

Location of Sodom

(by archaeologist and excavator Steven Collins, PhD, TeHEP Director.)

Notions like "under the Dead Sea" fall into the category of "urban myths" and "Arab legends." The fact is that neither the biblical passages recounting the "Cities of the Kikkar" (Heb. *kikkar* is often mistranslated "plain" or "valley") nor the Quranic statements about "the Evil Cities" suggest that Sodom and its neighbors somehow wound up in or under the Dead Sea. The primary, original story of Sodom is found in Genesis, and is quite specific as to its location and manner of destruction. Here are forty points relevant to the subject.

POINTS IN LOCATING THE CITIES OF THE JORDAN DISK: GENESIS 13:1-12

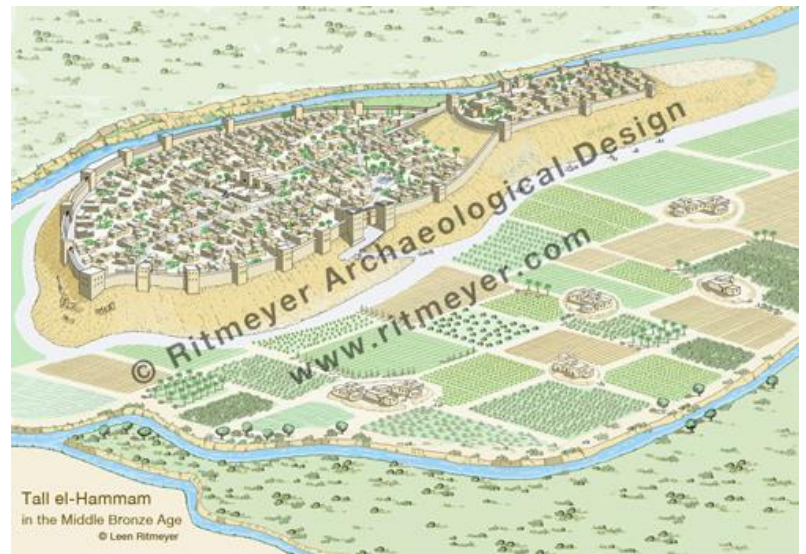
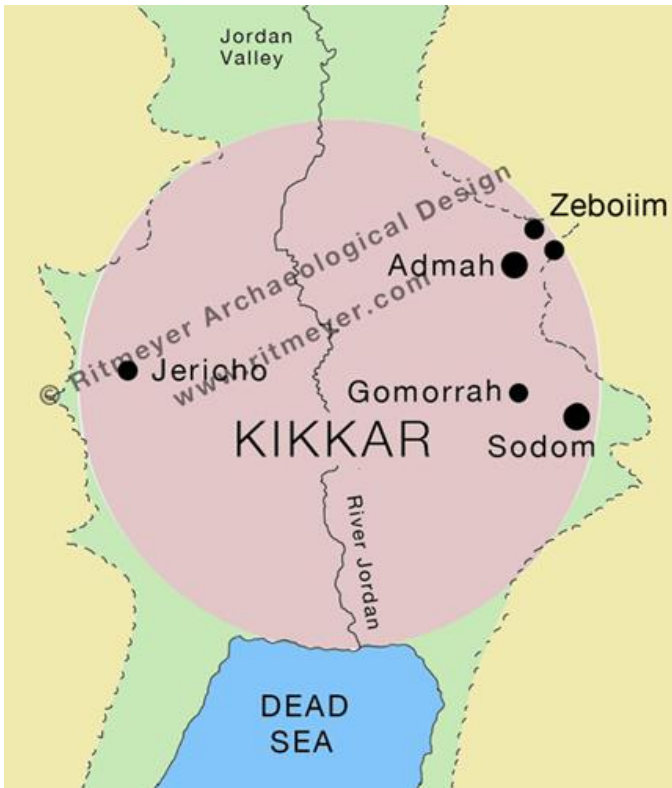
1. Story tellers and writers in the ancient Near East didn't invent fictitious geographies, but used what was known from personal experience, shared (cultural) experience, or 'traditional' geographical wisdom, i.e., actual geography.
2. Whether or not ancient stories are factual or fictitious, they were 'layered over' real-world geography and topography.
3. The writer of the Sodom tales likely had personal knowledge of the geography he used; perhaps intimate awareness based on experience.
4. Genesis 13:1-12 is the only narrative passage among the Sodom tales marking out the location of the Cities of the Plain by employing geographical data points and directions in a conscience attempt to place them in a real-world context shared by the readers.
5. The Genesis passage in question contains both specific and approximate geographical quantities: (a) Egypt; (b) the Negev; (c) Bethel/Ai; (d) the place of the altar to Yahweh (hill between Bethel and Ai, Gen 12:8); and (e) the *Kikkar* (Heb.) of the Jordan.
6. Outside the Old Testament, among the Semitic cognates and Egyptian, *kikkar/kakkar/kakkaru/kerker* is never used as a geographical term, but means only a "talent, a flat, circular weight of metal" or "circular, flat loaf of bread"; in Egyptian there is also the meaning "to draw a circle in the sand with a stick."
7. *kikkar* (disk, circle) in OT Hebrew likewise refers (well over 50 times) to a talent of metal or a circular, flat loaf of bread; but these meanings never use the definite article, suggesting its non-geographic quality in such contexts.
8. The thirteen, rare geographical uses of *kikkar*, found exclusively in the OT, ten of which are in the Sodom tales, denote the disk-shaped S Jordan Valley N of the Dead Sea (from all angles the area looks like a disk, thus its name); of these thirteen instances, four are constructed *kikkar hayarden* (disk of the Jordan, with the definite article), while the remaining nine are *hakikkar* (the Kikkar, with the definite article), suggesting a well-known geographical area (on a par with *the* Negev). There are many standard Hebrew words for 'plain' and 'valley', but these are explicitly avoided when referring to the geographical region known as *the* Kikkar and Kikkar of *the* Jordan.
9. The *Kikkar* of the Jordan is confined to the area N of the Dead Sea because (a) *hayarden* (the Jordan, = 'the descending') never refers to anything other than the fresh water system of the Jordan River proper, and the valley through which it descends, until it reaches the lowest

elevation on the face of the earth, the Dead Sea, where 'the descending' terminates; and (b) *hayarden* is never extended to include any part of the Valley of Siddim (Valley of the Dead Sea), but ends at "the mouth of the Jordan below Pisgah" (another known geographical quantity, easily documentable; cf. Num 34:12; Deut 3:17, 27; 4:47-49; Josh 15:5; 18:19).

10. Thus, the *Kikkar* of the Jordan can *only* refer to the disk-shaped alluvial plain north of the Dead Sea which was well-watered (a) like the garden of Yahweh (streams, rivers, springs), and (b) like Egypt (annual river inundations depositing new layers of water-laden silt; indeed, hydrologically speaking, the Jordan is a "Nile in miniature").
11. The W Jordan Disk, the location of Jericho and little else, has reasonable perennial water resources plus the Jordan River and local wadis; the E Jordan Disk has far greater water resources than the W side, and sports numerous Bronze Age cities and towns, mainly along its E edge, just beyond the reach of the flood plain.
12. The text specifies that Lot viewed with his "unaided" physical eyes the entire Jordan Disk from the area of Bethel/Ai (above and W/NW of Jericho); the entire *Kikkar* is, in fact, visible from the highland's edge E of Bethel/Ai (which I have personally viewed on many occasions).
13. Lot traveled E from Bethel/Ai, pitching his tent toward Sodom, one of the cities of the E Jordan Disk, while Abram remained "in Canaan"; i.e., Lot went E of the Jordan River beyond the formulaic Canaan boundary, remaining N of the Dead Sea all the while, no doubt traveling along the convenient E/W trade route that passed near Jericho, then crossed the river to the cities on the far side of the alluvial plain to the Cities of the *Kikkar*.
14. Sodom was one of the Cities of the Plain (*kikkar* = disk). No city S of the mouth of *hayarden* would have been considered as belonging to the Jordan Disk or the cities thereof (see Point 9 above). Any placement of Sodom (or any of the other *Kikkar* cities) S of the mouth of the Jordan would force an unnatural meaning on the term *kikkar* that it simply will not bear.
15. As the writer mentally works his way through the geography of the passage, the Cities of the *Kikkar* are perceived to have existed on the E Jordan Disk, N of the Dead Sea, the formulaic order of which (Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim), with its two doublets, is reminiscent of ancient map lists, particularly those of ancient Egypt, indicating directionality (S-to-N for Transjordan routes).
16. The storyteller calculated or assumed that Sodom was the largest urban center on the E Jordan Disk as indicated by the fact that (a) it is the *only* *Kikkar* city mentioned by itself; (b) it is always listed *first* when related cities are mentioned; and (c) the king of Sodom is the sole 'spokesperson' for the *Kikkar* cities coalition after the Kedorlaomer incident (Gen 14:17-24).
17. The story of Abram and Lot has roots in the Bronze Age (as viewed by most scholars).
18. Proper biblical dating and cultural descriptions in the text place Abram, Lot, and the Sodom tales squarely in the Middle Bronze Age, most likely MB2 (an era of famines when hordes of Semitic peoples migrated from the Levant to Lower Egypt; cf. Gen 12:10; 26:1; 41:57ff).
19. Given a Middle Bronze Age date for Abram, Genesis 10 pushes the existence of the Cities of the Plain back well before the time of Abram, probably into the Early Bronze Age, the time of first urbanization.

20. Sodom and the other Cities of the Jordan Disk would, thus, have occupations dating from the EBA into the MBA.
21. In Genesis 10, the mention of actual, known cities (such as Babylon, Erech (Uruk), Akkad, Nineveh, Sidon, Gerar, Gaza, and regions such as Shinar, Assyria, Mizraim (Egypt), and Caphtor) strongly suggests that Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, in the same context, were also real cities in the true geographical sense.
22. Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim were known by the writer of Genesis 10 to mark the E extent of the Canaanite clans (Gen 10:18-19), at the geographical and occupational 'seat' of the Great Rift Valley, the best and most obvious natural boundary imaginable; real cities representing a real boundary.
23. The city of Sodom itself was fortified (Gen 19:1).
24. Given a MBA date for Abram, archaeologically and geographically speaking, the largest fortified Bronze Age urban center on the E Jordan Disk would be the most likely candidate for biblical Sodom (see Point 16); such is Tall el-Hammam.
25. The presence of major EBA, Intermediate Bronze Age, and MBA occupations at the 'Sodom' urban center would make such a theory compelling.
26. An occupational hiatus of several centuries after a fiery MBA destruction would make that 'Sodom' identification almost irresistible (in the time of Moses and Joshua the E Jordan Disk is called "the wasteland" below Pisgah-Num 21:20).
27. The presence of three or four nearby sites reflecting the doublet geographical configuration suggested in the text, and with the same occupational profile, would make the theory virtually irrefutable.
28. Given a MBA date for Abram, Tall el-Hammam satisfies every 'Sodom' criterion embedded in Genesis 13:1-12 (Points 20, 23-27).
29. Given virtually any other date for Abram, and if one assumes that the Sodom tales are etiological legends, the Bronze Age ruins of the E Jordan Disk would have provided geographical realism to the narrative.
30. S Dead Sea sites such as Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira, and other suggested 'locations', satisfy not a single "Cities of the Plain" criterion set forth in the Genesis 13 narrative (summarized in Points 20, 23-27 above) because (a) they were destroyed at the end of the EBA (c. 2500 BCE) centuries before the time of Abram and Lot; and (b) they are entirely in the wrong place (whether or not the tales are factual or etiological, and regardless of date!).
31. There are no archaeological sites with an EBA/MBA occupational profile in the Dead Sea Valley S of the mouth of the Jordan River. Period. And the idea that the Dead Sea was 'created' at the time of Sodom's destruction in the former location of Sodom is geological and geographical nonsense.
32. Whether or not the Sodom tales are fact or fancy, the urban landscape of the Kikkar cities is real, and well-known to the readers.

33. Significant EBA through MBA ruins would have been readily visible on the E Jordan Disk in antiquity, even after several of them were topped by town occupations during Iron Age 2 (this is a reality at several E Jordan Disk sites including Tall el-Hammam and Tall Nimrin).
34. The Genesis writer penned his stories about the cities of the Jordan *Kikkar* while ruins, more ancient still, dotted the E Jordan Disk, readily visible and well known to anyone living in or near that region (whether he wrote during the Late Bronze Age or Iron Age!).
35. Had the author of Genesis 13:1-12 thought that S Dead Sea sites like Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira were Sodom and Gomorrah, his clearly-written geography would have been constructed to incorporate the specificity of that location; it does not, by any stretch of the imagination.
36. The Sodom narrative carefully marks out a location for the cities of the Kikkar N of the Dead Sea, E bank of the Jordan River where, in fact, the ruins of significant Bronze Age cities exist. Such a high degree of correspondence between text and ground cannot be mere coincidence.
37. Given the extremely high degree of correspondence between the material evidence on the eastern Jordan Disk and a 'literal' biblical chronology placing Abram in the Middle Bronze Age, one must ask whether or not such correspondence is actual or coincidental.
38. For the sake of argument, one is forced to admit that a 'face-value' reading of the biblical text places the Patriarchal Period in the Middle Bronze Age, whereupon a remarkable level of correspondence exists between the Sodom tales and the material facts present on the E Jordan Disk; regardless of when the stories were codified.
39. Given the fact that the writer's geography unequivocally places the Cities of the Kikkar N of the Dead Sea and E of the Jordan River, one must conclude that, whether the Sodom tales are authentically MBA in origin and date, or are late IA etiological compositions, they are layered over the physical geography of the E Jordan Disk where multiple Bronze Age ruins provided his readers with eloquent physical testimony of the destruction of a bygone civilization.
40. As the archaeological evidence now attests, that massive Tall el-Hammam was destroyed by an unimaginably violent cosmic event ("out of the heavens") toward the end of the Middle Bronze Age, this detail of the Sodom narratives (Gen 19) makes the case for Tall el-Hammam being Sodom a virtual lock; indeed, its satellite towns and the entire E Kikkar were thus destroyed simultaneously, remaining an uninhabited wasteland for the next 700 years. These facts also militate against the idea that the Sodom tales were mere etiological legends.



A reconstruction of Tall el-Hammam in the Middle Bronze Age. The excavator of the site, Dr. Steve Collins, has pointed out that the geographical data preserved in the Scriptures, especially in Gen. 13, strongly indicate the area northeast of the Dead Sea



View of the Kikkar from Bethel-Ai, looking east. (Photo: Mike Luddeni)