

The Discovery of the Sin Cities of Sodom and Gomorrah 1

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The names Sodom and Gomorrah are by-words in our modern society. An especially wicked place is described as a "Sodom and Gomorrah." Pastors are sometimes said to be preaching "fire and brimstone." And we have the legal term *sodomy* for unnatural sex acts. These allusions, of course, stem from the Biblical account of events that occurred in the days of Abraham in Genesis 19.

But did these places ever exist and will they ever be found? Most scholars think not. In his *Anchor Bible Dictionary* article on Sodom and Gomorrah, M.J. Mulder concluded that they were,

Two legendary cities from prehistoric Israel in the neighborhood of the Dead Sea...it is highly uncertain, if not improbable, that the vanished cities of the Pentapolis will ever be recovered (1992: 99, 102).

In their textbook on the history of Israel and Judah, Miller and Hayes state:

The Sodom and Gomorrah story reflects yet another motif pattern known from extrabiblical literature, that of divine beings who visit a city to test the hospitality of its people and eventually destroy the inhospitable city. One can compare in this regard the Greek myth of Baucis and Philemon. The presence of such traditional motifs in the biblical narratives raises the possibility that at least some of these narratives are purely products of the storyteller's art, which of course raises serious questions about their usefulness for historical reconstruction (1986:60).

Looking for the Sites

Sodom and Gomorrah were two of five cities referred to in Scripture as the Cities of the Plain. From references to the "plain of the Jordan" (Gn 13:10), "the Valley of Siddim (the Salt Sea)" (Gn 14:3) and Abraham looking *down* to see the Cities of the Plain from the area of Hebron (Gn 19:28), it is clear that the cities were located in the vicinity of the Dead Sea. Since the mountains come close to the shore on both the east and west, the cities must have been located either north or south of the Dead Sea. Various commentators over the centuries have suggested locations both north and south (Mulder 1992: 101-102). The reference to "bitumen pits" in Genesis 14:10, however, tips the scale in favor of a southern location (Howard 1984). Bitumen (a natural petroleum product similar to asphalt) was commonly found in the shallow southern basin of the Dead Sea in antiquity. (Bilkadi 1984; 1994; Clapp 1936a: 901-902; 1936b: 341-342).

One popular theory, repeated yet today, is that the Cities of the Plain were located in the plain south of the Dead Sea and later covered by the waters of the southern basin, ...

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