

## SOMETHING TO CHEW ON

It was going to be a hot one in the valley of Siddim, this day in a year about 2350 BC. Suddenly a conflagration of fire and sulphur blasted out of the early morning sky. The ground rocked, heaved and fell. Towns and settlements along the entire length of the valley were engulfed by a great wall of descending fire.

Two men made a desperate attempt to flee the inferno. Leaving their home they ran toward the city gate. But their dash for freedom was short-lived. As they passed beneath it, one of the city's great stone defence-towers tumbled, crushing them beneath an avalanche of rubble, and in moments they were gone. But not forever ....

In 1924, W F Albright conducted an archaeological survey along the eastern shores of the Dead Sea, in the south of Palestine. It's an extremely forbidding place. The surrounding hills are parched and desolate. There's little or no vegetation along most of the shoreline of the Dead Sea.

Temperatures often soar to 49°C or more during the day. Little rain ever falls. Accordingly, ancient as well as modern settlements in the region are rare. Despite the situation, the team continued in its search until eventually it discovered an enormous, ancient cemetery at a place called Bab edh-Dhra, just east of an elbow-shaped peninsula that juts into the Dead Sea from the east. Albright dated the site, 394 metres below sea level, as Early Bronze Age - 3000-2000 BC.

For the next 40 years the site received little archaeological attention. However, in the mid-1960s, an archaeologist, Paul Lapp, conducted an excavation of the site. He confirmed the existence of the large cemetery, estimating the presence of some 20,000 tombs in which over 500,000 people were buried together with more than three million pottery vessels.

But surprisingly, next to the cemetery, Lapp discovered a ruined city that had gone unobserved by the earlier explorers. The city showed the hallmarks of having met annihilation by fire. Mud bricks from the city wall, originally unbaked, were found toppled away from the wall and baked to a pinkish hue, evidence of destruction by a very hot fire.

The discovery of this large Early Bronze Age city aroused the interest of theologians and scholars alike. Some suggested that Bab edh-Dhra might be one of the biblical Cities of the Plain (Genesis 13:12).

The Bible records two stories concerning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, one in Genesis 14, the other in Genesis 19. In the first, the kings of the two cities were defeated in battle by an invading army of federated kings from Elam, Goiim, Shinar and Ellasar. A battle was fought, the Cities of the Plain lost the contest and their citizens were taken captive.

When Abraham heard this, he created an army and defeated the armies and rescued the captives from the five Cities of the Plain. The second story (chapter 19) tells how the cities met their final end in a fiery cataclysm.

But many critically inclined scholars have questioned the reliability of these Bible records, declaring them to be nothing more than myth and legend. They have contended that Sodom and Gomorrah were not historical cities, but the fictitious invention of an early author.

Paul Lapp's excavation at Bab edh-Dhra left too many unanswered questions to make a safe identification of the site with the biblical Cities of the Plain. And then, before he was able to finish his work, Lapp was accidentally drowned while swimming off the coast of Cyprus.

Further research of the site languished until, in the 1970s, another expedition led by Americans Walter Rast and Thomas Schaub, returned to the site. They conducted an archaeological survey searching for other ancient cities in the general region of the south Dead Sea basin.

Some 15 kilometres south of Bab edh-Dhra, the survey team located a second site, at Numeira. Surface evidence found at the site clearly dated Numeira to the Early Bronze Age, the same period that Bab edh-Dhra was inhabited.

Even before excavation began, the archaeologists could tell that the city had been burned. A thick mantle of ash, in some places 1.5 metres thick, covered the ruins and could be scooped up by the handful. So, it seems, like Bab edh-Dhra, the city was destroyed in an inferno.

As they continued their systematic survey of the area, Rast and Schaub found three other cities sites, es-Safi, Feifeh and Khanazir, all contemporary with Bab edh-Dhra.

Careful investigation of the now five sites produced evidence that forced scholars to revise their opinions about the biblical Cities of the Plain. In fact, it was admitted that they might be the remains of the five cities.

The surprising similarity of the five sites supports this view: all the cities were located on ridges of the same geological formation. They are situated in a north-south line along the lower east slopes of the Dead Sea. They are separated from each other by five to 15 kilometres. Each is located near what was a flowing spring. All five date to the same archaeological period.

Where their walls could be observed, they were constructed in a similar style and pattern. All sites were associated with a cemetery similar to that of Bab edh-Dhra. The pottery and other finds made by the survey indicate a common culture among the cities. All five

cities were destroyed or abandoned near the same time, in about 2350 BC. It is also interesting to note that there are five and only five sites located in the Dead Sea area.

Then, in 1977, one of the most spectacular discoveries of the excavations was made at Numeira. Digging beneath the ash and rubble of a collapsed defence tower, archaeologists uncovered the skeletons of two adult males.

Over 4000 years after meeting their end in the conflagration of their city, the two still bear graphic testimony to not only the violence of the destruction, but also to the surprise with which the fiery destruction came upon the inhabitants.

They say dead men don't tell tales. But on this occasion they do - tales that confirm the biblical record of events.

And the further archaeologists excavate into these cities, the more telling is the evidence connecting the archaeological finds with the biblical record. The mounting evidence is leading highly respected archaeologists to propose that the Bible was right; and that they have found the remains of Sodom and Gomorrah. The more the spade of the archaeologists dig, the more the Bible and its history are confirmed. As such we are to be very serious about taking heed to its warnings of further judgements to come. The days of the end will be as the days of Sodom as Jesus warned.

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