

# Sodom

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Sod'om (Heb. *Sedom*', סָדוֹם, meaning uncertain [see below]; Sept. and New Test. [τά] Σόδομα; Josephus, Σόδομα, *Ant.* 1, 9, 1; Vulg. *Sodoma*), an ancient city in the vale of Siddim, where Lot settled after his separation from Abraham ([Ge 13:12](#); [Ge 14:12](#); [Ge 19:1](#)). It had its own chief or "king," as had the other four cities of the plain (14:2, 8, 10), and was along with them, Zoar only excepted, destroyed by fire from heaven on account of the gross wickedness of the inhabitants; the memory of which event has been perpetuated in a name of infamy to all generations (ch. 19). In the following account of this remarkable place we digest the ancient and modern information on the subject. SEE [SODOMITISH SEA](#).

**I. The Name.** — The word *Sedom* has been interpreted to mean "burning" (Gesenius, *Thesaur.* p. 939a), taking, = סָדוֹם, שָׂדָם, and that as = שָׂדָה.

This is possible, though not at all certain, since Gesenius himself hesitates between that interpretation and one which identifies it with a similar Hebrew word meaning "vineyard," and Furst (*Handwb.* 2, 72), with nearly equal plausibility, connects it with an Arabic root meaning *to enclose* or *fortify* (سَدَم, as the base also of *Siddim*), a view in which Muhlau coincides. Simonis, again (*Onomast.* p. 363), renders it "abundance of dew or water," Hiller (*ibid.* p. 176), "fruitful land," and Chytraeus, "mystery." In fact, like most archaic

names, it may, by a little ingenuity, be made to mean almost anything. Stanley (*Sin. and Pal.* p. 289) notices the first of these interpretations, and, comparing it with the "Phlegraean fields" in the Campagna at Rome, says that "the name, if not derived from the subsequent catastrophe, shows that the marks of fire had already passed over the doomed valley." Apparent "marks of fire" there are all over the neighborhood of the Dead Sea. They have been regarded by many travelers as tokens of conflagration and volcanic action, and in the same manner it is quite possible that they originated the name *Sedom*, for they undoubtedly abounded on the shores of the lake long before even Sodom was founded.

⇒[Bible concordance for SODOM.](#)

**II. Historical Notices.** — Sodom is commonly mentioned in connection with Gomorrah, but also with Admah and Zeboim, and on one occasion (Genesis 14) with Bela or Zoar. Sodom was evidently the chief town in the settlement. Its king takes the lead, and the city is always named first in the list, and appears to be the most important. The four are first named in the ethnological records of [Ge 10:19](#) as belonging to the Canaanites: "The border of the Canaanite was from Zidon towards Gerar unto Azzah, towards Sedom and Amorah and Admah and Tseboim unto Lasha." The meaning of this appears to be that the district in the hands of the Canaanites formed a kind of triangle — the apex at Zidon, the southwest extremity at Gaza, the southeastern at Lasha.

The next mention of the name of Sodom ([Ge 13:10-13](#)) gives us more definite information as to the city. Abram and Lot are standing together between Bethel and Ai (ver. 3), taking, as any spectator from that spot may still do, a survey, of the land around and below them. Eastward of them, and absolutely at their feet; lay the "circle (רֶגֶב) of Jordan," i.e. the *ghor*. It was in all its verdant glory — that glory of which the traces are still

to be seen, and which is so strangely and irresistibly attractive to a spectator from any of the heights in the neighborhood of Bethel — watered in the northern portion by the copious supplies of the Wady Kelt, the Ain Sultan, the Ain Duk, and the other springs which gush out from the foot of the mountains; and in the southern part by Wady Tufileh, and the abundant brooks of the Ghor es-Safieh. These abundant waters even now support a mass of verdure before they are lost in the light, loamy soil of the region. But at the time when Abram and Lot beheld them, they were husbanded and directed by irrigation, after the manner of Egypt, until the whole circle was one great oasis — "a garden of Jehovah" (ver. 10). In the midst of the garden the four cities of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboim appear to have been situated. To these cities Lot descended, and retaining his nomad habits among the more civilized manners of the Canaanitish settlement, "pitched his tent" by (τύ, *at*, not "towards") the chief of the four. At a later period he seems to have been living within the walls of Sodom. It is necessary to notice how absolutely the cities are identified with the district. In the subsequent account of their destruction (ch. 19), the topographical terms are employed with all the precision which is characteristic of such early times. "The *Ciccar*" (q.v.), the "land of the *Ciccar*," "*Ciccar* of Jordan," recurs again and again both in ch. 13 and 19, and "the cities of the *Ciccar*" is the almost technical designation of the towns which were destroyed in the catastrophe related in the latter chapter. SEE **JORDAN**.

⇒ **Definition of sod**

The remaining passages of Scripture respecting Sodom relate merely to the event of its destruction (Genesis 19), and to its perpetual desolation: "Brimstone, and salt, and burning not sown, nor beareth, nor any grass groweth therein" (De 29:22);

"Never to be inhabited, nor dwelt in from generation to generation; where neither Arab should pitch tent nor shepherd make fold" ([Isa 13:19](#)); "No man abiding there, nor son of man dwelling in it" ([Jer 49:18](#); [Jer 50:40](#)); "A fruitful land turned into saltiness" ([Ps 107:34](#)); "Overthrown and burned" ([Am 4:11](#)); "The breeding of nettles and salt pits, and a perpetual desolation" ([Zep 2:9](#)); "A waste land that smoketh, and plants bearing fruit which never cometh to ripeness" ([Wisd. 9:7](#)); "Land lying in clods of pitch and heaps of ashes" ([2 Esdr. 2:9](#)); "The cities turned into ashes" ([2Pe 2:6](#)), where their destruction by fire is contrasted with the deluge. The miserable fate of Sodom and Gomorrah is held up as a warning in these and other passages of the Old and New Tests. By Peter and Jude it is made "an ensample to those that after should live ungodly," "and to those" denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ" ([2Pe 2:6](#); [Jude 1:4-7](#)). Our Lord himself, when describing the fearful punishment that will befall those that reject his disciples, says that "it shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city" ([Mr 6:11](#); comp. [Mt 10:15](#)).

In agreement with the above Scripture accounts is the statement of Josephus (*War*, 4, 8, 4). After describing the lake, he proceeds: "Adjoining it is Sodomitis, once a blessed region abounding in produce and in cities, but now entirely burned up. They say that it was destroyed by lightning for the impiety of its inhabitants. And even to this day the relics of the divine fire and the traces of five cities are to be seen there, and, moreover, the ashes reappear even in the fruit." Josephus regarded this passage as his main statement of the event (see *Ant.* 1, 11, 4). In another passage (*War*, 5, 13, 6) he alludes incidentally to the destruction of Sodom, contrasting it, like Peter, with a destruction by water. By comparing these passages with *Ant.* 1, 9, it appears that Josephus believed the

vale of Siddim to have been submerged, and to have been a district adjoining Sodom. Similar are the accounts of heathen writers, as Strabo and Tacitus; who, however vague their statements, are evidently under the belief that the remains of the towns were still to be seen. These passages are given at length by De Saulcy (*Narr.* 1, 448). There is a slight variation in the account of the Koran (11, 84): "We turned those cities upside down, and we rained upon them stones of baked clay." The name of the bishop of Sodom, "Severus Sodomorum," appears among the Arabian prelates who signed the acts of the first Council of Nice. Reland remonstrates against the idea of the Sodom of the Bible being intended, and suggests that it is a mistake for Zuzumaon or Zoraima, a see under the metropolitan of Bostra (*Paloest.* p. 1020), This De Saulcy (*Narr.* 1, 454) refuses to admit. He explains it by the fact that many sees still bear the names of places which have vanished, and exist only in name and memory, such as Troy. The Coptic version to which he refers, in the edition of M. Lenormant, does not throw any light on the point.

⇒See also the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.

**III. Physical Means of the Catastrophe to the City.** The destruction of Sodom claims attention from the solemnity with which it is introduced ([Ge 18:20-22](#)); from the circumstances which preceded and followed the intercession of Abraham, the preservation of Lot, and the judgment which overtook his lingering wife (ver. 25-33; 19); and from the nature of the physical agencies through which the overthrow was effected. Most of these particulars are easily understood; but the last has awakened much discussion, and may therefore require a larger measure of attention.

The circumstances are these. In the first place, we learn that the vale of Siddim, in which Sodom lay, was very fertile, and everywhere well watered — "like the garden of the Lord;" and

these circumstances induced Lot to fix his abode there, notwithstanding the wickedness of the inhabitants (13:10, 11). Next it appears that this vale was full of "slime pits." This means sources of bitumen, for the word is the same as that which is applied to the cement used by the builders of Babylon, and we know that this was bitumen or asphaltum (14:10; comp. 11:3). These pits appear to have been of considerable extent; and, indeed, it was from them doubtless that the whole valley derived its name of Siddim (שִׁדִּים). At length, when the day of destruction arrived, "the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah fire and brimstone from the Lord out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of those cities, and that which grew upon the ground" (19:24, 25). In the escape from this overthrow, the wife of Lot "looked back, and became a pillar of salt" (ver. 26). When Abraham, early that same morning, from the neighborhood of his distant camp, "looked towards Sodom and Gomorrah, and towards all the land of the plain, and beheld, and lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace" (ver. 27). These are the simple facts of the case. The following are the naturalistic explanations that have been attempted of the phenomena:

**1.** It has usually been assumed that the vale of Siddim occupied the basin of what is now the Dead Sea, which did not previously exist, but was one of the results of this catastrophe (see Milman, *Hist. of the Jews*, 1, 15 sq.). It has now, however, been established that a lake to receive the Jordan and other waters must have occupied this basin long before the catastrophe of Sodom, as all the geological characteristics of the region go to show that its present configuration is in its main features coeval with the present condition of the surface of the earth in general, and is not the effect of any local catastrophe at a subsequent period (Dr. Buist, in *Trans. of*

*Bombay Geogr. Soc.* 12, p. 16). SEE **DEAD SEA**.

**2.** But although a lake must then have existed to receive the Jordan and other waters of the north, which could not have passed more southward, as was at one time supposed, and which must even, as is now proved, have received the waters of the south also, we are at liberty to assume, and it is necessary to do so, that the Dead Sea anciently covered a much less extent of surface than at present. The cities which were destroyed must have been situated at the edge of the lake as it then existed, for Lot fled to Zoar, which was near Sodom (*Ge 19:20*). This view has the support of several incidental circumstances. Thus the abundant water supply (as above noticed) still exists at both ends of the lake. "Even at the present day," says Robinson, "more living streams flow into the Ghor, at the south end of the sea, from wadys of the eastern mountains than are to be found so near together in all Palestine; and the tract, although now mostly desert, is still better watered through these streams and by the many fountains than any other district throughout the whole country" (*Bibl. Res.* 2, 603). The slime pits, or wells of asphaltum, are no longer to be seen; but it seems that masses of floating asphaltum occur only in the southern part of the lake; and as they are seen but rarely, and immediately after earthquakes, the asphaltum appears to be gradually consolidated in the lake, and not being able to flow off, forms by consequence a layer at the bottom, portions of which may be detached by earthquakes and other convulsions of nature, and then appear on the surface of the water or upon the shore. The eminent geologist Leopold von Buch, in his letter to Dr. Robinson (*Bibl. Res.* 2, 606-608), thinks it quite probable that this accumulation may have taken place in remote times as well as at the present day. Thus another circumstance of importance is produced in coincidence with the sacred

accounts, especially with reference to the southern portion of the *present* lake, suggesting the probability that the remarkable bay, or "backwater," at its southern extremity, is the portion of it which did not in ancient times exist — that it, in fact, covers the more fertile vale of Siddim, and the site of Sodom and the other cities which the Lord destroyed; and that, in the words of Dr. Robinson, "by some convulsion or catastrophe of nature connected with the miraculous destruction of the cities, either the surface of this plain was scooped out or the bottom of the sea was heaved up so as to cause the waters to overflow and cover permanently a larger tract than formerly. The country is, as we know, subject to earthquakes, and exhibits also frequent traces of volcanic action. It would have been no uncommon effect of either of these causes to heave up the bottom of the ancient lake, and thus produce the phenomenon in question. But the historical account of the destruction of the cities implies also the agency of fire. Perhaps both causes were therefore at work, for volcanic action and earthquakes go hand in hand, and the accompanying electric discharges usually cause lightnings to play and thunders to roll. In this way we have all the phenomena which the most literal interpretation of the sacred records can demand." The same writer, with the geological sanction given above, repeats the conjecture of Le Clerc and others that the bitumen had become accumulated around the sources, and had perhaps formed strata, spreading for some distance upon the plain; that possibly these strata in some parts extended under the soil, and might thus approach the vicinity of the cities: "If, indeed, we might suppose all this, then the kindling of such a heap of combustible materials, through volcanic action or lightning from heaven, would cause a conflagration sufficient not only to engulf the cities, but also to destroy the surface of the plain, so that the smoke of the

country would go up as the smoke of a furnace, and the sea rushing in, would convert it to a tract of waters. The supposition of such, an accumulation of bitumen, with our present knowledge, appears less extraordinary than it might in former times have seemed, and requires nothing more than nature presents to our view in the wonderful lake, or rather tract, of bitumen in the island of Trinidad. The subsequent barrenness of the remaining portion of the plain is readily accounted for by the presence of the masses of fossil salt which now abound in its neighborhood, and which were perhaps then, for the first time, brought to light. These, being carried by the waters to the bottom of the valley, would suffice to take away its productive power. In connection with this fact, the circumstance that the wife of Lot 'became a pillar of salt' is significant and suggestive, whatever interpretation we may assign to the fact recorded" (see Baier, *De Excidio Sodomoe* [Francf. 1695]). *SEE LOT.*

This view of the catastrophe of the cities of the plain has, however, not passed without the dissent of some writers. It was easy to explode the opinion long current that when the five cities were submerged in the lake their remains — walls, columns, and capitals — might still be discerned below the water, for exploration has discovered no such relics. Not content with this, Reland led the way in modern times in attacking the whole theory in question of the meteorological and geological agencies employed in the event (*Paloest.* p. 257), and De Saulcy (*Dead Sea*, 1, 370, Amer. ed.) and Stanley (*Sin. and Pal.* p. 289) have followed in the same line. Their arguments are the following:

**(1.)** Only two words are used in Genesis 19 to describe what happened: **השחת**, to throw down, to destroy (ver. 13, 14), and **הפך**, to overturn (ver. 21, 25, 29). In neither of these is the presence of water — the submergence of the cities or of the

district in which they stood — either mentioned or implied. This would perhaps be a valid objection if the submersion were regarded as the principal cause of the destruction; but as, under the above statement, it comes in merely as a consequence of that event (see Keil, *Comment.* ad loc.), the argument hardly applies. Moreover, in the latter of the two terms employed (הַפְּקַד, *haphak*, to overturn) there does seem to be a covert allusion to the undermining action of a subterranean force; and perhaps in the former (הַשְׁחִית, *hischith*, to wipe out) there is implied the erosive violence of a rush of water. Certainly these terms do not forbid such an explanation of the mode of destruction; and in the confessed inability of the opponents of this view to suggest any other natural means, we may well acquiesce in this as the most plausible hitherto found.

**(2.)** "The geological portion of the theory does not appear to agree with the facts. The whole of the lower end of the lake, including the plain which borders it on the south, has every appearance not of having been lowered since the formation of the valley, but of undergoing a gradual process of filling up. This region is, in fact, the delta of the very large, though irregular, streams which drain the highlands on its east, west, and south, and have drained them ever since the valley was a valley. No report by any observer at all competent to read the geological features of the district will be found to give countenance to the notion that any disturbance has taken place within the historical period, or that anything occurred there since the country assumed its present general conformation beyond the quiet, gradual change due to the regular operation of the ordinary agents of nature, which is slowly filling up the chasm of the valley and the lake with the washings brought down by the torrents from the highlands on all sides. The volcanic appearances and marks of fire, so often

mentioned, are, so far as we have any trustworthy means of judging, entirely illusory, and due to ordinary, natural causes." On the contrary, we have adduced above the testimony of travelers and the opinion of competent scientists to sustain the convulsive character of the region in modern times. Until counter evidence shall have been brought forward of a more decided character than merely round assertions and general inferences, we may rest the case upon these grounds. Prof. Hitchcock shows (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, July, 1867, p. 469 sq.) that the present geological features of the region confirm the Scriptural account of the fate of the cities of the plain where Sodom stood.

**(3.)** "The plain of the Jordan, in which the cities stood (as has been stated), can hardly have been at the south end of the lake." This position of Sodom favors, indeed, the foregoing theory, by reason of the comparative shallowness of the water in the southern end of the Dead Sea; but it is not essential to the mechanical agencies employed, whether volcanic, meteorological, or fluvial. As, however, the two questions have been involved in each other, we will proceed to consider.

**IV. *The Location of the City.*** — Until a very recent period it has universally been held that the cities of the plain were situated at the *southern* end of the Dead Sea. Josephus, although he speaks indefinitely about the position of Sodom, expressly fixes Zoar (*Ant.* 1, 11; *War*, 4, 8) in Arabia, under which name he was in this case referring to the southeast end of the Salt Sea; and to the same effect is the testimony of Eusebius (*Onomast.* s.v.) and of Jerome (*Ep.* 108, 11; *Comment. in Esa.* 15, 5). This view seems to have been universally held by the medieval historians and pilgrims, and it is adopted by modern topographers, almost without exception. In the words of one of the most able and careful of modern travelers, Dr. Robinson, "the cities which were

destroyed must have been situated on the south end of the lake as it then existed" (*Bibl. Res.* 2, 188). This is also the belief of De Saulcy, except with regard to Gomorrah; and, in fact, is generally accepted. Besides the above arguments in favor of the submersion beneath the shallow waters of the south end of the sea, a consideration of much force is the existence of similar names in that direction. Thus, the name *Usdum*, attached to the remarkable ridge of salt which lies at the southwestern corner of the lake, is usually regarded as the representative of Sodom (Robinson, Van de Velde, De Saulcy, etc.), notwithstanding a slight difference between the two words. *SEE SODOMITISH SEA*. The name '*Amrah*', which is attached to a valley among the mountains south of Masada (Van de Velde, 2, 99, and map), is an almost exact equivalent to the Hebrew of, *Gorhorrha* ('Amorah). The name *Dra'a*, and nearly as strongly that of *Zoghal*, recall Zoar. The frequent salt pinnacles in the same vicinity are likewise a striking memento of the saline incrustation which overtook Lot's wife, although, from the miraculous character of the latter incident, we are not inclined to press this coincidence. *SEE LOTS WIFE.*

On the other hand, Mr. Tristram, who has explored the lake neighborhood more carefully than any previous investigator, strenuously contends for the northern location of Sodom with its neighboring cities, chiefly on account of the following considerations:

(1.) When it is said that Lot encamped "at" (not "towards") Sodom (*Ge 13:12*; Sept. ἐν Σοδόμοις), the statement is made in such a connection with the "Ciccar," or circle, of Jordan as to imply that Sodom was in it. Now this *Ciccar* was in view from a mountain on the east of Bethel (*Ge 12:8*; *Ge 13:3,10*), whence no portion of the south end of the lake can be discerned; the headland of Feshkah shuts out the view in that

direction. There is good reason to believe, however, that the *Ciccar*, or circle, of the Jordan comprehended the whole crevasse on both ends of the Dead Sea (see *Jour. Sac. Lit.* April, 1866, p. 36 sq.), and in the above passages it is not expressly said that Zoar itself was visible from Abraham's encampment at Bethel. Similarly, in the account of Abraham's view of the plain from the place of his intercession with Jehovah ([Ge 18:16](#); [Ge 19:27-28](#)), the cities themselves are not said to be in sight, but only glimpses of the general Ghor, such as are still attainable through the mountain gaps from the traditional spot near Hebron (Robinson, *Bibl. Res.* 2, 189).

**(2.)** In the account of the invasion of Chedorlaomer (Genesis 14) he is described as marching from Mount Seir to Hazezon-tamar (Engedi); and it is said that afterwards he met the king of Sodom and his confederates in the vale of Siddim. Now, as Mr. Tristram urges, "had Sodom and the other cities been situated at the south end of the sea, it was certainly not after smiting the Amalekites and Amorites at Engedi that they would have met the invader, but long before he reached Hazezon-tamar. But when we place these cities in the plain (circle) of the Jordan, there is a topographical sequence in the whole story, while Abraham and his allies hurriedly pursue the plunderers up the Ghor without delay or impediment until they overtake them at the sources of the Jordan" (*Land of Israel*, p. 362). On the contrary, it is impossible to proceed directly from Engedi to the plain of Jericho, owing to the impassable heights of Ain Feshkah, whereas the way is open along the whole shore of the Dead Sea southerly. It was from Kadesh, on the western side of the Arabah, that Chedorlaomer passed northerly through the Negeb, or south of Palestine, and then came down upon the Dead Sea by the pass of Engedi, where he could have encountered the natives only from the southern Ghor.

(3.) The location of Zoar at the southeastern end of the Salt Sea is inconsistent with the statement that Moses beheld it in his view from Mount Nebo ([De 34:3](#)); for only the western outline of the lake can be seen from the most commanding position among those heights, one of which must be the mount in question. To this argument the same reply may be made as in the above (No. 1), namely, that Zoar itself is not said in this passage to be seen, but only "the plain," or Ghor. We have had occasion under the article PISGAH to notice the sweeping character of the panorama there disclosed to Moses — one doubtless of miraculous extent; and the discussion of the location of the guilty cities will be resumed under ZOAR. For the present we may say that, although Tristram has reiterated his views on this subject in his *Land of Moab* (p. 343, Am. ed.), yet it is privately understood that he has since changed his mind, and now adheres to the traditional opinion. Dr. Merrill revives the arguments in favor of the northern position of Zoar (*Bulletin* of the American Geographical Society, condensed in the *Quar. Statement* of the "Palestine Exploration Fund," July, 1879, p. 144). SEE [SIDDIM](#).