

# 1. The Genesis Account

## *The Hebrew Bible*

An ambitious project, termed 'The Bible Project', has been underway in Jerusalem since 1958, and is unlikely to be completed until about the year 2200. A group of scholars is sifting through all the sacred texts forming the Hebrew Bible, with the view to correcting and rewriting where necessary in order to produce an authoritative version. Matti Friedman (2011) provided a fascinating report on progress to date in his newspaper article titled 'Decades of work uncovers changes in Old Testament'. He describes how, in 1958, a group of dedicated scholars embarked on a project which none will live long enough to see to its completion; one member of the original team died in 2010 at the age of ninety years. The project has the aim of producing an authoritative edition of the Old Testament by scrutinising every alteration of text that has occurred over the centuries, and delving into every relevant extant source of religious writing.

Many Jews and Christians hold strong convictions regarding the immutability of Scripture, but the work of the scholars already has shown that many books and passages of the Old Testament have altered through the ages, evolving into the versions generally accepted today. Wearisome months and years have been spent combing through ancient manuscripts, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, parchment texts from Egypt, and religious writings in Hebrew, Samaritan, Aramaic, Greek and Latin, amongst others. It is expected that the project will continue for the next two hundred years. Thus far, after five decades of research, authoritative versions of three of the Hebrew Bible's twenty-four books have been published. (Christians count the same books differently, for a total of thirty-nine).

It is clear from the progress to date that the texts of the Old Testament are far from inviolable, having experienced numerous changes throughout their long history and been subject to scribal errors, inaccuracies, additions and deletions, and other textual changes that, understandably, have occurred over the generations in oral communication or by the written word.

It remains to be seen whether the work of the Bible Project team will shed further light on the Genesis account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Perhaps more substantial evidence will emerge to aid in the reconstruction of those graphic events that occurred so long ago. In the meantime, we are in the fortunate position that preceding generations of scholars have provided us with

the Bible we know and cherish today. Our advanced scientific knowledge is a tool to further future study and, as it relates to the destruction of Sodom and the ‘cities of the plain’, will be seen to be of powerful application.

## *The Book of Jasher*

The origin of the Book of Jasher, also known as the ‘Book of the Just Man’, is obscure though reference is made to it in both the Hebrew Bible and English translations, e.g. Joshua (10:13) and Samuel II (1:18). These inclusions prove it was extant at the time the texts of Joshua and Samuel II were written. As no copy in the original Hebrew is known to exist, it may indeed represent a ‘lost book’ as some claim. It is to be hoped the Bible Project, currently in progress, will illuminate this obscurity.

Scholars have attempted to reconstruct the book, and several versions have been published, however caution must be exercised regarding the reliability of its factual content, the authenticity of which may be fragmentary. It is non-canonical, its substance not being considered scripturally genuine by religious authority. Despite this it is an interesting and valuable reference. Its ninety-one chapters are a condensed history of the first books of the Old Testament, extending from the Creation up to the occupation of Canaan following the death of Joshua.

The Book of Jasher makes reference to Sodom and its inhabitants in a similar manner to that of orthodox English translations, but with a notable exception discussed later in this chapter. Other verses describing the debauchery of the Sodomites in their quarterly revels have been quoted earlier.

## *English Versions*

The first English version of the Bible can be attributed to John Wycliffe (c. 1320-84), who translated the Latin *Vulgate* with the assistance of friends. Wycliffe was proclaimed a heretic for challenging church doctrines, his works condemned, and his followers imprisoned. He himself was unmolested and permitted to retire to his rectory at Lutterworth, Leicestershire. It is fortunate for posterity that Wycliffe’s translation was not burned, but remained in manuscript form until 1850 when it finally appeared in print.

The first attempt to produce a printed version in English was that of William Tyndale. The first edition of his New Testament, printed in Cologne in 1525, was denounced by the Bishop of London, and copies burned. This did not deter Tyndale from producing his translation of the *Pentateuch*, which appeared five years later. Notable other early versions include that by Miles Coverdale (1535), generally considered inferior to Tyndale’s, and that by John Rogers (1539) who completed Tyndale’s translation. The first authorised version was in 1540, and is generally known as Cranmer’s Bible from the influence of Archbishop Thomas

Cranmer, who played an important role in Reformation politics in England. With various revisions Cranmer's Bible remained the official version until 1598, it being decreed by royal proclamation that copies be placed in all parish churches in England.

Perhaps the greatest scholarly translation of the Bible into English is that represented by the King James Bible, an authorised version which appeared in 1611. The work was undertaken by forty-seven scholars. By the accuracy of translation, and the purity of its style, it superseded all previous versions, and remains popular today through the sheer beauty of its language. A number of other versions have appeared in recent years purporting to be more accurate. However, for the purpose of this book, it is the passages in the King James Bible which will be used to discuss the events relating to the destruction of Sodom, Gomorrah, and the other 'cities of the plain'.

The Book of Genesis is the first book of the *Pentateuch*, i.e. the first five books of the Old Testament. The word 'Genesis' is derived from the first word of the text *bē rē 'šit*, Hebrew for 'in the beginning'. In its initial chapters (1-11) Genesis relates the stories of the Creation, the Garden of Eden, the creation of Adam and Eve, the fratricide of Cain, Noah's Ark, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. From this point Genesis tells the Patriarchal story of Abraham and his wanderings, his sons and family. Included in Abraham's entourage is Lot, Abraham's nephew, who was destined to survive the destruction of Sodom. The story of Lot, and his struggles to maintain a virtuous existence amidst the debauchery of Sodom, is a focal part of Genesis, and delivers a powerful moral message as Sodom was doomed, through the iniquities of its inhabitants, to be destroyed by fire and brimstone according to the Genesis account.

Kuhrt (1995) gives details of the variations in style that may be detected in the *Pentateuch*. These include narrative, priestly and authoritative styles, suggesting that the original compositions were compiled by a number of different hands. As Kuhrt points out there are numerous anachronisms and inconsistencies. These resulted in disputes in the past between theologians, priests, and scholars. Such debate continues to this day, seemingly as vigorous as it ever was in the synagogues of Old Jerusalem.

## *The Genesis Account*

In Genesis, facts concerning Sodom are interwoven within the historical account, as it is recounted in the Old Testament. It is reasonable to question whether the writers of Genesis may, or may not, have chosen versions of the event from the oral tradition in order to provide a suitable backdrop to the moral message they wished to convey. It is expected they seized upon the opportunity if such a tradition existed.

It is only in the last century that the science of seismology has developed, and advanced to the point where we now better understand the causation of

earthquakes through plate tectonics and accumulated shear stress phenomena, and are capable of measuring and recording seismic events. We may not be able to predict when and where earthquakes may strike, but it cannot be disputed that we now know far more than the ancients, who viewed everything beyond their powers of comprehension and reason as an 'act of God'.

The above should not be viewed as an attack upon the veracity of the Bible for, as has been stated earlier, the geological perspective regarding the destruction of Sodom is generally supportive of the Biblical description. The eyewitness account of the destruction of Sodom, however, as recounted in Genesis, was written in the dawn of history.

On the presumption it was a real live event, it is important to divorce the emotional struggles of Lot from those clues which enable a rational hypothesis to be developed leading up to the dramatic destruction of Sodom. Whether Lot and his family lived through the cataclysm is not immaterial, but is of secondary consideration. What is vital is to identify those passages of Genesis which impart specific information relevant to the catastrophe from those that don't. By this means we can begin to analyse this distant event using the scientific techniques and technical knowledge currently available.

Chapters 12 and 13 of Genesis describe the long wanderings of Abraham and Lot, and how they go down to Egypt. On the southward journey through Canaan an altar is built on a mountain at Bethel, an altar to which Abraham and Lot return after their sojourn in Egypt. There is trouble between the herdsmen of Abraham and Lot, and they decide to go their separate ways:

And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar. Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan; and Lot journeyed east . . . and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain and pitched his tent towards Sodom. (12:10-12)

Chapter 14 relates the battle of the kings in the Vale of Siddim following an invasion by confederate armies from the north. It is a chapter of some importance, being the first chapter in the Old Testament to describe a battle. As the battle must have been an event of epic proportions, and of political prominence to warrant inclusion in Genesis, its implications are discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Lot is reported as having suffered the indignity of being made captive by the invaders and taken away, presumably destined for a life of slavery, but is rescued by Abraham from an uncertain fate. Later on, God appears to Abraham, and announces his intention of destroying Sodom and Gomorrah 'because their sin is great' (18:20), but Lot is forewarned by angels who urge him to escape the impending doom with the words 'Up, get you out of this place; for the Lord will destroy this city' (19:14). Lot's flight from Sodom is described thus:

And when the morning arose, then the angels hastened Lot, saying, Arise, take thy wife, and thy two daughters . . . lest though be consumed in the iniquity of the city. And while he lingered, the men laid hold upon his hand . . . and they brought him forth and set him without the city. . . . Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed. (19:15-17)

Lot arrives safely in Zoar and destruction of the cities ensues:

The sun was risen upon the earth when Lot entered into Zoar. Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground. But his [Lot's] wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt. (19:23-26)

Abraham, from his position on the mountain at Bethel (near Hebron), is a witness to these dramatic events:

And Abraham gat up early in the morning. . . . And he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace. (19:27-28)

A detailed study of the Hebrew phraseology describing these vivid events reinforces the English translation, but there are subtle differences:

- (1) Bentor (1989) points out that the original Hebrew word translated as 'smoke' is *kitor*, which signifies water vapour. This might suggest, therefore, that the primary catastrophe to which Sodom was presumably subjected involving fire and brimstone, was followed by a secondary one involving water.
- (2) Wood (1999) writes: 'The Biblical description, then, of the destruction was of burning material raining down from above, accompanied by an overturning of the cities and thick smoke being forced upward from the land. A rather apocalyptic scene, one that was forever etched in the minds of the ancient Israelites.'

Wood also attempts to determine a precise date for the destruction of Sodom from the chronology of the lives of the Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. From this he arrives at a date of about 2070 BC. However, to give Wood credit, he admits to an inconsistency of 230-280 years, thereby placing it within the period 2350-2300 BC. This is a time generally accepted by archaeologists, but not without reservations, as towards the end of Early Bronze III.

A Biblical basis for the dating of the destruction of Sodom is heavily reliant upon the assumption that Abraham actually lived and witnessed the event. Naturally, we have no other source of verification. Thus there is a dichotomy. Do we take the Biblical account as factually correct and ignore science? Or, do we place emphasis on interpreting scientific and historic evidence in order to produce a rational and logical argument, which may or may not be at variance with the genealogy of the Patriarchs implied by Genesis? This book takes the second path.

It may be argued that the writers of Genesis were unable to accurately portray the early history of Israel in the period of the Patriarchs, preferring to relate a number of disparate incidents useful in imparting a moral message. Therefore, the stories as told in Genesis, and indeed elsewhere in the early parts of the Old Testament may be neither historically accurate nor factually correct. The *Pentateuch*, most assuredly, was written to preserve Israel's rich cultural heritage at the time of compilation, with emphasis upon Judaic theology, genealogy, and fixing its prescribed laws and customs pertaining to religious observance. More cynically, Genesis might be construed as offering moral justification for Israelite occupation of the Land of Canaan following the Exodus.

Tubb (1998) writes:

It is clear that the time of writing, editing, or compiling of, say, the Patriarchal stories is of critical importance, for it obviously has a bearing on the credibility of the source material. In this respect, a number of points can be made. First, the narratives represent a compilation of very many individual sources. Second, the process of editing these sources into the coherent whole we recognize as the Book of Genesis could not have taken place before the seventh or possibly sixth century BC. Third, the writers or editors had access to a variety of material, most of which can be assumed was contemporary or near-contemporary with the time of writing.

The implications are obvious. Firstly, because of the persistence of the saga from antiquity, it is highly probable the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah occurred a long time before it was recorded in Genesis, with the likelihood the circumstances involved had become nothing more than fragments of folklore. Secondly, the account is markedly deficient with regard to specific details of importance to the forensic investigator. Regrettably, we have no more than a few scant Biblical passages upon which to commence our reconstruction of the events described, and to put them into modern perspective using current scientific and technical knowledge.

It is significant to the argument presented herein, that following the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, as recounted in Genesis, there is no further mention in the Bible of the Vale of Siddim. It follows, therefore, that the Vale of Siddim was lost as a consequence of the destruction and, furthermore, disappeared without trace.

From the Genesis account the following facts may be gleaned:

- (1) The Vale of Siddim could be sighted from Bethel.
- (2) The valley of the Jordan was well-watered.
- (3) Zoar was at a higher elevation than Sodom.
- (4) The cities were destroyed overnight by agencies that included 'fire and brimstone'.

### *The Battle of the Kings in the Vale of Siddim*

A full account is rendered in Genesis 14 of a most unusual event for such an early chapter of the Bible, namely an invasion by four confederate kings from the north, and their assault on the 'cities of the plain'. The assault and the ensuing battle in the Vale of Siddim is detailed; the combatants on each side are named, and the route taken by the invading armies is described. The inclusion of such a military confrontation, suggests Sodom ranked as being highly important in the regional politics of the age. The clash must have had consequences of epic proportions:

And it came to pass in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of nations; That these made war with Bera king of Sodom, and with Birsha king of Admah, and Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar. All these were joined together in the vale of Siddim, which is the salt sea. Twelve years they served Chedorlaomer, and in the thirteenth year they rebelled. (14:1-4)

And in the fourteenth year came Chedorlaomer, and the kings that were with him, and smote the Rephaims in Ashteroth Karnaim, and the Zuzins in Ham, and the Emims in Shaveh Kiriathaim, and the Horites in their mount Seir, unto El-paran, which is by the wilderness. And they returned, and came to En-mishpat, which is Kadesh, and smote all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites, that dwelt in Hazezon-tamar. (14:5-7)

And there went out the king of Sodom, and the king of Gomorrah, and the king of Admah, and the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (the same is Zoar) and they joined battle with them in the vale of Siddim; With Chedorlaomer the king of Elam, and with Tidal king of nations, and Amraphel king of Shinar, and Arioch king of Ellasar; four kings with five. And the vale was full of *slimepits*; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, and fell there; and they that remained fled to the mountain. And they took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their victuals, and went their way. (14:8-11)<sup>1</sup>

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1. Note: According to Bentor (1989) the term here translated as 'slime-pits' occurs in other translations as 'lime-pits' or 'clay-pits'. The original phrase is be'eroth hemar, meaning asphalt wells, the translators apparently having confused hemar (asphalt) with homer (clay). As will be seen in a later chapter the region is rich in asphalt (or bitumen).

The Book of Jasher (16:2) gives the invaders a mighty army, so huge that some doubt must be expressed regarding the actual numbers:

And these four kings went up with all their camps, about eight hundred thousand men, and they went out as they were, and smote every man they found in their way.

Even by Biblical standards eight hundred thousand warriors seems preposterous. Assuming the figure to be correct and Chedorlaomer's men marched four abreast, the column of men would have stretched over two hundred kilometres. The prospect of feeding such an army on the move would have daunted the most able quartermaster! To put it in further perspective, the Allied invasion of France, June 6, 1944, placed 160,000 men on the beaches of Normandy the first day.

Budge (1884) comments upon Chedorlaomer's punitive raid in the following words:

Some writers think that Khammurabi is to be identified with Amphrael, King of Shinar, who, with Arioch of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer, King of Elam, and Tidal, King of Goiim, invaded Palestine (Gen xiv). 'Amphrael' may well be a garbled form of the name Khammurabi, and Tidal seems to be a good Hittite name, and the mention of a king of Babylon with a Hittite ring need not surprise us. There is an Elamite ring in the sound 'Chedorlaomer', yet though Ellasar may represent Larsa, its king Arioch is difficult to identify. But it is probable that the statement in Genesis has an historical foundation.

Father Tadros Yacoub Malaty, a Coptic priest has written extensively on Genesis. In his *Interpretation of the Book of Genesis*, he states the following regarding Chedorlaomer:

Chedorlaomer is a name that means 'Servant of Laomer', one of the gods of Elam. He was known for his violence and domineering, having swept all kingdoms of the South, submitted all the valley of the Jordan, and had control of the main road between Egypt and Damascus. After twelve years of humiliation, five kings [of Sodom] rebelled against him, and refrained from paying him taxes.

Malaty states (without supporting evidence) that Chedorlaomer was the ruler of the Persian Empire of Elam, located on the northwest coast of the Persian Gulf extending north to the Zagros Mountains, Amphrael was the ruler of Shinar, located amidst the southern regions of Babylonia, Arioch was the ruler of Assur which ranged to the north, and Tidal was the leader of the Hittites to the west. It would appear, therefore, that the invaders represented a far-flung confederacy involving most of modern Syria and Iraq, and reaching far into Turkey and Iran.





3. Route of the punitive expedition of the four Northern Kings (Genesis 14).

Figure 3 indicates the invasion route, generally accepted by Biblical scholars, as that followed by the invaders in their punitive expedition, prior to descending into the Dead Sea and engaging in battle in the Vale of Siddim. It has all the hallmarks of a military strategy designed to curtail, or control, Sodomite trade with the outside world, especially trade with Egypt. The phrase (14:4) ‘Twelve

years they served Chedorlaomer, and in the thirteenth year they rebelled', suggests the Canaanites were subjects who had failed to pay tribute to their overlords, and merited appropriate punishment.

The invading armies, on their march south, first took Ashteroth-Karnaim, a city in Bashan east of the Jordan River. They then captured Ham, located to the northeast of the Dead Sea, before continuing to follow what is now known as the King's Highway. This was a major route following the high ground linking Damascus with El-Paran, a town and port at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba. They then vanquished the inhabitants of Shaveh-Kiriathaim, now Kureiyat, north of Dibon in the land of Moab, before proceeding to Mount Seir, and thence to El-Paran.

Chedorlaomer's armies would have marched past the turn-off to Sodom, which would have wound westwards down through the mountains into the Vale of Siddim, and the Dead Sea beyond. If they had wanted direct engagement with the Sodomites they would have followed this route. Instead they elected to postpone the opportunity of springing a surprise attack on their enemies, which suggests they had more important issues in mind.

El-Paran was a seaport through which trade passed *en route* to Upper Egypt and beyond. It was, and continues to be, a place of considerable importance. Much commerce, in the form of imports and exports, pass through the present-day ports of Elat and Aqaba. In the days of Chedorlaomer the port of El-Paran could be expected to handle all the commerce originating in Canaan, which was bound for Upper Egypt and the Red Sea. Much of this export trade would have been in the form of bitumen and allied materials produced by the Sodomites. It might be expected, therefore, that Chedorlaomer left his tax-gatherers behind to ensure all duties and levies were paid.

After El-Paran the armies marched across the arid wastes of the Negev to Ennishpat, an oasis located approximately a hundred kilometres south of Gaza. This was situated on the overland route from Canaan to Lower Egypt. Again, Chedorlaomer is likely to have left a coterie of tax-gatherers behind to ensure his revenue collection was not compromised. He then struck off across the hills of Judaea in order to descend into the Dead Sea to Hazazon-tamar, believed to be En Gedi, on the western shore of the Dead Sea.

Chronicles II (20:2) references the conflict between the Moabites and the Ammonites with Jehoshaphat, King of Judah (873-849 BC) 'and, behold, they be in Hazazon-tamar, which is En-gedi'. En Gedi lay on the trading route winding northwards towards Jericho. It constituted a major staging-post for Sodomite trade. Once again Chedorlaomer would not have neglected to impose his control on this outpost.

At this point of the campaign Chedorlaomer and his confederates could have felt some degree of satisfaction in bottling up the trade routes, and ensuring tax revenues from Sodomite exports were fully restored. There remained only one last lesson to teach the Sodomites and their associates, and that was to thrash them in battle. We do not know what route the invading armies followed between Hazazon-tamar and the Vale of Siddim. Since the South Basin of the

Dead Sea was likely a salt plain at the time there was no need for them to march across it, or around it by following the southern shoreline. Instead they would have forded the Lynch Strait, and crossed the Lisan Peninsula, in order to besiege Sodom and her allies within the Vale of Siddim. As there is likely to have been a number of settlements along the southern shore of the South Basin, one or more of which may have been numbered among the ‘cities of the plain’, it is presumed that the conquest of these by the invading armies would have featured in the Genesis account if the invaders had followed this longer, more circuitous, route prior to engaging in battle.

It is impossible for the presence of Chedorlaomer’s armies to have gone undetected by the Sodomites. Even though Sodom itself was largely out of sight, being within the Vale of Siddim itself, they would have had observation posts scattered throughout the region. However, the intentions of Chedorlaomer would have been obvious, and it must be expected, therefore, that the Sodomites, and their allies, would have had ample time to prepare for the inevitable battle, whether they possessed much military prowess or not.

Chedorlaomer is reputed to have been killed while his forces marched north following their successful campaign, in which they garnered much booty. His death is said to have occurred at Hoba, northeast of Damascus, and the loss of his leadership by the northern confederacies led to the Canaanites regaining their independence. It is unknown when the ‘Battle of the Kings’ took place. However, it must have been prior to 2350 BC, the postulated date of the destruction of Sodom.

Another important point, which may be made in connection with the Genesis account, regards the five Sodomite kings listed, i.e. the kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Bela (which is Zoar). Strabo wrote that ‘there were once thirteen inhabited cities in that region of which Sodom was the metropolis.’ Figure 4 indicates twelve locations around the southern end of the Dead Sea capable of sustaining viable agriculture. It follows, therefore, that though only five kings reportedly engaged in battle against the invaders, the forces of the Sodomites were likely drawn from more than five communities. Which of those locations depicted on Figure 4 represent Sodom’s confederates in the battle is, of course, open to speculation, and further study.

### *The Vale of Siddim and the Valley of Salt*

Following the destruction of Sodom there is no further mention in the Bible of the Vale of Siddim. Its loss must, therefore, be considered total. However, the Valley of Salt persisted, and is referenced in Samuel II and Kings II in the following verses:

And David gat himself a name when he returned from smiting the Syrians in the valley of salt, being eighteen thousand men. And he put garrisons in Edom; throughout all Edom put he garrisons, and all they of Edom became David’s servants. (Samuel II, 8:13-14)

He [Amaziah] slew of Edom in the valley of salt ten thousand, and took Selah by war, and called the name of it Jokteel unto this day. (Kings II, 14:7)

The alluvial plain of the Wadi Kerak, located at the south-eastern corner of the North Basin would have been clearly visible from Bethel prior to its loss. This would have represented one of the most expansive, and fertile, areas to the south. Though the southern extremity of the South Basin would have offered some oases of fertility clustered around the ephemeral wadis draining into the sea, these would likely have been only partially visible from Bethel.

The South Basin of the Dead Sea was occupied by salt flats inimical to large-scale human habitation and, therefore, offering a dismal vista, and beyond lay the desolate wastes of the Aravah valley. As the alluvial plain of Wadi Kerak would have been well-watered it is considered to be the prime location of the legendary Vale of Siddim, especially as the North Basin provided a ready source of bitumen.

Though ancillary to the Genesis account of the destruction of Sodom, the Prophet Ezekiel supplies comment to support the view that the singularity of the event had been long remembered. He writes (16:49-51):

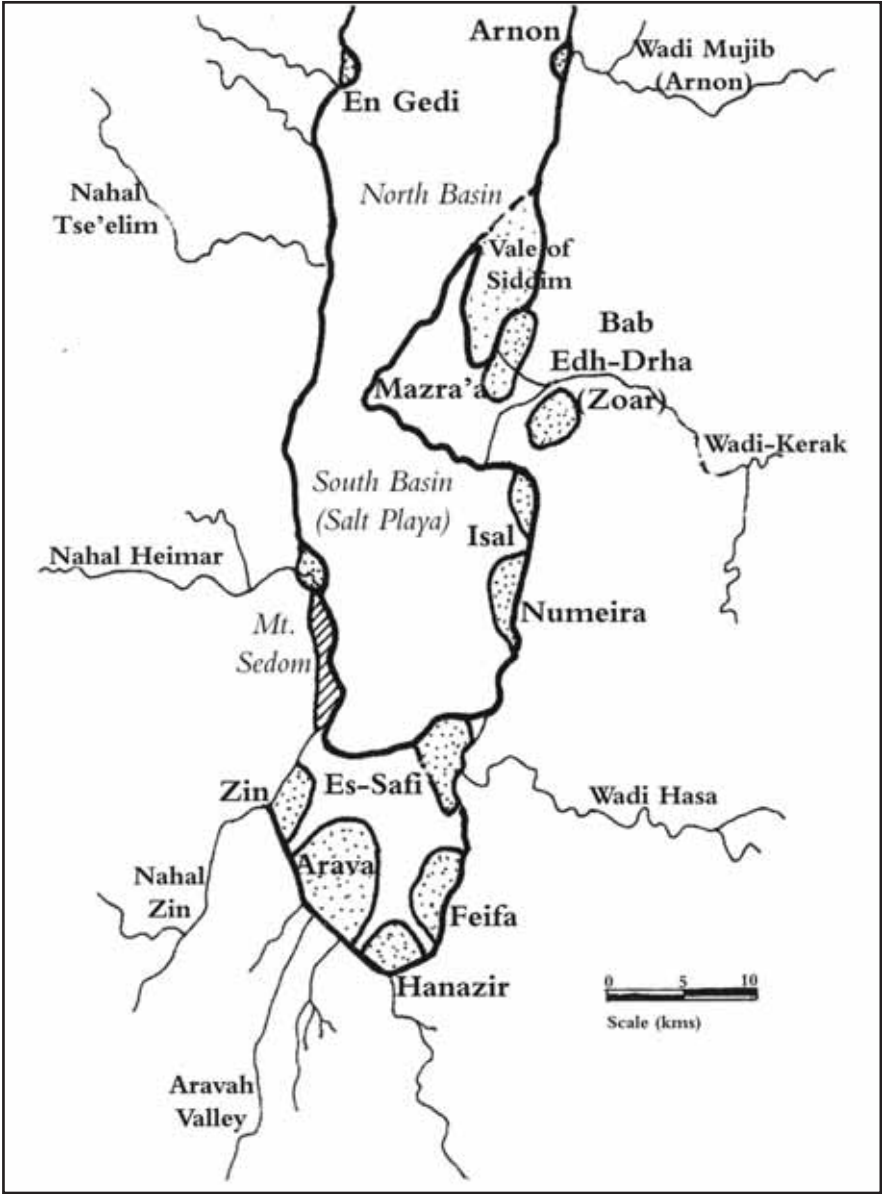
As I live, saith the Lord God, Sodom thy sister hath not done, she nor her daughters, as thou [Samaria] hast done, thou and thy daughters.

Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy.

And they were haughty, and committed abomination before me: therefore I took them away as I saw good.

Ezekiel was born around 622 BC, and describes his calling to become a prophet when he was about thirty years of age. He prophesied the sacking of Jerusalem, which occurred in 587 BC when the Jews were carried off into captivity by the Babylonians. The presumably oral tradition of the destruction of Sodom had, therefore, lasted some fifteen hundred years before Ezekiel wrote his words. What is most interesting is the phrase 'this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness'.

The central thesis of this book is that the production of bitumen was vital to the Canaanite economy of the Dead Sea. Because the Sodomites monopolised its production, the profits of trade would have been lucrative. Their kings, princes and merchants would have waxed rich with 'fulness of bread' and, in consequence, spent their time in an 'abundance of idleness', with its perverse pleasures and distractions. Their haughtiness and disdain towards the poor and needy is little different from that reflected today by certain regimes holding a similar monopoly.



4. Southern part of the Dead Sea showing locations of agricultural communities and possible 'Cities of the Plain' (after Neev and Emery, 1995).