



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 in the place now occupied by the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea, according to the Genesis account, was not yet in existence in the days of Abraham. In its place there was a fertile plain, known as the plain of Sittim, 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.” [\(1\)](#)

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. . . .

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. [\(2\)](#)

The description of this upheaval has always aroused wonder: “There is clearly something unnatural or extraordinary that is recorded,” one commentator wrote. [\(3\)](#)

The great rift of the Jordan and the Dead Sea bear witness to a tremendous upheaval. “With the end of the Tertiary period, 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 M. Blanckenhorn, the explorer of the region of the Dead Sea. [\(4\)](#) In his later work he advanced the age of the rift to the pluvial, or the beginning of the first glacial age. The origin of the Dead Sea occurred “in a great mountain movement, with collapse and dislocation, that took place at the beginning of the pluvial, in the first glacial period. . . . In these titanic events conditions were created for the existence of an inner sea.” [\(5\)](#)

A period of dryness followed the first glacial, or pluvial period. In a new pluvial period, the second glacial epoch, the lake reached its greatest dimensions: the Dead Sea spread to the northern side of the present Sea of Galilee, engulfing it together with the Jordan Valley between. At the time, as fossil snails show, the water was not yet saline.

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 400 meters below the level of the Mediterranean, and its deepest bottom is some 320 meters 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.⁽⁶⁾ 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. These lava eruptions from fissures are ascribed to the second interglacial period.⁽⁷⁾ 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.”⁽⁸⁾ “Only the rupture of the ground could create this site, singular in the entire world.”⁽⁹⁾

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah took place in historical times, according to my scheme in a catastrophe which caused also the end of the Old Kingdom in Egypt. The geologists refer the upheaval which tore Syria in two to the end of the Tertiary period—long before human history began.

Now the question is legitimate: how old is the Dead Sea?

References

1. Genesis 13:10. Tacitus wrote that the plain was “fruitful and supported great and populous cities.” (*Histories* V. 7). According to Strabo (*Geography* XVI. 2. 44) there were “thirteen inhabited cities in that region of which Sodom was the metropolis.”
2. Genesis 19: 23-25, 27-28.
3. J. Penrose Harland, “Sodom and Gomorrah,” *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader* (New York, 1961), p. 61.
4. M. Blanckenhorn, “Entstehung und Geschichte des Todten Meeres,” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palaestina-Vereins*, 19 (1896), p. 16.
5. Idem, *Naturwissenschaftliche Studien am Todten Meer und im tal* (Berlin, 1912); cf. R. Freund *et al.*, “The Shear along the Dead Sea Rift,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, A*, Vol. 267 (1970), pp. 107-130.
6. Blanckenhorn, “Entstehung und Geschichte des Todten Meeres,” p. 26.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

