

Texts, Talls, and Old Testament Chronology: Tall Hammam as a Case Study

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Old Testament scholarship across the spectrum of theological and ideological persuasion is committed to the notion that a realistic picture of ancient Israel's life and times is best recovered by careful attention to both the biblical narrative and to archaeological data when both are subjected to proper methodological analysis and interpretation. The conservative will, of course, tend to give more attention to the text than to archaeology as a base of authority whereas the critical (liberal) scholar will allot primacy of place to archaeology. At the extremes of both respective positions are (1) those who are persuaded that archaeology is a tool of the devil that has no constructive role to play and (2) those who view the Bible as a collection of mere myth, fable, and legend, with little or no value to the serious historian.

Steven Collins is a committed Evangelical scholar with impressive experience in Near Eastern archaeology, especially at Kh. Al-Maqatir (Ai?) and Tall Hammam (Sodom?).¹ The former is in the so-called West Bank some 10 miles north of Jerusalem and a mile east of Ramallah. The latter is in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, just across the Jordan River from Jericho and four miles from the northeast curve of the Dead Sea. Since 2006 Professor Collins has been excavating Hammam, the site he prefers over Bab ed-DraU/Numeira as the proper location of ancient Sodom. His arguments as to the location of the "cities of the plain" (Heb U^*r^2 $\text{h}^{\wedge}KK]KK"r^2$; Gen 13:12) and Lot's choice of land as "all the Plain of the Jordan" ($\text{q}^{\wedge}l K]KK^{\wedge}r$ $\text{h}^{\wedge}Y^{\wedge}rD@n$; Gen 13:11) seem attractive enough, and the enormous size of the urban area so far uncovered at Hammam seems to fit other biblical descriptions of a city commensurate with the archaeological coordinates (Gen 14:2; 18:22-33; 19:4; Ezek 16:48, 55).³

However, both archaeological and biblical chronological data rule out Hammam as a candidate for patriarchal Sodom. After a great deal of analysis Collins has concluded, based on stratigraphy, pottery assemblages, destruction layers, and architectural features, that the evidence points to the late MB2 period (ca. 1600 BC) for the cataclysmic overthrow of the site, thus necessitating a date for the Abraham-Lot narrative at the same time. But it is precisely at this

¹ For his reports and other publications on Hammam, see Collins in *Biblical Research Bulletin* VII 1 (2007); VII 3 (2007); VII 4 (2007); VII 7 (2007); *Bible and Spade* 15 2 (2007); *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 53 (2010): 385-414.

² The Hebrew term is usually glossed "disk" or something disk-shaped such as a loaf of bread (Exod 29:23; 1 Sam 2:36), a metal shaped in the form of a disk (2 Sam 12:30; 2 Kgs 5:22; Est 3:9), or, indeed, "the wide southern part of the Ghor" (1 Kgs 7:46; Neh 12:38; thus Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, ed. *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Vol. One. Leiden: Brill, 2001, p. 473). A glance at a map of the lower Jordan Valley just north of the Dead Sea does indeed reveal a half-moon shaped and flat region about 10x10 square miles in extent. See R. L. W. Cleave. *The Holy Land Satellite Atlas*. Vol. 1. Nicosia, Cyprus: Rohr Productions, 1999, Map 1 LT-B, p. 35.

³ For a recent restatement of the traditional view that locates Sodom at the southeast curve of the Dead Sea and therefore the corollary rejection of Hammam as such, see Clyde E. Billington, "Tall el-Hammam Is not Sodom," *Artifax* 27/2 (2012): 12-14.

point that Hammam must, on biblical chronological grounds, be precluded from being a candidate as one of the cities of that narrative. The following considerations with subsequent supporting documentation decisively undermine the possibility of the Collins hypothesis:

1. The chronological system of the Hebrew Masoretic text places the era of the Patriarchs between ca. 2100-1700 B. C.⁴
2. All subsequent biblical historical accounts no longer jibe with each other or fit the periods to which a 1600 date assigns them.
3. Besides the dismantling of the biblical chronological schemes and the rendering of their data as incorrect and/or meaningless, other numerical features such as the life spans of the patriarchs must also be discarded or radically reinterpreted.
4. Most serious of all—to the conservative scholar at least—is the methodological fallacy of testing and assessing biblical information in light of presumed archaeological primacy and the necessary shift of the ground of authority from text to tell.

*The Chronology of the Old Testament and Its Basis*⁵

In the modern period, attempts to determine the dates of Old Testament events commenced notably with Archbishop James Ussher of the Anglican Church of Ireland (1581-1656). By methodically adding up the years attributed to various biblical persons and events, all the while making due allowance for concurrences and discordances, he concluded that the exodus took place in 1492 B. C., Abraham flourished at the beginning of the second millennium (1997-1822), the Flood ca. 2350 B. C., and creation at 4004 B. C.⁶ The early Enlightenment of the same period generated a great deal of skepticism about such matters as the historical and chronological reliability of the Old Testament, and subsequent developments in the fields of the natural sciences added to this skepticism by positing the beginnings of the earth millions of years earlier, the non-existence of a universal flood, and, in biblical critical scholarship, the denial of the historical reality of Old Testament persons and events such as Noah, Abraham, and even Moses.

⁴ For detailed discussion of this scheme, see Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests. A History of Old Testament Israel*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008, pp. 83-96.

⁵ *Inter alia*, see Eugene H. Merrill, "Fixed Dates in Patriarchal Chronology," *BSac* 137 (1980): 141-151; "The Late Bronze/Early Iron Age Transition and the Emergence of Israel," *BSac* 152 (1995): 145-162; "Chronology," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*. Ed. T. Desmond Alexander & David W. Baker. Downers Grove, IL: 2003, pp. 113-122; "Archaeology and Biblical History: Its Uses and Abuses," *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts*. Ed. David M. Howard Jr. and Michael A. Grisanti. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003, pp. 74-96.

⁶ See conveniently Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*. Rev. ed. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998, pp. 403-405. It should be noted that Ussher was no dilettante in such matters; in fact, he was a brilliant classicist at home in Greek, Latin, and other languages. See Charles Richard Elrington, *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D. D.* Vol. 1. Dublin: Hodges and Smith, 1847, pp. 266-267.

With this worldview in place, even some conservative scientists and theologians adopted the skeptical mind-set and methods of the age in both secular and biblical studies.⁷

Currently, critical scholarship ranges from the moderate stance of the so-called “Albright school” that is willing to entertain a highly nuanced notion of historical patriarchs to a radical minimalism that denies any substantial historical reliability to the Old Testament pre-exilic narratives. On the other hand, inscriptions from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Levant have provided significant chronological data to which the Old Testament can be compared. These, with the internal dating schemes of the Bible itself, have enabled more modern scholars—especially evangelicals—to (re)construct a near consensus template against which biblical history at least as far back as Abraham can be dated with near precision. Given astronomically derived dates from various sources, especially those that refer to biblical persons,⁸ careful application of these to the Hebrew texts yields the following important set of data: (1) Abraham was born in 2166 B. C.; (2) the descent of Jacob into Egypt was 1876; (3) the exodus occurred in 1446; (4) the United Monarchy began ca. 1050; (5) the division of the kingdom between Israel and Judah took place in 931; (5) Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722; (6) Judah went into Babylonian exile and the temple was destroyed in 586; (7) and the exiles returned to Judah in 538 and thereafter.⁹

At the same time, archaeological evidence has convinced many evangelicals that the exodus occurred not in Dynasty 18 of Egypt but in the mid- to late 13th century (ca. 1250) of the so-called Ramesside 19th Dynasty. For this view there exist two subsets: (1) a 215 year sojourn preceded by a 215 year span back to the making of the Abrahamic covenant (1680) and (2) a 430 year sojourn preceded by the age of Jacob when he descended to Egypt (130) plus the years back to the Abrahamic covenant when Abraham was 85 years old (1885 B. C.). Position (1) thus dates the destruction of Sodom at 1665 and position (2) at 1871. However, position (1) rests upon two untenable supports: a 215 year sojourn and a late exodus date and position (2), though more acceptable, is itself flawed by the late exodus date. If the generally superior MT text is taken at face value, the destruction of Sodom took place in 2067, the sojourn was 430 years, and the exodus was in 1446 (see preceding paragraph),.

To return to Steve Collins’s hypothesis based on the archaeological data, his proposed date of the destruction of the city of Sodom ca. 1600 is still some 65 years too late for proposal (1) and 355 years too late for proposal (2). The date in the best manuscripts and the most sound hermeneutic demands the overthrow of Sodom at 2067 B. C., completely removing Tall Hammam from consideration as the location of Sodom.

⁷ As conservative as he was in general, the notable theologian A. H. Strong (1836-1921) readily adopted biological evolution as the best way to account for both biblical and scientific evidence. *Systematic Theology*. Philadelphia: Judson, 1907, pp. 392-393. For an excellent overview of the pernicious effect of evolution on Christian thought even before Darwin, see Terry Mortenson, *The Great Turning Point*. Green Forest, AR (Master Books, 2004), pp. 19-54.

⁸ Most important are the Assyrian eponym lists of years and the royal inscriptions that both inform them and are informed by them. Conveniently, see Alan Millard, “Assyrian King Lists,” *The Context of Scripture*. Vol. 1. Ed. W. W. Hallo. Leiden: Brill, 1997, pp. 463-466.

⁹ Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, pp. 41-48, 74-80, 166-170, 337.

Conclusion

Though the Collins construal is attractive in certain respects, it is bound up in its own cocoon by postulating the following criteria that must be met if it is to stand:

- The late MB date of Sodom's destruction, driven by archaeological considerations, must be the iron-clad standard against which the biblical chronology is ascertained.
- This date demands a birth date of Abraham about 1699; since he was 175 when he died, that occurred in 1524, 76 years after the destruction of Sodom.
- Isaac's lifespan is 1599-1419 and Jacob's 1539-1392!
- Even a 215 year Egyptian sojourn must cover the years 1415-1200, requiring the exodus to be in 1200 and the conquest, 40 years later, in 1160-1150.
- The various judges and the reign of Saul must be compressed between 1150 and 1010, the established date of the commencement of David's reign.
- The only way out of the conundrum if Hammam is Sodom is to (1) disregard the biblical figures for the ages of the patriarchs; (2) jettison or greatly reduce the 215-year sojourn; and (3) minimize the length of the ministries of the judges and the reign of Saul nearly to the vanishing point. The following chart is a possible scenario illustrative of the drastic measures required to fit the narrative of Sodom between 1600 and 1010 B. C. If this is not the correct one, there must be one like it.

1. Abraham was **75**¹⁰ at the 1600 date of Sodom's destruction; therefore, he was born in 1675.
2. Isaac was born in **Abraham's 50th** year—1625.
3. Jacob was born in **Isaac's 30th year**—1595.
4. Jacob moved his family to Egypt in his **60th** year—1535.
5. The sojourn lasted for 215 years—1535-1320.
6. The exodus took place in 1320.
7. The Sinai wanderings took **20** years—1320-1300.
8. The conquest took 10 years--1300-1290.
9. The administration of the judges lasted for 250 years—1290-1040.
10. Samuel's tenure was 10 years in length—1040-1030.
11. Saul reigned for **20** years—1030-1010.
12. David ascended to the throne in 1010.

A hypothetical scheme like this could provide the necessary correlation but for one bothersome fact: These numbers are arbitrarily chosen *in order to achieve the desired harmonization*. That is,

¹⁰ Embolded refers to data that are flatly contradicted by explicit biblical numbers.

text has had to be distorted in order to allow tall to triumph.¹¹ The price is simply too high to pay!

¹¹ Applying the biblical chronology in a strict and literal sense yields the following picture:

1. Abraham's lifespan was 2166-1991
2. Abraham was 99 when Sodom was destroyed in **2067**
3. Isaac's lifespan was 2066-1886
4. Jacob's lifespan was 2006-1859
5. Jacob's descent to Egypt was in 1876 when he was 130 years old
6. The sojourn was for 430 years—1876-1446
7. The exodus occurred in 1446
8. Sinai wandering took 40 years—1446-1406
9. Conquest took ca. seven years—1406-1400
10. The judges era was at least 300 years-1400-1100
11. Samuel ministered for ca. 55 years—1080-1025
12. Saul reigned for 40 years—1051-1011
13. David ascended to the throne in 1011

See Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, pp. 31, 40, 146-151, 192-194.