

SODOM AND GOMORRAH

Even among people who do not know the Bible very well, the mention of “Sodom and Gomorrah” produces instant recognition. We learn about these places from Genesis, but their catastrophic end has become a powerful representation of God’s overwhelming judgment on all evildoers. The demise of Sodom and Gomorrah was used repeatedly throughout the Bible to depict humanity’s tremendous capacity for evil and God’s capacity and willingness to punish any wickedness.

REFERENCES IN THE BIBLE

In Genesis 13:5-18, Sodom is mentioned as noteworthy in its wickedness and sin. Throughout the biblical pages, this same stigma is applied to Sodom and Gomorrah as well as to the other three “cities of the valley” (or plain). According to Genesis 10:19, the four cities of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim constitute a group. A fifth city, Zoar (or Bela), was added in Genesis 13:10. Even though all five of these locations eventually experienced God’s powerfully destructive judgment because of their evil, Sodom and Gomorrah are mentioned by name most frequently in that regard.

When the prophets raised their voices against wickedness, Sodom, Gomorrah and the other cities of the plain often served as their archetype of evil and God’s fierce judgment (Amos 4:11; Hos. 11:8; Isa. 1:10, 3:9; Jer. 49:18; 50:40). Jesus cited Sodom as an analogy of coming judgment in the end times (Luke 17:28-32). He also pointed out Sodom in His words of condemnation against those towns that did not receive His ministry with openness (Matt. 10:15; 11:23-24). Paul cited the Old Testament prophets who highlighted Sodom and Gomorrah’s wickedness in Romans 9:29.

LOCATION ON THE MAP

Any effort to pinpoint the exact locations for the cities of the valley/plain is based largely upon speculation and educated guesswork. Even a close and careful reading of the biblical passages can lead equally committed Bible students to different interpretations. Some readers will conclude that the cities were on the northern rim of the Dead Sea, while others place them around the southern shores of the Dead Sea.

Most current Bible atlases suggest that the five cities adopt the southern theory. Several factors seem to lend weight to this decision. For example, the site of

es-Safi at the southern tip of the Dead Sea has been equated historically with Zoar/Bela, the fifth city of the valley (see Gen. 13:10).¹

At first glance, the southern Dead Sea location as it exists today may appear to lack any “garden” vegetation. But a closer look at the area reveals many acres of irrigated, productive agricultural stations where tree crops such as dates, bananas, and oranges are being grown in abundance. And there is strong physical evidence that several significant sources of water (for example, streams and springs fed by the rain falling upon the fertile plateau of Moab) once nourished life and crops along the sea’s southeastern shore.²

Modern archaeological excavations at the sites of Bab edh-Dhra, Numeira, es-Safi, Feifeh, and Khanazi have led some interpreters to identify them as the “cities of the valley” (particularly since the time of their existence seems to even predate the time of Abraham). But caution is advisable. We should avoid assigning any rigid locations until more complete results of those digs continue to develop and more confident assignments of biblical place names might be made to these sites.³

Also, the southern third of the Dead Sea is very shallow—about 20 feet deep, compared with depths of up to 1,300 feet in the northern two-thirds. That simple, but impressive, fact has led some interpreters to conclude that this southern one-third was a dry, fertile plain in biblical times, which later was flooded. These interpreters believe that somewhere upon that plain—perhaps the biblical “valley of Siddim” (see Gen. 14:3)—the “cities of the valley,” including Sodom and Gomorrah, were located.⁴ But once again, caution should prevail before any pronouncements about exact locations.

Sodom and Gomorrah, wherever they have been located, continue even now to mark a specific and clear teaching of the biblical revelation. The biblical witness remains steady: God will judge those individuals and communities who reject His ways in wicked abandon.

1 John Keating Wiles, “Sodom/Gomorrah/Cities of the Plain” in *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, Watson E. Mills, gen. ed. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1991), 839.

2 John Rogerson, “The Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea,” *Atlas of the Bible* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1985), 195.

3 Willem C. van Hattem, “Once Again: Sodom and Gomorrah,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 44 (Spring 1981): 89; Wiles, 839-40.

4 D. M. Howard, Jr., “Siddim, Valley of” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev., Geoffrey W. Bromiley, gen. ed., vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 499-500; also Rogerson, 194.

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