

A northern Sodom?

**Discovering the City of Sodom:
The Fascinating, True Account
of the Discovery of the Old
Testament's Most Infamous City**

Steven Collins and Latayne C.
Scott

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Murray R. Adamthwaite

After the Foreword and Preface this book falls into two main parts:

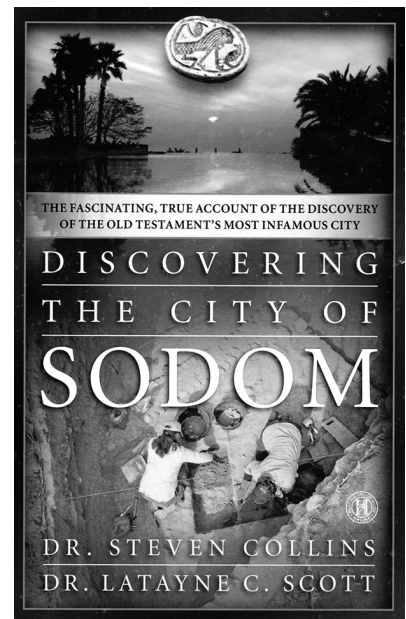
One: Land of Facts and Fables, wherein Collins and Scott trace the location of Sodom and the associated ‘cities of the plain’ (Hebrew *‘ār^{ey} hakkikkār*). They relocate these cities from the now-conventional site at Bab ed-Dhra and further south, in the Ghor region on the south-eastern side of the Dead Sea, to what they contend is the more traditional location on the ‘Plains of Moab’ at the north-eastern end of the Dead Sea, the modern site of Tall el-Hammam. The conventional identifications, proposed by William F. Albright, G. Ernest Wright, and others in the 20th century, are an innovation, unsustainable according to biblical and archaeological evidence. The ‘new’ site, the authors maintain, is the right location after all, and so they return to what medieval sources (e.g. the Madaba Map), and certain 19th century geographers, identified as Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim.

Two: the Science of Tall el-Hammam, wherein the authors explore the archaeology of this site from seven seasons of excavations, and then, being convinced of their identification, they examine the dating implications of their work for a 2nd millennium BC Old Testament chronology. It is on this latter point that difficulties arise, of which the authors are aware but press on nevertheless.

Location of Sodom

In regard to the location of the cities, Dr Collins does at first glance seem to be on to something, especially when he has intimate first-hand knowledge of the relevant sites (p. 112). Furthermore, the ancient testimony he cites is not to be lightly dismissed, as Albright and others have tended to do, or so he alleges. In this connection, Collins places much emphasis on line-of-sight geography, i.e. what can and can’t be seen from this or that location, a fair and reasonable procedure at first glance. In particular, he lays considerable stress on Genesis 13:10–12, according to which Lot could see “all the valley of the Jordan” from a point between Bethel and Ai, which can easily include the Kikkar region and Tall al-Hammam, but a Sodom at Bab ed-Dhra near the Lisan and a Gomorrah even further south are well out of visible range, no matter how good the atmospheric conditions. Hence the Ghor region of the Dead Sea is, for him, out of contention. However, as it turns out, Collins places rather too much weight on this point: there are other considerations here which point in favour of a Ghor location.

Although the authors carefully read the geographical data of Genesis 13, suspicions are immediately aroused when Collins informs us that the biblical Ai is to be identified with Et Tell (p. 112). Yet this identification, along with the related location of Bethel as the modern Beitin, has been seriously challenged in recent years.^{1,2} However, this point is not crucial, since Bethel and Ai were, of course, in the central hill country, the vantage point from which Lot surveyed the cities of the plain. Whatever the solution to the Ai problem, Collins and Scott lay too much weight on this ‘line-of-sight’ critique of the southern location, since a reading of the text of



Genesis 13 indicates that Abraham and Lot may well have moved from the Bethel-Ai region when Lot “lifted up his eyes and saw the whole valley of the Jordan”, which could well indicate that the *kikkar hayyarden* (“valley of the Jordan”) of Genesis 13:10 and the *kikkar biqat yeriho* (“valley of the plain of Jericho”) in Deuteronomy 34:3 are two different entities with two different locations, as Bryant Wood points out.³ Whatever, the text of Genesis 13 is not as definite in its geographical references as Collins and Scott would have us believe.

Are there alternative locations? Could Bab ed-Dhra be right after all? Collins’ identification is not new, even if he seems to have some new evidence in its support. However, he and Scott focus on Albright and Wright as the architects of the southern end hypothesis, but it is really the very thorough investigation of the Ghor region by Walter Rast and Thomas Schaub in 1973–1974 that established Sodom’s location in this area. Yet Collins and Scott appear largely to ignore the evidence and conclusions of Rast and Schaub.⁴ Their bibliography includes two articles by Rast: one an entry in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*



Figure 1. Ruins on top of Tell al-Hammam, the site Collins and Scott designate as Sodom

(1993), and another an essay in the D.G. Rose festschrift of 1987. Schaub is listed in a joint essay with M.S. Chesson in the multi-author work edited by T.E. Levy *et al.*, *Crossing the Jordan: North American Contributions to the Archaeology of Jordan*, London, 2007, which seems to be all. Yet Rast and Schaub have published prolifically during the late 1980s and through the 1990s, in addition to the official site reports for the Jordanian Department of Antiquities. Virtually none of this material appears in Collins' and Scott's volume—a serious omission. By contrast, Bryant Wood lists an extensive bibliography of reports and articles by both Rast and Schaub in his survey and discussion of the evidence for Sodom and Gomorrah.⁵ Accordingly, Wood builds much of his case for Bab ed-Dhra and Numeira as Sodom and Gomorrah respectively on the investigations of Rast and Schaub, as well as a number of other investigators.

Willem van Hattem also discusses the issue of the cities of the plain and, unlike some critics who dismiss the story as 'products of the storyteller's art', he credits the account as historical.⁶ However, he too builds on the

investigations of Rast and Schaub, and while he insists that there is further work to be done on both the Eastern and Western Ghor, the Rast and Schaub explorations have solidly established both the historicity of the biblical story and also the location of the notorious cities.

Then there is Zoar, where Lot and his daughters fled (Genesis 19:18–22). This seems to be well to the south (cf. Genesis 19:19–20), indeed just south of the Zered tributary according to the Madaba Map.⁷ The town is mentioned together with Eglath-Shelishiyah in a broad sweep of Moabite territory from its northern border (Heshbon and Elealeh) to its southern region (Nimrim and Arabim) in Isaiah 15:4–7; likewise in Jeremiah 48:34–35. Arabim in particular is likely to be located near the border with Edom. Later, in the Middle Ages, Zoar was located near the Monastery of St Lot, and called Zugar, while today it is located near the modern town of es-Safi. Numeira, eight miles north of es-Safi, has linguistic connections with Gomorrah and could well preserve the ancient name '*Amorah*'. Then further on, Bab ed-Dhra lies 16 km north of Numeira.

It is the largest ancient ruin, and since it shows occupation in the Early Bronze period it would seem to be the biblical Sodom. While this was the suggestion of Albright and Wright, it received strong confirmation from Rast and Schaub in the mid-1970s.

Collins and Scott are non-committal on the location of Zoar, save to separate it from the other four 'cities of the plain', and place it somewhere to the south of these, although how far south they are not prepared to say. However, both Josephus and Eusebius place it at the southern end of the Dead Sea, and while the modern es-Safi may not be the precise place of Zoar, it must be fairly close, since there is an unbroken tradition from antiquity which places it in that vicinity. This being the case it is stretching things, to say the least, that in fleeing Sodom the Lot family travelled all the way from Tall al-Hammam on the Plains of Moab down to the southern end of the Dead Sea, a distance of more than 60 miles, and braving falling brimstone (and salt) for much of the way. This contradicts Genesis 19:17, where Lot is told, "Do not stay anywhere in the valley, but escape to the mountains", whereupon Lot pleads that he be allowed to flee to Zoar since it was "near" (v. 20). This information regarding Zoar puts Collins' and Scott's identification of Sodom into serious doubt.

Redating Abraham

On the basis of his relocation of the 'cities of the plain'—Sodom in particular—and the fact that no Middle Bronze III or Late Bronze artefacts have been found at Tell al-Hammam, Collins concludes that their destruction occurred abruptly late in the Middle Bronze II period (around 1700 BC, on conventional chronology), much later than conventional chronology allows. However, this involves redating Abraham, which is a tall order. He fits well with the Third Dynasty of Ur (i.e. Ur

III, from 2112 to 2004, according to Kuhrt⁸), wherein his father Terah and family “served other gods” in Mesopotamia (Joshua 24:2), but not to a later period. Moreover, a wholesale redating of the 2nd millennium BC on—ultimately—the strength of one site is a long stretch, but pursuant to this Collins and Scott do not hesitate to turn the whole dating procedure on its head. Thus they proceed to redate Joseph, the Exodus, and the Conquest according to the standard ‘late date’ model of a Hyksos-period Joseph and a Ramesside Exodus (1260 BC, approx.), and at the same time dating Abraham to around 1700 BC. This is too much for some reviewers to swallow, and likewise for myself.

Two considerations *inter alia* point clearly to an early date Abraham:

‘Ur of the Chaldeans’ (*Ur Kašdim*, Genesis 11:31) can only be the Sumerian Ur of Lower Mesopotamia. The epithet ‘of the Chaldees’ is admittedly anachronistic, but is at the same time intended as explanatory for the time the Old Testament received its final form in the time of Ezra (this is not, of course, to countenance the JEDP theory of documentary critics). In Neo-Babylonian times the Kaldu (Heb. *Kašdim*) were a tribe from Lower Mesopotamia (from which came the Chaldean dynasty of Nebuchadnezzar), while Ur itself enjoyed something of a revival as a religious centre at the same time. The excavations of Sir Leonard Woolley in the 1920s revealed just how extensive Ur was in Sumerian times (late 3rd millennium BC), but just as surely Ur was *not* prominent after the collapse of Ur III around 2000 BC. The subsequent chaos of the Isin–Larsa period ensured Ur’s eclipse. While it remained a cult centre for the worship of the moon deity Nanna, it was never again any sort of prominent commercial or residential centre.

Some scholars have indeed argued for a northern ‘Ur’ (Cyrus Gordon *et al.*), but their reasoning has met with

little acceptance. Therefore, if we adopt the Sumerian Ur this places Abraham in the Ur III period (see below) when Ur was at the height of its culture and political power. Archaeologically—on the old configuration—this is the Early Bronze III/IV, into Middle Bronze I (2350–2000 BC), and while the dating for the destruction of Bab ed-Dhra and Numeira is, according to Rast and Schaub, the end of Early Bronze III, Collins regards it as a ‘fudge’ to bring that destruction into the ‘Intermediate Bronze’ (the new configuration).⁹

But why should these archaeological periods with their associated dates be regarded as some kind of ‘holy writ’? This has long troubled me. On a reading of the chrono-genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11, the Flood happened around 2500 BC, which means these archaeological periods are grossly inflated, to say the least, and while a major discussion of this issue is outside the scope of this review, such a major revision is nevertheless urgently necessary from a creationist standpoint.

A date of c. 930 for the Disruption of the Kingdom, along with a straightforward reading of the chronological information given in the Old Testament narratives (1 Kings 6:1; Judges 11:26; Exodus 12:40, and the patriarchal ages) yields a date of c. 2060 for Abraham’s call from Ur. Collins and Scott reject this date and appeal to the Septuagint (LXX) reading of Exodus 12:40: “the children of Israel sojourned in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan for 430 years” (pp. 134–135). This halves the actual time of the sojourn in Egypt, viz. 215 years. Meanwhile, the traditional Masoretic Hebrew text reads 430 years for the entire Egyptian sojourn. However, one of the Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts of Exodus, 4Q22 paleoExodus, is written in the ‘Old Hebrew’, pre-Exilic script, indicating a copy of a very early text,¹⁰ and although fragmentary it preserves Exodus 12:40, and the reading agrees with the Masoretic text. While this

is not necessarily decisive in itself, it does give quite powerful support to the traditional text. It should be noted here that the Qumran caves have yielded manuscripts whose text appears to support the LXX in places (notably in 1 Samuel), while the 430 years of Galatians 3:17 does seem also to derive from LXX. That said, however, we depart from the traditional Hebrew text only if there is compelling evidence pointing in that direction, and the evidence of Qumran Paleo-Exodus points to the traditional Hebrew text.

Conclusion

If the identification of Tell al-Hammam with Sodom entails a (very) late-date Abraham, and *inter alia* for the reasons above we reject that dating implication, we must find an alternative identification for this site. If David Rohl is in any way correct with his late 13th Dynasty Exodus theory,¹¹ a suggestion I find very attractive, I would suggest that the Transjordan campaign towards the end of the wilderness wanderings, as described in Numbers 21:21–30 and Deuteronomy 2:32–36, may provide a possible answer. While the Israelites did not normally burn the cities in which they were going to live (cf. Joshua 11:13; 24:13), they may well have burned the city on the mound of Tell al-Hammam, while it has gone unrecorded. The ‘ball park’ archaeological date for this would align with the Rohl thesis. Whatever, the site is not Sodom.

References

1. Livingston, D., Location of Bethel and Ai Reconsidered, *Westminster Theological J.* XXXIII:20–44, 1970.
2. Despite detractors, Livingston, ref. 1, began a wholesale reinvestigation of the location of Bethel and Ai, such that even Steven Collins himself agrees that Wood has now correctly reidentified Ai with Khirbet el-Maqatir. See also Collins, S., A response to Bryant G. Wood’s critique of Collins’ Northern Sodom Theory, *Biblical Research Bulletin* VII(7):2, n. 5, 2007.
3. Wood, B.G., Locating Sodom: a critique of the northern proposal, *Bible and Spade* 20(3):80, 2007.

4. Rast, W.F. and Schaub, R.T., Survey of the southeastern plain of the Dead Sea, *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* (Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan: Department of Antiquities) 19:5–54; 175–185, 1974.
5. Wood, B.G., The discovery of the sin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, *Bible and Spade* 12(3): 67–80, 1999. See also Wood, ref. 3, pp.78–84. Note the extensive body of literature by Rast and Schaub cited in each of these articles. Collins' reason for this omission becomes clear in Collins, ref. 2, p. 35, where he declares that Schaub's investigations do not support a Bab ed-Dhra location for Sodom, although Wood assumes that they do.
6. van Hattem, W.C., Once again: Sodom and Gomorrah, *Biblical Archaeologist* 44(2):87–92, 1981.
7. Note here the observations of Wood, ref. 3, pp. 78–79, on the location of Zoar. Significantly, Collins and Scott do not discuss Zoar to any great extent in their book, yet its location is pivotal to any discussion concerning Sodom. A survey of his discussion of the “biblical facts leading to the location of Zoar” in Collins, ref. 2, p. 11, significantly fails to mention Isaiah 15:5 and Jeremiah 48:34.
8. Kuhrt, A., *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–300 BC*, vol. I, Routledge, London, p. 56, 1995.
9. Collins, ref. 2, p. 27.
10. For a discussion, see Phillips, D.L., Hebrew-English Paleo Exodus—Scripture at the End of the Iron II Period, mellenpress.com, accessed 20 August 2015. I consulted a facsimile of the manuscript 4Q22 at the Australian Institute of Archaeology, Collins St, Melbourne (where it was housed at the time).
11. Rohl, D.M., *A Test of Time: The Bible—from Myth to History*, ch. 13, Century Random House, London, 1995.