The Evidence for Sodom’s Location

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by

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The location of Sodom has been one of intense debate as well as a certain amount of skepticism. Two prominent positions have arisen. The first holds that Sodom was located at the southern end of the Dead Sea at a site now known as Bâb edh-Dhrâ (BeD). The second holds that Sodom was located at the northern end of the Dead Sea at a site called Tall el-Hammâm (TeH). Both views have compelling arguments when looked at independently of one another. However, the biblical evidence and geological evidence leave no choice but to conclude that Tall el-Hammam is the proper location of Sodom.

To make a fair comparison of the two major positions some time must be spent giving a brief overview of each position and its primary endorser. The Southern Sodom Theory (SST) is primarily endorsed and argued by Bryant G. Wood.\(^1\) The Northern Sodom Theory (NST) is primarily endorsed and argued by Steven Collins.\(^2\) Both men are considered conservative evangelicals and believe the historicity of the Bible. It should be noted that Collins used to be a proponent of the Southern Sodom Theory.\(^3\)

The Southern Sodom Theory was brought into prominence in the mid-1960’s with an excavation led by Paul Lapp at Bâb edh-Dhrâ.\(^4\) The site appeared to researchers and archaeologists to be a perfect fit for the description of Sodom. Bryant Wood explains a few of the reasons that BeD fits the description of Sodom. He explains that Genesis 14 talks about the bitumen pits that would tip towards a southern location of Sodom.\(^5\) Wood also supports his theory of the BeD location with its vicinity compared to what is commonly accepted as the

\(^2\) Ibid., 139.
\(^3\) Steven Collins, "Sodom: The Discovery of a Lost City," *Bible and Spade* 20, no. 3 (2007): 70.
ancient city of Zoar. The perceived importance of Zoar’s location is derived from Genesis 19:22 where Lot pleads with the angels of the Lord to allow him to flee to the city of Zoar instead of the hills. There is also a church called the Sanctuary of St. Lot that is supposed to be the location where Lot fled. Since this location is on the southern end of the Dead Sea, Sodom must also be located there according to proponents of the NST. Wood also argues that since BeD is the largest city in the Dead Sea region from the Early Bronze Age, it should be considered the ideal candidate for Sodom.

Báb edh-Dhrâ was also the site of a major fortification that has since been found in excavations. This, according to Wood, shows that BeD fulfills the requirement found in Genesis 19:1 of Lot being found at the city gate. The excavations of BeD have also shown that the city was destroyed by fire. This, of course, would fulfill Genesis 19:24 which describes that the city was destroyed by God raining down fire on the city.

The Northern Sodom Theory was brought into focus beginning in 1996 by Dr. Steven Collins. Collins realized that Báb edh-Dhrâ could not possibly be Sodom while studying the geographic points listed in Genesis 13. Collins, a maximalist, completed a thorough analysis of the passage. He points to the following points, Lot and Abraham were in Bethel/Ai, they decided to part ways, Lot saw the whole Kikkar of Jordan, Lot saw that the Kikkar was well watered, Lot chose the Kikkar and travelled east as far as Sodom. Collins concludes that, given the textual

6 Ibid., 69.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 70.
10 Wood, "Have Sodom and Gomorrah Been Found?," 80.
11 Graves, 139.
12 Collins,  70-71.
evidence from the Genesis account, there is no possible way for BeD to be the location of Sodom based on line of sight from Bethel/Ai. Instead, Collins has placed Sodom at Tall el-Hammâm in the northern region of the Dead Sea in the southern Jordan plain.

Collins gives ample support for his theory on TeH being the true location of Sodom. While all the points cannot be closely examined the major points can be listed. Genesis 13 gives the only definitive geographic description of the location of Sodom. The Kikkar of the Jordan ends at the mouth of the Jordan and does not extend to the southern region of the Dead Sea. TeH is visible from Bethel/Ai while BeD is not. The destruction of TeH came in the Middle Bronze Age and would coincide with the dates of the Patriarchs. Like BeD, TeH was also fortified which fits the biblical description of Sodom.

Dr. Wood refutes Dr. Collins findings with several points that Collins has easily rebutted. Wood claims that Collins is dishonest when he claims that virtually no biblical map or atlas contains the location of Sodom and he has found several published since 1997 that do. This seems disingenuous because Dr. Collins said “before 1996” and Wood’s claims come from maps after 1997. Collins also refutes Wood’s point about maps by giving a list of many prominent biblical map publications that do not include the location of Sodom.

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17 Ibid., 3.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 3-4.
20 Ibid., 4.
22 Collins, "Sodom: The Discovery of a Lost City," 70.
Dr. Wood also claims that BeD is the proper location because of the battle listed in Genesis 14 in the Valley of Siddim.\(^{24}\) However, this has no relevancy to the location of Sodom. Collins is also quick to point out this fact and points out that this would strengthen the argument for TeH since armies would routinely fight battles as far away from home as possible.\(^ {25}\)

Dr. Wood also makes claim, in response to Collins contention that BeD is not visible from Bethel/Ai, that Lot and Abraham did not separate in Bethel/Ai but rather separated further south after continuing to travel together.\(^ {26}\) However, there is no further travel given in Genesis 13 until after Lot and Abraham have separated. Collins correctly charges Wood with improper exegesis of Genesis 13 and, in fact, accuses him of eisegesis or reading into the passage something that is not there.\(^ {27}\)

A major contention between Wood and Collins and consequently SST and NST is the date of Abraham compared to the destruction dates of BeD and TeH. Collins charges Wood with having a major discrepancy regarding these two dates. He claims that Wood has the destruction of Sodom (BeD) 215 years earlier than the time of Abraham.\(^ {28}\) Wood places Abraham with many scholars around 2166-1991 B.C. and puts the destruction of BeD around 2067 B.C.\(^ {29}\) Collins explains that this is using the old chronology and would actually place the destruction of BeD at 2350 B.C. which is too early to be the destruction of Sodom based on the timeline of the Patriarchs.\(^ {30}\)

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 26.
The above arguments are not all the evidence given for the NST or the SST. It is not within the scope of this piece to give a thorough analysis of each position, but rather, it is the scope to show the main arguments and how they align with Holy Scripture.

In summary, Collins argument for the Northern Sodom Theory is far superior to the traditional Southern Sodom Theory posed by Bryant G. Wood and other scholars. His proper exegesis of Genesis 13 leads to a proper understanding of the location of Sodom geographically. He adds credibility to himself since he admits he used to hold to the SST. His research and excavation work have shown that TeH fits all the criteria to identify Sodom against the biblical text. On the other hand, Wood seems to take things out of context as well as reads things into certain passages to make his views “fit” the evidence that he sees in his digs and research. To be sure, the most likely candidate city known today for Sodom is Tall el-Hammâm.
Bibliography


