



The Sinking of the Pentapolis: Gen 19:24-25: God's Perfectly Timed Earthquake & Firestorm: Rationales from Geology, Archaeology, and Theology

10. As it rained burning stones of sulfur upon the area it resulted in the overthrow of the four cities, all their inhabitants, and what grew on the ground. The word "overthrew" in verse 25 is the Hebrew verb:
פָּהַק *haphak* - "to overturn"
11. This overturning describes the end result of the catastrophe. The facts of geology and the discoveries of archaeologists indicate very strongly that the destruction of the four cities of the valley followed by their disappearance from the face of the earth was initiated by an earthquake from below and lightning from above which ignited the brimstone thrown upward.
12. We will now examine several sources which describe how these things most likely occurred:

Tacitus, Cornelius, *Histories 5:7*. In *Great Books of the Western World*, edited by Robert Maynard Hutchins. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 15:296:

Note: Tacitus \tas' i-tus\; A.D. 56-120 Roman historian.

The Jordan river does not discharge itself into the sea, but flows entire through two lakes [Lake Merom and the Sea of Galilee], and is lost in the third. This is a lake of vast circumference; it resembles the sea, but is more nauseous in taste; it breeds pestilence among those who live near by its noisome odour; it cannot be moved by the wind, and it affords no home either to fish or water-birds. These strange waters support what is thrown upon them, as on a solid surface, and all persons, whether they can swim or no, are equally buoyed up by the waves. At a certain season of the year the lake throws up bitumen. It is naturally a fluid of dark colour; when vinegar is sprinkled upon it, it coagulates and floats upon the surface. Those who know the country say that the bitumen moves in heaving masses on the water, that it is drawn by hand to the shore, and that there, when dried by the evaporation of the earth and the power of the sun, it is cut into pieces with axes and wedges just as timber or stone would be.

Not far from this lake lies a plain, once fertile, they say, and the site of great cities, but afterwards struck by lightning and consumed. Of this event, they declare, traces still remain, for the soil, which is scorched in appearance, has lost its productive power. Everything that grows spontaneously, as well as what is planted by hand, either when the leaf or flower have been developed, or after maturing in the usual form, becomes black and rotten, and crumbles into a kind of dust. I am ready to allow, on the one hand, that cities, once famous, may have been consumed by fire from heaven, while, on the other, I imagine that the earth is infected by the exhalations of the lake, and that the surrounding air is tainted.

Blaiklock, Edward M. and R. K. Harrison (eds.). *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*. (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1983), 418-19:

Sodom. While the site has not been positively identified, it is thought to be submerged under the waters of the Dead Sea south of the Lisan [*Lashon* in Hebrew] peninsula in what was originally the Vale of Siddim. Perhaps the citizens of the Vale of Siddim used (an area) about five miles from the Dead Sea southeast of Lashon, as a place for religious pilgrimages between 2300 and 1900 B.C., as suggested by excavations there. The cessation of visits at that time implies the destruction of the cities of the plain about 1900 B.C. God's destruction of Sodom most probably was produced by the combustion of petroleum gases emanating from the bituminous deposits in the area. This doubtlessly was accompanied by seismic disturbances, which caused the plain to sink some twenty feet under the surface of the Dead Sea.

Rasmussen, Carl G. *NIV Atlas of the Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 44-45:



The largest inland body of water in Israel is the Dead Sea. It is located in one of the deepest sections of the Rift Valley; its surface is some 1,300 feet below the level of the Mediterranean Sea.

The Dead Sea can be divided into two unequal sections by a tongue-shaped peninsula that protrudes into it from its eastern shore, *Lashon* in the Hebrew. The northern section is the deeper of the two; soundings in the northeastern corner indicate that the bottom of the sea lies 1,300 feet below the surface. The southern end is quite shallow with a maximum depth of only 25 feet.

Fault escarpments to the west and east of the Dead Sea clearly outline its shore. On the west perpendicular cliffs, towering some 1,300 feet above the sea in spots, rise behind the narrow gravel-and-marl shoreline. In other areas the cliffs descend right into the sea, not even leaving space for a footpath along their base.

In the south, the eastern shoreline is more expansive. There, jutting out into the sea, is the tongue-shaped *Lashon*, a very bleak and forbidding region composed of gravel, mud, and marl deposits that have weathered into formations like those of the badlands in the western United States.

Velikovsky, Immanuel. "The Overthrow of the Cities of the Plain." (New York: The Immanuel Velikovsky Archive, 1999).

The Overthrow of the Cities of the Plain

The Book of Genesis portrays the age of the patriarchs as a time of great upheavals in nature in which the geology of the Jordan Valley underwent some drastic changes. The focus of these events was ... a fertile plain, known as the plain of Siddim, with five populous cities: Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar. When Lot arrived in the region,

he lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well-watered everywhere ... even as the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt (Genesis 13:10).

The nineteenth chapter of the Book of Genesis tells of a catastrophe in which these cities were overwhelmed, overturned, and swallowed by the earth:

The sun was risen upon the earth when . . . 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. (Genesis 19:23-25)

And Abraham got up early in the morning to the place where he stood before the Lord; 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. (Genesis 19:27-28)

The great rift of the Jordan and the Dead Sea bear witness to a tremendous upheaval. "In an event of extreme violence ... the entire Syrian land, from its south end to its north end, was torn apart and the ground in between sank into the depths." So wrote Professor Max. Blanckenhorn [German geologist], the explorer of the region of the Dead Sea. In his later work he advanced (that) the origin of the Dead Sea occurred "in a great mountain movement, with collapse and dislocation. In these titanic events conditions were created for the existence of an inner sea."



The rift in which the Lake of Galilee, the Jordan, and the Dead Sea lie is the deepest depression on any continent. The surface of the Dead Sea is close to (1300 feet) below the level of the Mediterranean [the lowest point on the earth's surface], and its deepest bottom is some (1050 feet) lower still. The shore falls steeply from the Judean mountains on the west; on the eastern side of the rift rise the Moabite mountains. The walls of the chasm show sharp broken strata that remained horizontal, which proves that the breaking down was instantaneous. The force which caused this slide movement must have been stupendous. The ground of the rift around the Dead Sea is covered with coagulated lava masses, taking the form of an immense herd of giant elephants with rough skin. To the south end of the Dead Sea towers a big cliff of salt called Jebel Usdum (Mount of Sodom). "It is absolutely impossible that the salt sediment of a sea should precipitate in such a form. Only the rupture of the ground could create this site, singular in the entire world. (Blanckenhorn)."

Unger, Merrill F. *Unger's Bible Dictionary*. 3d & rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 1034-35:

Sodom. A town located in the plain of the Jordan together with its sister cities Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar. Sometime around the middle of the twenty-first century B.C., this region with its cities was overwhelmed by a great conflagration. The area is said to have been "full of slime (i.e., asphalt pits)" (Genesis 14:10). Bitumen [bi-tyu' men\ viscous mixture of hydrocarbons obtained naturally (e.g. asphalt, tar)] deposits are still to be found in this locality. The entire valley is one long fault line which forms the Jordan Valley, the Dead Sea, and the Arabah. An earthquake-ridden region throughout its history, geological activity was doubtless an accompanying factor in the destruction of the cities, although the Bible account records only the miraculous elements. The salt and free sulphur of this area, now a burned out region of oil and asphalt, were apparently mingled by an earthquake, causing a violent explosion. Carried up into the air red-hot, the exploding salt and sulphur literally caused a rain of fire and brimstone over the whole plain. Somewhere under the waters of the southern part of the lake in this general locality the "cities of the plain" are probably to be found. In classical and New Testament times their ruins were still visible, not yet being covered with water.

Wood, Leon J. *A Survey of Israel's History*. Revised by David O'Brien. (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1970, 1986), 42:

Destruction of Sodom. The destruction of Sodom was effected by a rain of "burning sulfur." In examining the meaning of this expression, scholars have ruled out volcanic action because the geology of the region does not lend itself to this type of activity. Many believe that it refers to an earthquake resulting in an enormous explosion. Several factors favor this view. The idea of brimstone and fire suggests incendiary materials raining upon the city as the result of an explosion. Another descriptive word used is "overthrew" (Genesis 19:25, 29), and this fits the thought of an earthquake. That Abraham saw smoke rising in the direction of the city indicates that there was fire. Inflammable asphalt has long been known in the area. Moreover, records from ancient writers speak of strong sulphuric odors, which suggests that quantities of sulphur were there in past time.

Strabo [Greek geographer] of the first century B.C., Josephus his successor, and Tacitus of about A.D. 100 all testify to severe odors, asphalt seepages, and a general burned complexion of the area now called the southern end of the Dead Sea. The area was not under water at the time.

Further, the whole Jordan Valley constitutes an enormous fault in the earth's surface, given to earthquake conditions.

It is possible, then, that God did see fit miraculously to time an earthquake at this precise moment, which could have released great quantities of gas, mixed sulphur with various salts found in abundance, and measurably increased the flow of asphalt seepage. Lightning could have ignited all, the entire country being consumed as indicated. The Bible is clear that God does sometimes use natural means to accomplish His purpose when and to the extent that they are available. He may have done so in this instance. Whatever the method employed, God did bring the destruction.

18. A summary of these sources reveals the sequence of events that brought about the conflagration of the cities of the valley:



- (1) A major fault line severs the Jordan valley. It becomes evident in the north in Syria and runs southward into East Africa.
- (2) The area surrounding the Valley of Siddim is defined by subterranean petroleum gasses and large deposits of salt, bitumen, and sulfur.
- (3) The cities of the valley were located above this on either side of the Jordan River as it flowed southward, apparently feeding a small lake just north of the pentapolis.
- (4) The catalyst for the catastrophe that hit the area was a massive earthquake which caused the surface of the valley to sink into the mantle of the earth forcing huge amounts of inflammable gasses, salt, bitumen, and sulphur into the air.
- (5) Lightning from the sky ignited the mixture which resulted in a “rain” of fiery brimstone over the entire area.
- (6) The floor of the valley sank to about 2350 feet below sea level at its greatest depth and the waters of the Jordan began to fill this depression.
- (7) The seismic upheaval caused the pentapolis to sink into the earth. Its debris and that of the upsurged marl dammed the Jordan enabling it to enlarge the small lake to the north of the pentapolis into what became known as the Salt Sea and later the Dead Sea.
- (8) The area once the site of the pentapolis sunk into the mire creating the much shallower southern end of the Dead Sea.
- (9) After things settled down the southeastern shore of the Dead Sea was interrupted by the *Lashon* peninsula which is the Hebrew word for “tongue.”
- (10) The area to the north of this peninsula drops off immediately to a depth of up to 1300 feet while that to the south of it measures only up to 25 feet.
- (11) The present surface of the Dead Sea marks the lowest point on the surface of the earth, some 1300-feet below sea level.
- (12) The shallow end floods and covers the former area populated by four of the destroyed cities of the pentapolis.
- (13) Some speculate that based on Lot’s movement down the Valley of Siddim toward Sodom in Genesis 13:11-12 the arrangement of the cities are from north to south: Zeboiim, Admah, Gomorrah, and Sodom with Zoar, the farthest south, avoiding the catastrophe.
- (14) Geological formations that give testimony to the severity of the event include Mount Sodom, also known as *Jebel Usdum*. This formation is described by:

Tenney, Merrill C. (ed.). *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 5:468:

There is a five mile long mountain range west of the south end of the Dead Sea made up largely of crystalline salt. It is called *Jebel Usdum* (or Mt. Sodom). Many free-standing pinnacles are there and one is appropriately named “Lot’s wife.”

Genesis 19:26 - But Lot’s wife, from behind him, looked back; and she became a pillar of salt.