

GENESIS

Lesson 33

Life in The City of Sodom - Genesis 19:1-2

¹ The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. ² "My lords," he said, "please turn aside to your servant's house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning." "No," they answered, "we will spend the night in the square."

Genesis 19:1-2 (NIV)

In this lesson I will walk you through the city of Sodom as Lot would have known it and introduce you to what life was like during the Middle Bronze Age. My goal is to provide some additional context to the story of Lot and the destruction of Sodom and the Cities of the Plain. I will also share some of the insights that I gained as a member of the dig team that excavated Sodom's gateway area.

As you can observe from the picture below, Sodom was a very large city—the second largest city in the Levant. Like most large cities at that time, its foundation was built up, allowing the city itself to be built on a hill. It had an upper and lower city, with the upper portion assigned to the king's palace, ancillary buildings, and dwellings of the king's officials. The lower portion contained the "gateway" area, as depicted above with the four towers and a narrow entrance to the city.



The City of Sodom at the Time of Abraham and Lot (*courtesy of Archaeology Illustrated*)

As you will note from the artist's rendering in the picture above, Sodom was large, had a massive gateway and tower complex, and was built so that it was surrounded on three sides by very mountainous terrain. In the bottom left of the picture, you can also see the narrow road that led up to the gateway. This is the road the angel messengers would have walked as they approached the city. I have had the opportunity to walk up that road as I approached the gateway. It was an indescribable experience, knowing the story of the angels, Lot, and the gateway area of Sodom.

Defensively, the high walls incorporating ramparts and glacis were built to prevent egress by ladders and to thwart attacks from archers, slingers, chariots and foot soldiers. In the photo below with myself and the archaeological site's co-director, Carol Kobb, I am holding a single mud brick. Weighing approximately 20-25 pounds each, the construction of the city walls would have required approximately two million mud bricks. The gateway area that our team excavated was located just on the other

side of the gate area located between the towers. The narrow entry road and narrow gate were designed to impede large charging armies by forcing them to attack the gate in small numbers while the guards in the towers attacked them from above.



Sodom Mud Brick, with Carol Kobb (*photo by Wes Husted*)

Inside the gate, the gateway area served two primary purposes: First, walled on all sides with only a single-entry point into the city, the area served as a place for the king's elevated throne. There were benches along the side walls where his court would sit in order to conduct the day's business, hold court to settle legal matters, and greet dignitaries. This is where Lot would have been when he was described as "sitting in the gateway of the city" at the time the angels entered Sodom. (See Genesis 19:1)

Second, the gateway area served as the customs area—clearing visitors for entry, collecting tolls and taxes, and conducting other business for the king. Using this process, not everyone needed to actually enter the city, and unwanted visitors were kept out. The enclosed nature of the gateway area also prevented spies from coming into this area under a false pretext just to see the city and its layout.

Once someone passed through the gateway area, they could then travel through the narrow streets of Sodom to the town square. As you traveled along the streets, you would notice that homes were built very small and close together. Each home used the adjoining walls of their neighbors. When viewed from above, it looked like one long structure with many rooms. All of the

streets were narrow, unlike the wide streets that we are accustomed to today. This, again, provided a challenge to attacking armies, who would have to navigate narrow to very-narrow, and sometimes winding, streets. This of course would slow down the attackers and provide opportunities for citizens to repel them at every choke point. Dwellings would often align with the pattern of the city walls, with the poorest living outside the walls, along with the farmers and livestock shepherds.

Middle Bronze Age city walls themselves were very thick, such as those at Sodom, and some cities would employ a casemate design in constructing their walls. Casemate designs involve building two parallel walls, with dividing walls between them creating compartments. This design also allowed for people to occupy a dwelling encased in or between the city walls, such as Rahab living in the walls of Jericho. (See Joshua 2:15)

Today we can see examples of similar casemate construction in the ruins of Masada. The photos below are from a trip to Israel that my wife Sherrie and I took. They show Sherrie standing in the narrow doorway leading into a dwelling in the walls. You can also see how thick and large the stone structure was. I have also included pictures from Masada below that show plastered walls, etc. The wealthy would use limestone plaster to cover the stone walls and incorporate art as a decoration. These pictures are from the ruins at Masada.



Casemate Walls -- Entry to Embedded Dwelling at Masada, with Sherrie Husted (*photo by Wes Husted*)

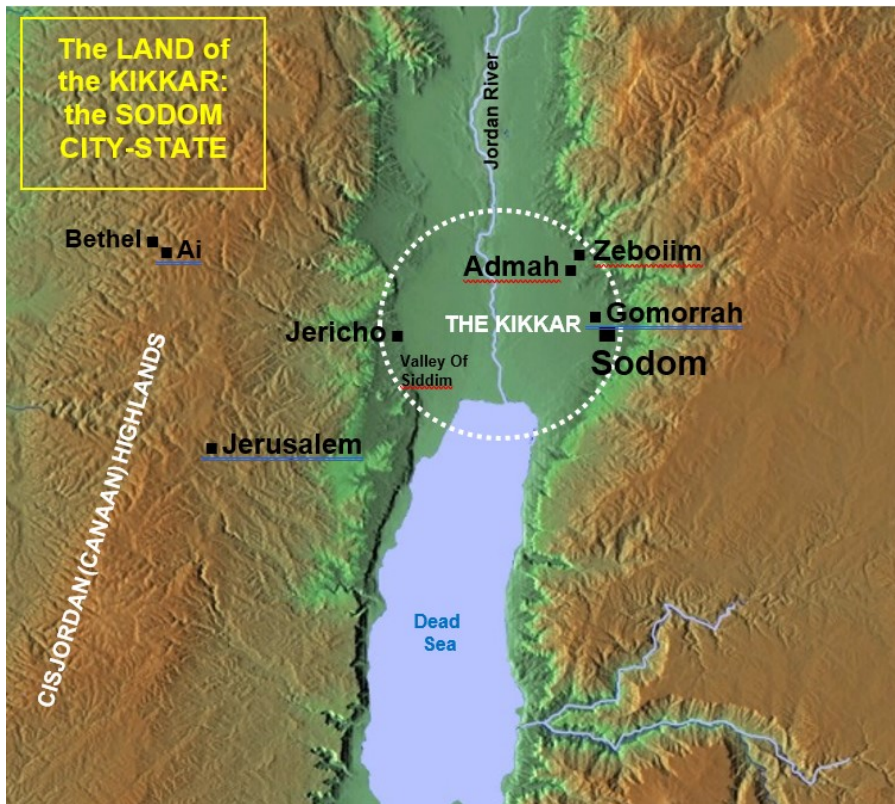


Plaster and Painted Walls at Masada (*photo by Wes Husted*)



More Plaster and Painted Walls at Masada (*photo by Wes Husted*)

Below I have included a map of the region, thanks to Dr. Steven Collins, the archaeologist who discovered the ruins and has been leading excavations at Tall el-Hammam for sixteen years. As you can see from the map, it depicts where Sodom and the Cities of the Plain are located, as well as the Dead Sea, Bethel and Ai, Jerusalem (Salem), and Jericho. It is important to also consider that the location of The Oaks of Mamre (modern day Hebron) is twenty miles south of Jerusalem. We know from our earlier lessons in Genesis Chapter 18 that Abraham was living near the Oaks of Mamre when the three visitors came to see him and the Lord told him about the judgment coming to Sodom. (This knowledge will provide additional context when we study the aftermath of the destruction of Sodom.)



Land of the Kikkar: The Sodom City State (*map courtesy of Dr. Steven Collins*)

Located behind and above Sodom is Mt Pisgah, also known as Mt Nebo. Mt Nebo is where God brought Moses to show him the Promised Land. The view from there is spectacular and panoramic, as on a clear day you can see all the way across the Jordan Plain and River to Jerusalem. Since Jerusalem and Jericho are very visible from Sodom, they also would have had a clear view of Sodom and the Jordan Plain. Hundreds of years later, when Joshua will be marshalling his army, and the exiles from Egypt are camped waiting to cross the Jordan River, they would have been camping just in front of the ruins of Sodom, in an area called Shittim. It is likely that Moses and Joshua used the Tall as a command center, giving them an excellent vantage point as Joshua prepared to attack the city of Jericho just across the Jordan river.

Below are two pictures of the Tall El Hammam archaeological excavation site.



Tall El Hammam (Sodom) Excavation (*map courtesy of Wikipedia*)



Tall el-Hammam Gateway Area (*photo by Wes Husted*)

The defenses at Sodom were formidable, and for 900 years or more it was a place of continuous occupation. Unlike other cities of its day that saw periods of destruction and abandonment, Sodom stands out as a large, strongly-defended, city that had passed the test of time. Except for the one incident where the city's population was taken prisoner by Chedorlaomer and his allied kings (ultimately rescued by Abraham and returned to its previous state), its citizens have had nothing to fear regarding their enemies. This will be covered more in our next lesson.

Life in the Middle Bronze Age was in many ways routine. People were living and dying, marrying and having children, and they were ruled in an organized fashion with a king, his court, and so on. The market place was often the center of activity during the day, and typically within the city one would find an area where the artisans (leather goods, wine making, pottery, weavers, etc.) lived and work. Since Sodom was located strategically within several trade routes, it would also be likely to see large caravans of donkeys and camels bringing goods and materials to the city; and a variety of travelers would simply be passing through on their way to other destinations in Canaan and Egypt. All this would have made Sodom's city life very cosmopolitan.

Across the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Egypt, the cultures exhibited many customs and acceptable behaviors that may seem foreign to us today. Easy examples would be the temple systems with temple prostitution and many idols as key cultural centers. To fully understand life and customs during the time of Sodom in both Canaan and Egypt we need to look at Leviticus Chapter 18, as it refers to all sorts of sexual behavior occurring as a natural part of life in those days. This is important, as anyone who has ever heard or studied the story of Sodom easily focuses on the homosexual connection. However, as we will discover in the next lesson, God's judgment was pronounced on something much worse.

Read the scriptures from Leviticus referenced below and respond to the associated questions.

1. Read Leviticus 18:1-5, and verse 27. What does God tell us will follow in the remaining verses?
2. Leviticus 18:22 is often quoted as God's condemnation of homosexual behavior, which it is. However, if you read the verses surrounding this particular verse, you will see many additional behaviors listed as detestable to God and thus not to be adopted by the people of God. Read Leviticus 18:6-26 and list the pagan practices of Egypt and Canaan that God prohibits.

I included the above this in this lesson is to show you what the practices of the day were, everywhere in Egypt and Canaan, including in Sodom and its sister cities. While we often the focus on homosexual behavior, we overlook a long list of sexual sins that were being practiced at that time which were also detestable to God. In addition to the list above there are indications that the practice of pederasty was also common (i.e., sexual activity between a man and a boy).

However, we should also consider that the list of detestable and abominable things God calls out is much, much larger than just this list, which is based on sexual activity. A simple Bible word search on the word "detestable" results in 102 verses in which God is calling something that mankind does as detestable. Sin, it turns out, runs through the Bible and is of course is something that we are to avoid. I was concerned when I began a serious study of the story of Sodom that so much focus seemed to be placed on the homosexual behavior of its citizens, while all the rest of their detestable activities were being ignored. As it turns out, their sins were much broader in nature, and they were all detestable to God.

In the next lesson, we will dig deeper, as we study the judgment and destruction of Sodom. As a takeaway from this lesson, we need to examine ourselves and the world around us to see that the evils of Sodom's day are still with us—some are simply more visible than others. In its day, Sodom was a large and cosmopolitan city, the capital of King Bera's city-state. Over nine hundred

years of continuous occupation, it was a very prosperous city located strategically at the intersection of trade routes. Sodom had it all...or did it?

Suddenly, God's judgment arrived. As we can also observe in current times, the story of Sodom reflects how subtly a society can slide into detestable behavior that becomes integrated into daily living and regarded as "normal"—as it blinds its people to the evil that it brings on society. Judges 21:25 tells us that, "All the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes." God, however, is not blind to sin, and He will surely bring both salvation and judgment on this world through his son Jesus. (See Matthew 24:36-39) Each day we move a day closer to that judgment.

In the next lesson, we examine the judgment of Sodom and the Cities of the Plain.

Have a great week, everyone!

In Christ,

Wes