatly buried in cemeteries.

Both have evidence of a fiery destruction

Both have evidence of a fiery destruction to their city gate and human remains in the destruction layers, although at BeD charred human remains were only found in the cemetery.

Wood has suggested that because the evidence in Charnel house A22 in the cemetery at BeD “revealed that the fire started in the roof and spread to the interior when the roof collapsed” that “this provides powerful evidence that ‘the Lord rained down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the Lord out of the heavens’ ” (Gen 19:24). However, in the ancient world it was common to destroy cities by means of shooting flaming arrows into the air (i.e., the Lachish reliefs in the British Museum), which would then land on the roofs of buildings and cause the wattle and daub (twigs and sticks) roof constructions to catch fire. The roofs of buildings that have been set on fire are certainly not proof of divine destruction. Charnel houses that appeared to be dwellings on the exterior would have certainly been attacked during war. There can be several explanations for why the roofs of the charnal houses burned.

The destruction at Tall el-Hammam is also unusual. Thus far, the TeH excavation has uncovered a total of five pieces of super-heated vitrified pottery (klinkers) from the MB destruction layer that have been identified as “trinitite” and desert glass (impact glass) at Tall Mwais, near TeH. Trinitite has unique characteristics different from obsidian (volcanic glass) and fulgurite (lightning glass), which scientists can easily identify. The extreme heat required to melt pottery and produce trinitite indicates that there was an unusual phenomena that took place at and around TeH.

Both were well-watered

Both locations were well-watered in ancient times, evident from the paleo-botanical evidence

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15 It derived its name from Trinity, New Mexico, where the first nuclear tests were conducted, which produced this same type of material. Collins, “Where Is Sodom?,” 41; Collins and Scott, Discovering the City of Sodom, 207.

16 Steven Collins, “Tall El-Hammam Is Sodom: Billington’s Heshbon Identification Suffers from Numerous Fatal Flaws,” Artifax 27, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 4; Collins and Scott, Discovering the City of Sodom, 213.

collected from both BeD\textsuperscript{18} and TeH\textsuperscript{19}; otherwise no one would be able to survive in such a harsh climate at either place. All cities in the Jordan Valley require water to survive and it is no surprise to find that both the northern and southern sites were strategically located near flowing springs. These springs would have provided the lush landscape and crops needed to sustain life. Both sites reveal the presence of ample food and water to sustain a large population with a suitable diet via the presence of a variety of edible plants. When the water dried up, the people moved to another location.

Both are located in the Great Rift Jordan Valley

Both are located in the Great Rift Jordan Valley along the same geological fault lines which are known to have bitumen\textsuperscript{20} (i.e. “slime pits”)\textsuperscript{21}/asphalt pits,\textsuperscript{22} sulphur, tar, and natural gas\textsuperscript{23} in this region and be susceptible to seismic activity.\textsuperscript{24} And the hypothetical geological description of the destruction of Sodom by volcano,\textsuperscript{25} earthquake\textsuperscript{26} or liquefaction\textsuperscript{27} is no indication to its location,\textsuperscript{28} because if tectonic

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\textsuperscript{20} Bitumen was also a major export from the Dead Sea region (Pliny the Elder \textit{Nat. Hist.} 2.226; 5.72; 7.65; 28.80; 35.178). Nissenbaum and Goldberg defined \textit{bitumen} (Hel. \textit{Bisamur} Gen 14:10) as ozocerite (Gr. \sigma\gamma στένχος + κέρω = wax; an odoruous paraffin earthwax) a “natural mixture of predominantly high molecular weight paraffinic hydrocarbons.” Arie Nissenbaum and M. Goldberg, “Asphalts, Heavy Oils, Ozocerite and Gases in the Dead Sea Basin,” \textit{Organic Geochemistry} 2, no. 3 (1975): 172.

\textsuperscript{21} Amos Frumkin and Yoel Elitzur, “The Rise and Fall of the Dead Sea,” \textit{Bible} 27, no. 6 (2001): 42 n.1.

\textsuperscript{22} It is often identified as asphalt, common in the Dead Sea. Josephus called it Lake Asphaltites (\textit{Ant.} 1.9) and the Romans called it Asphalt Lake (Lat. \textit{Palus Asphaltites}). In their research, Nissenbaum and Goldberg, decided that “The Dead Sea material has been so often referred to as asphals, that for historical reasons it was decided to retain this term.” Nissenbaum and Goldberg, “Asphalts, Heavy Oils, Ozocerite and Gases in the Dead Sea Basin,” 167.


or seismic activity took out BeD, it could have also taken out TeH.

Wood suggests that the mention of bitumen pits in Genesis 14:10 “tips the scales in favour of a southern location” for the Cities of the Plain. There is no question that the Dead Sea is full of bitumen that floats to the surface (Josephus J.W. 4:479–80; Strabo Geogr. 16.2.42; Diodorus Siculus Hist. Lib. 19:98.84–88; Tacitus Hist. 5.7), being pushed up through the fault lines to the surface by earthquakes or movements of the plates. However, one of the difficulties in identifying the location of the bitumen pits is that the formation of sinkholes is triggered by “the declining level of the Dead Sea.”

Since the level fluctuates, the exact location of sinkholes (bitumen pits) in antiquity is unknown along with the Valley of Siddim (Genesis 14:3, 8, 10). If we use the present location of sinkholes as an example of where these were 3000 years ago, then they would have been concentrated on the western side of the Dead Sea graben along what is called the “tar belt” between Mt Sedom and Ein Gedi with a few possibly along the eastern shore. However, due to the variations in the levels of the Dead Sea, to determine the ancient location on the basis of modern research is mere speculation and not reliable. The fact that they are present in modern times does not necessarily mean they were in this exact location in ancient times. Certainly this

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36 Gardosh et al., “Hydrocarbon Exploration in the Southern Dead Sea Area,” 68.

37 Ibid., 58.


argument can be used for either the presence or the absence of bitumen pits in either location. All one can conclude is that the presence of sink holes alone does not determine the location of Sodom.

But even if one could identify the location of ancient sink holes, this still does not determine the location of Sodom, since ancient people would not likely build their cities near these hazardous natural formations, nor go to battle in location close to where the peoples lived. In addition, as Howard points out: “the implication in v 3 (and also in v 8 [of Gen 14]) is that the kings (or at least some of them) did not live in the place where they joined forces and prepared for war but rather that this was a rendezvous point and that they lived nearby.”

Both are visible from the Hebron plateau

Thick smoke rising from either the northern Jordan Valley or southern Ghor would be visible from the Hebron plateau (Genesis 19:28). While there are reports from both the NST and the SST proponents, claiming that only smoke from their site could be visible from Hebron, the fact is that thick smoke rising from either the northern Jordan Valley or south Ghor would be visible from the Hebron plateau, which rises 3,094 ft. (943 m) above sea level and is about halfway between BeD and TeH, a fact that can be verified by looking at any good Bible map.

There are not two destructions of Sodom mentioned in the Bible.

Wood has made a lot of the fact that Bab edh-Dhra has evidence of two destructions and connects this with the events of Genesis 14. Under his heading “Two Destinations” he states: “the Bible tells of not one, but two, traumatic events that occurred in the final days of Sodom and Gomorrah. Genesis 14 describes an attack against the Cities of the Plain by a coalition of four Mesopotamian kings.”

However, the events as described in Genesis, can be classified as traumatic but can hardly be described as a destruction. The text states that, after doing battle in the Valley of Siddim, that Chedorlaomer king of Elam “took all the possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way. They also took Lot, the son of Abram’s brother, who was dwelling in Sodom, and his possessions, and went their way” (Gen 14:11-12 ESV). One may assume that Chedorlaomer destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah but the text only states that he took their possessions after doing battle out in the Valley of Siddim. The text makes it clear that all the kings armies “joined forces in the Valley of Siddim,” (emphasis added; Gen 14:3 ESV) and “then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) went out, and they joined battle in the Valley of Siddim with Chedorlaomer king of Elam (emphasis added; Gen 14:8-9 ESV). After the victory out on the battle field in the Valley of Siddim, Chedorlaomer marched in and took the possessions that were his by virtue of his victory. Hardly a destruction, and thus a moot argument.

Both were resettled

Some people have argued that Jeremiah 50:39-40, which compares the curse on Babylon, “As when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighboring cities, declares the LORD, so no man shall dwell there, and no son of man shall sojourn in her” (Jeremiah 50:40) indicates that Sodom will be abandoned forever. Therefore the archaeological site, identified as the location of Sodom, must be a site with signs of destruction and with no signs of later resettlement.

Geikie, Holy Land and the Bible, 118–119.

According to this interpretation of Jeremiah, TeH is ruled out as a candidate for Sodom because it was resettled in the Iron Age and Roman, Byzantine and Umayyad periods. However, if this is the criteria, then BeD must also be ruled out, as it was also reoccupied in the EBIV period after the major destruction of 2350 BC, which some claim was the Sodom destruction.

But Ezekiel also promises that “Sodom and her daughters shall return to their former state” (Ezekiel 16:53-55). So if these prophetic passages are treated literally, then both TeH and BeD were resettled to some extent and this argument becomes moot.

Both have possible locations for Zoar

Both sites have possible locations for Zoar, but no one really knows for sure where Zoar is located, and over the years scholars have proposed several locations, though no clear archaeological evidence has ever emerged to positively identify it.

The site of Ghor es-Safi, at the southern end of the Dead Sea is a popular location for Zoar for SST proponents because it has traditionally retained the name of Zoar (then Zoora) since Roman and Byzantine times. This is the location preserved in Greek on the 6th cent. AD Madaba Map, in the Greek Orthodox Parish Church of St. George, in Madaba, Jordan. It reads: “Balak, also Segor [Rom. Seghor], now Zoora [Byz. Zoara]”. However, early surveys of the area reported no archaeological evidence uncovered at this site earlier than the Hellenistic Period and Schaub, who excavated BeD, states that the 6th cent. Zoar on the Madaba map is not the same as the Middle Bronze age Zoar as listed in Genesis.

In the northern Jordan Valley, Selah Merrill has identified Tall Iktanu (also Ektanu) for the location of Zoar. It was excavated between 1987 and 1990 by Kay Prag, identifying Early Bronze I

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45 For further discussion see Fact 20. Graves, Key Facts for the Location of Sodom, 75–76.
46 Albright believed that Zoar was buried under the Dead Sea with the rest of the Cities of the Plain. Albright, “The Archeological Results of an Expedition to Moab and the Dead Sea,” 8.
52 Selah Merrill, “Modern Researches in Palestine,” PEFS 11, no. 1 (1879): 149.
and II (ca. 3200-2800 BC) and Intermediate EB-MB (= EB IV) occupations. Also north of the Dead Sea, William Birch was the first to identify Tell el-Sa’agur (Hill of Zoar; Tell esh Shaghur; Um Sheggar; or M’Shuggar) with Zoar (Σηγώρ Gr. Segor or So’ar) which Taylor identified with the modern village of el-Makhayyat (or Serābāt el-Mushaqqaq). There is only early IA pottery at the site, but a significant MB site at Khirbet Qarn al Qubish (Kh. Qurn el-Kibsh) is only 3 km east of Serābāt el-Mushaqqaq and 1 km south of the modern village of el-Mushaqqaq.

And finally, Collins proposed that Zoar was a “tent city” and a “port” on the Arnon River, since it was the southern border for the land of Israel promised to Moses (Deut 2:4-5, 9; 34:1-4; Josh 13:9-10). Also, es-Ṣafi is located well inside the territories of Moab and Edom which “were off-limits to the Israelites” (Deut 2:4-5, 9).

With four, possibly more, locations for Zoar in the northern and southern regions, but with none positively identified, the question whether Zoar can help in the location of Sodom is still open. But even if Zoar were located, this still does not help in locating the city of Sodom, as the narrative indicates that it was situated at a distance from the destruction that covered the majority of the Cities of the Plain. If Zoar was found, we would know where the destroyed Cities of the Plain were NOT located. Thus the location of Zoar is a moot argument.

The Ebla Tablets do not help

The proposed identification of Sodom on the Ebla tablets from Tell Mardikh is used by Shea, Freedman and others to support the SST. The Pentapolis are purported to be places visited by

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Collins, “Rethinking the Location of Zoar,” 2; Neev and Emery, *The Destruction of Sodom, Gomorrah and Jericho*, 131–38.


merchants from Ebla and “listed in geographical order,” placing them in the southern end of the Dead Sea. This argument proposed by Shea and Freedman, is picked up by Wood to argue for the SST, but their arguments are very subjective and arbitrary.

The only two sites that are even remotely recognizable in the Ebla tablets are Admah (ad-mu-nt) and Sodom (si-da-mu), which could easily be in the northern region of the Jordan Valley since the other sites are impossible to identify with any degree of certainty. All the other place names could be located anywhere in the region. Matthiae dates the Ebla tablets to the EB III period (2400 and 2250 BC), which would be the earliest mention of the Pentapolis outside the biblical text (Gen 10) and the time period would indicate that merchants from Ebla were trading with these cities prior to their destruction.

However, even if Sodom was named in the Ebla tablets (and that is debated) it does not indicate if Sodom was north or south of the Dead Sea. As all would agree, the Pentapolis existed during the Early Bronze Age (Gen 10) at the time of the Ebla tablets and both sites (BeD and TeH) were occupied in the EB age. The important questions concerning the location and destruction of the Pentapolis are not answered by the Ebla tablets. The use of the Ebla tablets is a moot argument.

COMPELLING ARGUMENTS

Given these moot arguments, what was it that finally swayed me from the southern to a northern location for the Pentapolis? The two main arguments are geography and chronology, with some supportive evidence from the ancillary elements of the moot arguments.


Serial Geography is Central in Determining the Location of the Pentapolis

Usually scholars use geographic indicators, as opposed to inscriptions, to identify a city’s location (i.e., by the Jordan River, below Mt. Nebo, near Jerusalem, etc.). Collins is quoted stating that: “the Tall el-Hammam site has 25 geographical indicators that align it with the description in Genesis. Compare this with something well known—like Jerusalem—that has only 16. Other sites have only 5 or 6. So, this site has many times more indicators than any other Old Testament site.”

While several passages in the Bible mention geographic indicators for the location of Sodom (Gen 13:10; 14:3; 19:28), there is debate as to which is more helpful. Wood claims that “the reference to ‘bitumen pits’ [See Fact 57] in Genesis 14:10, however, tips the scale in favor of a southern location.” However, the bitumen pits (Gen 14:10) are referring to the battle of the Mesopotamian kings and not the location of the Pentapolis. Context is vital. Poetic and prophetic passages (i.e., Jer 50:35-46; Ezek 16:46; Is 15:4-7) are also often referenced for Sodom’s location, but these must not be treated as narrative texts. Thus, Collins asserts, on good grounds, in his reply to Wood’s criticism, that: “the only definitive biblical text on the geography of the Cities of the Plain: [is] Genesis 13:1-12.”

The destroyed cities of the Pentapolis are repeatedly mentioned located in “the plain” or “valley” (Gen 13:12; Heb. kikkār), also called “the land of the valley” (Gen 19:28) and “Jordan Valley” (Gen 13:10f). This distinctive Hebrew term (kikkār) is central in identifying the location of the city of Sodom. The etymology of the root word indicates that kikkār refers to something round, as in a “round loaf of bread” (1 Sam 2:36; Prov 6:26; Exod 29:23; Jer 37:21; 1 Chr 16:3; 1 Sam 10:3; Jud 8:5) or a “circular disk for payment” (2 Sam 12:30, 1 Kgs 20:39, 2 Kgs 5:5; 1 Chr 29:7; 2 Kgs 9:14). Other references to the kikkār place it between Zarethan (Tell es-Saidiyeh) and Succoth (Tell Deir ‘Alla) in the Jordan Valley near the Jabbok River, east of the Jordan River (1 Kgs 7:46; 2 Chron 4:17; 2 Sam 18:23). This would place the kikkār in the northern region between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. Later, during Nehemiah’s time, the term kikkār...
was used to refer to an area surrounding (Heb. ṣḥāmār) Jerusalem (Heb. hakkikkār; Neh 3:22; 12:28).\textsuperscript{83} It would appear that kikkār was adopted as a technical geographical term due to the round appearance of the Jordan Valley when viewed from the surrounding hills. The term kikkār is still used in Israel for a traffic circle or a roundabout.

However, some arguing for the SST, have suggested that the roundness of the term kikkār must not be pressed too hard, as the Jordan Valley has an oval or rectangular shape, since it extends to Zarethan and Succoth,\textsuperscript{84} and they include the entire southern “region”\textsuperscript{85} of the Dead Sea into the kikkār.\textsuperscript{86} Also, the idea that Lot saw “all” the Plain from between Bethel and Ai must be figurative, since as Driver points out, “not even the entire valley north of the Dead Sea is visible from near Bethel.”\textsuperscript{87} But this was challenged in the 1800’s by Merrill, who protested the extension of the meaning of the word kikkār to include the entire Dead Sea valley. He stated:

But I think it is to do violence to the language and to the facts of the case to attempt to make the phrase “all the plain of the Jordan” include the salt marsh at the southern end of the Dead Sea, which is fifty miles from that river, and has nothing to do with it. Indeed, the region there belongs to another water-system altogether-entirely distinct from that at the northern end of the Dead Sea, with which the Jordan is connected.\textsuperscript{88}

And today Sarna agrees, stating several arguments in support of the northern location for the kikkār:

The statement that King Solomon cast the bronze vessels for the Temple “in the plain of the Jordan [kikkār] between Succoth and Zerekan” (2 Chron 4:17), referring to the middle section of the Jordan Valley, between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, seems to imply that the northern shore of the Dead Sea is the southern extremity of the Kikkār. This conclusion is supported by the report that from the summit of Mount Nebo in Transjordan “facing Jericho” (Deut 32:49), Moses was able to see . . . “the Negeb, and the Plain, that is, the Valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar” (Deut 34:3). Finally, as we noted above, Lot is said to have been able to view the entire Jordan Plain from a location between Bethel and Ai (Gen 13:3, 10), which would have been impossible if the cities were south of the Dead Sea.\textsuperscript{89}

Even the strong SST advocate Samuel R. Driver admits that Genesis 13 suggests a northern site.\textsuperscript{90} Regardless of the exact geometrical shape of the Jordan Valley, the kikkār is described as the “kikkār of the Jordan” (Gen 13:10) and “kikkār of Jericho” (Deut 34:3) indicating that it is in the northern region of the Dead Sea, where the Jordan River and Jericho are located. The biblical text provides a clear geographic indicator for the location of the Pentapolis. The large site of Tall el-

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item[83] Steven Collins, “Reassessing the Term Hakikkar in Nehemiah as Bearing on the Location of the Cities of the Plain,” \textit{BRB} 7, no. 3 (2007): 1–4.
  \item[85] Howard, Jr., “Sodom and Gomorrah Revisited,” 388.
  \item[90] Driver, “Zoar.”
\end{itemize}
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Ḥammām is situated up against the eastern side of the Jordan Valley (kikkār), enabling it to exercise control over much of the Jordan Valley.

**The Chronology fits with the Patriarchs**

**Destruction of TeH.**

Preliminary reports, even as late as 2013, identified the terminal destruction of TeH in the MBA at ca. 1600 BC. However, later in 2013, following eight seasons of excavations and reading over 40,000 separate vessels, Collins published that “our refined date-range for Tall el-Ḥammām’s destruction is 1750–1650 BCE, [MB IIB] not 1600.”

Collins also reports that “virtually no Late Bronze Age pottery has been found at Tall el-Ḥammām.” In the 2013 report, after eight seasons, Collins reports:

Late Bronze Age [1550-1200 BC] sherds are extremely rare in the area, and there is no discernable LBA architecture thus far (the only LBA sherds from around the site were found in a tomb). . . . Material from the Late Bronze Age are systematically absent from the tall proper. However, LB2 pottery vessels were found in a nearby tomb containing vessels dating from the Chalcolithic Period through the Iron Age. Thus, some kind of LB2 presence in the area can be surmised; however, no architecture from that period is known in this vicinity of the valley E of the Jordan River.

Since TeH is considered Abel-Shittim, and Moses camped here with the Israelites for a few years, it is not surprising to find some LB pottery lying around, with no architecture dating to the LB period. Following the destruction of TeH in the MBA, it lay unoccupied for over 500 years only to be resettled in the IAII, about five centuries later. What is also compelling is that there are at least four other sites in the Jordan Valley with the same archaeological footprint (MB destruction with no LBA occupation) to easily fulfill the requirements for the Pentapolis.

**Destruction of BeD**

According to Paul Lapp, Walter E. Rast and R. Thomas Schaub, who excavated Bāb edh-Dhra’

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92 Collins and Scott, *Discovering the City of Sodom*, 33.


98 See Fact 44 and 45. Graves, *Key Facts for the Location of Sodom*, 114–18.
between 1975 and 1981, the material finds indicate at least five periods of occupation between ca. 3150 and 2200 BC. The permanent occupation dates to the EB IB (3150–3000), EB II and III (3000–2300). A massive EB III destruction took place around 2350 BC or 2300 BC. This is the destruction that Wood and others have connected with the destruction of Sodom. Additionally, in this period the ancient Near East (ANE) suffered an unidentified regional catastrophe which affected life in Egypt and Mesopotamia. It is speculative whether the two catastrophes of BeD and the rest of the ANE are connected.

However, BeD was not permanently abandoned but resettled for about 100 years in EB IV (2350–2100 BC) until the water dried up. Wood has tried to nullify the EB IV occupation by highlighting in the 1981 report that “the EB IV peoples chose areas away from the town for settlement.” But new evidence, reported in their 1981 excavation reports, indicated that there was EB IV settlement inside the city. The site was finally destroyed and abandoned after 2200 BC (EB IV). Although Rast and Schaub question the reliability of some of their C-14 dates, the evidence is clear that there was a reoccupation at BeD following the EB III destruction and hiatus with structural resettlement in the EB IV period.

103 Schaub, “Bab Edh-Dhra” (OEANE), 1:249.
104 Collins and Scott, Discovering the City of Sodom, 78.
109 2200 may be too early for the EBIV period based on suspicious C-14 dating. Schaub, “Bab Edh-Dhra” (NEAEHL), 136.
110 Rast and Schaub, Bab Edh-Dhra : Excavations in the Cemetery.

BeD and Numeira were destroyed at different times.

In 1977 Rast and Schaub reported on the destruction at Numeira, which is well documented.\(^\text{112}\) The question is: Were BeD and Numeira destroyed at the same time? The evidence at first (1977–80) suggested that the destruction occurred simultaneously.\(^\text{113}\) However, there was initial difficulty with the C-14 samples and the calibrated dates, but they continued to re-examine the evidence\(^\text{114}\) and stated that “The possibility that Numeira lasted somewhat longer than the EB III city at Báb edh-Dhrâʿ also cannot be ruled out.”\(^\text{115}\) While in 1987 Rast reported that BeD and Numeira “were terminated at approximately the same time toward the end of EB III.”\(^\text{116}\) [emphasis added],\(^\text{117}\) in 2007, Schaub and Chesson reported that it was an earthquake\(^\text{118}\) that brought the final destruction\(^\text{119}\) in 2600 BC,\(^\text{120}\) 250 years before the destruction of BeD in 2350 BC.

The early conclusions of Rast and Schaub that BeD and Numeira were both destroyed at approximately the same time (i.e., 2350–2067 BC), are often recounted. However, it is now known that their individual destructions were separated by approximately two and a half centuries, with the destruction of BeD identified at ca. 2350 BC and Numeira at ca. 2600 BC. If BeD is Sodom then Numeira cannot possibly be one of the cities of the Pentapolis and vice versa.

In addition the southern EB I–III period sites of eṣ-Ṣafī,\(^\text{121}\) Feifa,\(^\text{122}\) and Khirbet al-Khanazir,\(^\text{123}\) which have been identified as the remaining cities of the Pentapolis,\(^\text{124}\) are nothing more than cemeteries, with no architectural structures or domestic settlement. If BeD is Sodom then there are no


\(^{114}\) Rast, “Settlement at Numeira,” 41.


\(^{116}\) Ibid., 46–47.


\(^{119}\) Wenham suggests that the destruction was not natural or supernatural but brought about through military means Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1–15, ed. David Allan Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1987), 309.


other candidates for the cities of the Pentapolis. In the EBA the southern region was one large burial site, perhaps managed by Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira.

**Most maximalists believe that the Patriarchs lived in the Middle Bronze Age.**

Most conservative evangelical scholars and maximalists would place the period of the Patriarchs (including Abraham and Lot) in the Middle Bronze Age.\(^{125}\) This is based not so much on archaeological finds as on correlating characteristics in the biblical text with the cultural markers of the MB periods. Scholars who hold to a MB I period for the Patriarchs\(^{126}\) base their position on the literal biblical chronology based on a mid-15th cent. BC date for the Exodus, the antiquity of the biblical accounts (Gen 14), the geopolitical conditions and climate of the regions in the MB I period, nomadism and migration exemplified in the domestication of camels, and personal names and places identified in MB texts from Egypt, Ur, Mari, Ebla, Nuzi and Anatolia (20th-18th cent. BC).\(^{127}\) Those who support a MB IIA/B date for the Patriarchs\(^{128}\) rely on the 13th cent. BC date for the Exodus, the presence of the Hyksos in Egypt, pottery in Negev, the Beni-Hasan mural (1890 BC), Middle kingdom Egyptian chronology, the geopolitical conditions (Gen 14), parallels with the MB culture and the price of slaves, and the structure of covenants. Collins explains some of the issues surrounding the question of chronology when he states:

> While high, middle, and low ANE chronologies exist—tied principally to the chronology(ies) of Egypt—the differences between them consist of one or two decades, not centuries. (I am talking

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\(^{125}\) See the chart in Price, *The Stones Cry Out*, 106.


about the well-worked-out chronologies of mainline scholars like W. F. Albright, K. Kenyon, A. Bendor, B. Mazar, A. Mazar,¹²⁹ K. A. Kitchen, D. Redford, Wente and Van Siclen, J. Hoffmeier, J. Curril, and W. Dever; not the fringe, radical revisions of ANE chronology suggested by D. Rohl, G. Aardsma, and a few others.¹³⁰

Almost all scholars place the Patriarchs in the Middle Bronze Age, including Wood (2166–1991 BC MB I)¹³¹ and Collins (2000–1600 MB IIA/B).¹³² Freedman and van Hattem place the Patriarchs in the EB age,¹³³ to support a SST.¹³⁴ The proponents who place them in the LB,¹³⁵ Iron IA,¹³⁶ and Persian/Greek¹³⁷ periods are in the minority. Even Wood, who supports the idea of the EB destruction of BeD as supporting his claim on being Sodom, places the Patriarchs in the Middle Bronze I (2166–1991 BC) along with other scholars.¹³⁸ Wood acknowledges the discrepancy and explains:

If we assume a mid-15th century BC date for the Exodus, the date for the destruction [of Sodom] would then be ca. 2070 BC. The archeological date for the destruction of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira, however, is considerably earlier than this. . . . This leaves a discrepancy between the Biblical date and the archaeological date of 230–280 years.¹³⁹

The fact remains that the majority of scholars believe that the Patriarchs lived in the MBA.


¹³¹ Wood claims that the date for the destruction of Sodom is ca. 2070 BC based on a 1446 BC date for the Exodus. The date of the destruction of Bab edh-Dhra according to Rast and Schaub is 2350 BC. Wood, “Discovery of the Sin Cities,” 78; “Locating Sodom: A Critique of the Northern Proposal,” 81.


¹³³ Freedman states, “If Abraham and Lot had anything to do with the Cities of the Plain, then that link could only have existed in the Early Bronze Age, certainly not in the Middle Bronze Age.” Freedman, “The Real Story of the Ebla Tablets,” 157; Albright, “The Jordan Valley in the Bronze Age,” 58–61; Willem C. van Hattem, “Once Again: Sodom and Gomorrah,” BA 44, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 90; Hershel Shanks, “BAR Interviews Giovanni Pettinato: Original Ebla Epigrapher Attempts to Set the Record Straight,” Biblical Archaeology Review 6, no. 5 (1980): 47. Pettinato replied to Freedman’s dating the Patriarchal Age to the third millennium as “impossible.”

¹³⁴ Recently Kris Udd wrote his dissertation on the subject and states in his abstract “Combining the new lower archaeological chronologies and the higher dates for the patriarchs indicates the possibility that Bab edh-Dhra’ and Numeira could be two of the biblical cities of the plain.” Udd applies two extreme views to propose this speculative hypothesis. Kris J. Udd, “Bab Edh-Dhra’, Numeira, and the Biblical Patriarchs: A Chronological Study” (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 2011).


¹³⁹ Ibid.
Logical conclusion

If Bâb edh-Dhrâ’ was destroyed in the EBA (2350 BC), and yet all conservative maximalists would place Abraham in the MBA (2100-1600 BC), then BeD cannot be Sodom, as it no longer existed. However, TeH was still a thriving city state until it was destroyed in 1750–1650 BC (MB II) at the time of the Patriarchs and lay dormant for some 500 years until the Iron Age.

CONCLUSION

The geography of the biblical text (Gen 13) places the Pentapolis on the kikkār in the Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea. This is precisely where Tall el-Ḥammām is situated on the eastern edge of the kikkār. With a size of 62 acres, it would have been clearly visible from between Bethel and Ai, where the text states Abraham and Lot were standing looking east (Gen 13:3 and 12:8). If this was the only argument for the location of the Pentapolis, it would be sufficient; but there is more.

A significant unusual destruction took place at Tall el-Ḥammām in the Middle Bronze II period, the time of the Patriarchs. Human remains were found contorted in the ash layer of the MB II ruins obviously not buried following their natural deaths but smothered in the destruction. A catastrophic event took place here with such high temperatures, it turned pottery into glass.

The proverbial icing on the cake has been the recent identification of several architectural features and ceramics at Tall el-Ḥammām that have shown Minoan influence.140 While this, in itself is not unique,141 and does not help with the location of Sodom, Collins pointed out a possible literary link between Sodom, with their “sociological sexual practices”142 and

the attempted abduction of the angels by the “young and old” men of Sodom (Gen 19), suggest an affinity to the formal cultural institution of paiderastia found on Bronze Age Crete, including a unique feature: ritual kidnapping [See Strabo Geogr. 10.21.4]. Research in this vein is ongoing, but the results thus far support the idea that the link is more than coincidental.143

Thus, Tall el-Ḥammām is in the right location on the kikkār, at the appropriate MB time period for the Patriarchs, and contains the suitable material remains and destruction to be Sodom. To date Tall el-Ḥammām is the best candidate for the lost city of Sodom and no longer is there any reason to look south of the Dead Sea for its location. Based on the most up-to-date archaeological evidence, while once a southern supporter, I am now a persuaded northern defector!!

141 Minoan influence has also been identified at Tel Kabri, Israel, Alalakh, Turkey, Tell el-Dab’a (Avaris), Egypt, and Qatna, Syria.
142 Moore, “Dr. John Moore and Dr. Steven Collins Reflect on TeHEP’s First Nine Years,” 1.
Timeline for the proposed location of the sites associated with the Northern and Southern Sodom
theories


———. “Sodom and Gomorrah Part II: The Destruction of the Cities of the Plain.” B.A 6, no. 3 (1943): 41–52.


