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## The Geography of the Cities of the Plain

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### Abstract:

Tradition seems to provide the only support for a southern Dead Sea location for the Genesis Cities of the Plain. The biblical text clearly supports their location north of the Dead Sea, on the east side of the Jordan River, in a circular, alluvial area known in the Old Testament, particularly in Genesis, as the Kikkar. This paper provides a detailed textual analysis of this geography.



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# The Geography of the Cities of the Plain

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The environs of the southeast corner of the Dead Sea have always been the favorite location for Sodom and Gomorrah.<sup>1</sup> Very few scholars have suggested other locations.<sup>2</sup> If the Cities of the Plain were not located toward the southern end of the Dead Sea, then how is it that a virtual scholarly consensus places them there? What data have they missed, misinterpreted, or misrepresented? One of the categories of evidence that needs to be examined carefully is the geographical data contained in the biblical texts relating to Sodom and Gomorrah and the Cities of the Plain.

## GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATORS FROM THE BIBLICAL TEXT

The following geographical data points (words and phrases) are drawn from biblical passages dealing with Sodom and Gomorrah and the Cities of the Plain in their textual order (most citations are from the book of Genesis; those from other books are specified). (I strongly recommend that you read all the relevant passages before continuing.)

“Sodom and Gomorrah” (10:19ff). These are the two prominent Cities of the Plain. When the two are paired together, as they almost always are, Sodom is listed first. This suggests that, of the two, Sodom was the larger, more important city. There is no indication as to their directional juxtaposition, but the fact that they are usually mentioned together probably indicates close geographical proximity. In the ancient Levant, particularly in this area, large cities generally did not exist in close proximity to each other, a phenomenon that is simply a function of available arable land and water resources needed to support larger populations.<sup>3</sup> However, it was not uncommon for larger cities to have one or more “daughter” cities (towns and/or villages) in the immediate vicinity.<sup>4</sup> Biblically speaking, Sodom and Gomorrah are never mentioned again by

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, *Archaeology* 30; D.M. Howard Jr., “Sodom,” *ISBE vol. 4*, G.W. Bromiley, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 560-561; R.K. Harrison, “Cities of the Valley,” *ISBE vol. 1* 704. Perhaps the best recent geographical work on the Transjordan, holding a “split view” on the location of the Cities of the Plain, is B. MacDonald, *East of the Jordan: Territories and Sites of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Boston: ASOR, 2000) 45-61.

<sup>2</sup> These consist mainly of a few nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars; see G.A. Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, twenty-fifth ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931) 505-506. While their consideration of the area north of the Dead Sea was eventually buried by the powerful opinions of W.F. Albright and G.E. Wright, who opted for a southern location, I think the earlier scholars exercised more cogent analysis and were ultimately correct. See M.J. Mulder, “Sodom and Gomorrah,” *ABD vol 6*, D.N. Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 99-103; and Harrison, “Cities of the Valley” 704.

<sup>3</sup> See W.R. Kotter, “Settlement Patterns,” *OEANE vol. 5* 6-10; M. Broshi and R. Gophna, “The Settlements and Population of Palestine During the Early Bronze Age II-III,” *BASOR* 253 (1984); Y. Shiloh, “The Population of Iron Age Palestine in the Light of a Sample Analysis of Urban Plans, Areas, and Population Density,” *BASOR* 239 (1980); and R. Gophna and J. Portugali, “Settlement and Demographic Processes in Israel’s Coastal Plain from the Chalcolithic to the Middle Bronze Age,” *BASOR* 269 (1988).

<sup>4</sup> Bethel and Ai constitute another doublet and are commonly linked together, especially in Genesis. In this case, Bethel was the more prominent city. In the time of Abraham, Ai (et-Tell) was an unoccupied ruin (*ha’ay* means “the ruin”). In the time of

these names as occupied sites or geographical markers beyond their destruction in Genesis chapter nineteen.

“Admah and Zeboiim” (10:19ff). These two cities are invariably mentioned together. Since Admah is always listed first, it can be assumed that it was the larger and more prominent of the two. It is possible, even probable, that Zeboiim was a daughter town/village of Admah. It is also quite possible that Zeboiim, being plural, refers to more than one (two?; three?) town(s) or village(s). Zeboiim may mean something like “the gazelles” or “the warriors,”<sup>5</sup> but frankly, no one has a clue as to its actual meaning. As with Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim are never mentioned again by these names as occupied sites or geographical markers beyond their implied destruction in Genesis 19.

“Bethel and Ai” (13:3). Whether ancient Bethel is to be found at modern Beitin, as Albright and others suggest,<sup>6</sup> or at nearby El Bira, as Livingston and Wood insist,<sup>7</sup> it was located in the central highlands of Canaan approximately sixteen to twenty kilometers north of Jerusalem. The city of Ai mentioned in Genesis 12:8 was a large ruin (Hebrew *ha'ay* means “the ruin”) located at the nearby site of et-Tell in modern Deir Dibwan, about four kilometers east of Bethel.<sup>8</sup> The story of the separation of Abram and Lot recorded in Genesis 13, which takes place in the vicinity of Bethel and Ai, is quite clear about what Lot could see from his vantage point somewhere in that area:

Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company: Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. (Genesis 13:10-12)

I will discuss the relevant words and phrases of this passage subsequently, but at this point I should note that I excavated in the area<sup>9</sup> of Bethel and Ai for six seasons, and I, along with

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Joshua, Ai (Khirbet el-Maqatir, less than two kilometers west of et-Tell) was a small border fortress close to Bethel. The Old Testament is full of references to the smaller “cities,” towns, and villages closely associated with their larger “mother” cities (together constituting what we routinely refer to as “city states”) (Joshua 13:23, 28; 15:32, 36, 41, 44, 51, 54, 57, 59, 60, 62; 16:9; 18:24, 28; 19:6-8, 15-16, 22-23, 30-31, 38-39, 48; 1 Samuel 6:18; 1 Chronicles 4:32-33; 27:25; Jeremiah 17:26; 32:44; 33:13). Such smaller, associated sites were often referred to as “daughters,” as in the “daughters of the Philistines” and “daughters of Edom” (2 Samuel 1:20; Ezekiel 16:27, 44-49).

<sup>5</sup> The spelling of Zeboiim is rendered variously in the Old Testament: צבאים, צבאים, צבאים, and צבאים (it may even include the variation צבאים, but that is questionable). Most sources list it merely as a toponym of unknown meaning. However, could it not be related to the Hebrew word for “gazelle” (צב/צבה), the m. plural of which is צבאים, or the m. plural form of the word for “war/warrior,” צבאים? In either case, the only real difference is in the pointing. See L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, eds., *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros: A Dictionary of the Hebrew Old Testament in English and German* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985) 791; W.L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 302; and M.S. Moore and M.L. Brown, “7383/7386 צב,” *NIDOTTE vol. 3*, W.A. VanGemeren, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 739-740.

<sup>6</sup> J.L. Kelso and W.F. Albright, “The Excavation of Bethel,” *BASOR* 39 (1968) 1-3.

<sup>7</sup> D.P. Livingston, “Traditional Site of Bethel Questioned,” *WTJ* 34 (1971) 39-50; B.G. Wood, “Khirbet el-Maqatir 2000 Dig Report,” *BS* 13.3 (2000) 67-72.

<sup>8</sup> J.A. Callaway, “Ai,” *NEAEHL vol. 1* 39-45; R.K. Harrison, “Ai,” *ISBE vol. 1* 81-84.

<sup>9</sup> For six seasons (1995-2000) I served as a Field Supervisor for the Khirbet el-Maqatir excavation, directed by B.G. Wood of the Associates for Biblical Research. The site is located about one mile west of et-Tell (the Ai of Abraham’s day, excavated by Callaway). See B.G. Wood, “Khirbet el-Maqatir, 1995-1998,” *IEJ* 50.1-2 (2000) 123-130; B.G. Wood, “Khirbet el-

several of my colleagues, have hiked all over the territory in question. I am intimately familiar with what can and cannot be seen from practically every vantage point between Ai and the edge of the Jordan Valley to the east. The southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea and the foothills on the eastern edge of the Jordan Valley are easily visible from that area. On a clear day, you can even see a portion of the northern end of the Dead Sea itself. But under no circumstances or by any stretch of the imagination can you see with the naked eye beyond that point to the middle (Lisan) regions or the southern end of the Dead Sea. The vantage point of the area of Bethel and Ai is a bit of evidence that should not be passed over lightly.

“altar” (13:4). Abram built this altar when he first came into the land of Canaan in Genesis chapter twelve. He “pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD” (Genesis 12:8). This confirms that Abram and Lot’s location, from which the “well watered” “plain of the Jordan” was visible, was indeed the area of Bethel and Ai.

“whole plain of the Jordan” (13:10). From the area (no doubt) east of Ai, Lot was able to see enough of the “plain of the Jordan” in order to justify the use of the Hebrew word for “whole” (*kol*). If the plain of the Jordan is made to include the entire rift valley including the Dead Sea, as some have suggested,<sup>10</sup> then it must be explained how Lot could have seen enough of the “plain” to warrant the use of *kol*. The lines of sight from Bethel/Ai only take in a small fraction of the rift valley, certainly not enough to be considered the “whole” of it, if the “plain” included the rift valley from the Sea of Galilee to the southern tip of the Dead Sea. Thus it only makes sense that the “plain” referred to is mostly, if not entirely, visible from the foothills east of Ai.

“plain” (13:10). The Hebrew word for “plain” in every context dealing with Sodom and Gomorrah is *kikkar*. This word is interesting because its basic meaning has nothing at all to do with geography. In fact, of the 68 times that the term is used in the Old Testament, it is only applied within a geographical context in thirteen instances.<sup>11</sup> Of those thirteen, seven of them are found in Genesis in relationship to Sodom and Gomorrah where it is translated “plain.” The remaining usages of *kikkar* reveal the real sense of the term: 45+ times it is used to designate a “talent” of silver, gold, iron, or lead; seven times it is translated “loaf” as in “loaf of bread.” The root meaning of *kikkar* is “disk” or a “circular, flat disk.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, a talent of silver or any other metal is a round, flat disk of metal used as a medium of exchange.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, loaves of bread in antiquity were usually flat and disk-shaped.<sup>14</sup> This meaning holds true throughout the Semitic cognates (it even carries the meaning of “circle” in modern Arabic).<sup>15</sup> Therefore, as a

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Maqatir, 1999,” *IEJ* 50.3-4 (2000) 249-254; B.G. Wood, “Khirbet el-Maqatir, 2000,” *IEJ* 51.2 (2001) 246-252; and B.G. Wood, “Kh. el-Maqatir 2000 Dig Report” 67-72.

<sup>10</sup> M.J. Mulder, “Sodom and Gomorrah,” 99-103.

<sup>11</sup> See my discussion of primary and secondary semantic referents toward the end of this paper.

<sup>12</sup> Domeris and Hess, “3971 כִּכָּר,” *NIDOTTE* vol.2 636-637. For the definitions and usages of *kikkar* and other Hebrew terms identified or discussed in this paper, see Koehler and Baumgartner, *Lexicon*; Holladay, *Lexicon*; Brown, Driver and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975); and VanGemeren, *NIDOTTE*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* See also P. Bienkowski, “Bread,” *Dictionary of the Ancient Near East*, P. Bienkowski and A. Millard, eds. (London: British Museum, 2000) 59.

<sup>15</sup> In Akkadian/Assyrian the word is *kakkaru*, meaning “metal disk” or “round loaf of bread”; see Black, George, and Postgate, eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, second (corrected) printing (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 2000) 141; and Civil,

geographical semantic referent in the context of “the plain of the Jordan” and “the cities of the plain,” there is no doubt that the very use of the word *kikkar* denotes a (relatively) flat, circular, disk-shaped region. If the nature of the area being described were something other than a “circular plain,” another word would have been selected. There are several other common Hebrew words for valley, vale or region.<sup>16</sup> Scholars who translate *kikkar* as “valley” or merely “region” have completely missed the point of the word.<sup>17</sup> It is quite clear that when we search for a geographical area upon which sit the Cities of the Plain, we are looking for a region that is observably circular and disk-like.

Even a cursory glance at a topographical map of the southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea reveals the circular nature of the area (see Maps 2 and 3). But the sense of the disk-like, circular plain is very impressive when you actually descend from the foothills onto the plain (*kikkar*) from the east (from the direction of present-day Amman), which sweeps around to the south and west toward the Dead Sea and around toward the north and west toward Jericho across the Jordan River. Indeed, Koehler and Baumgartner define the geographical meaning of *kikkar* as “the (roughly circular) territory of Lower Jordan (around Jericho) Gn 13, 10 f” [their parentheses and notations], which is precisely the area I have just described.<sup>18</sup>

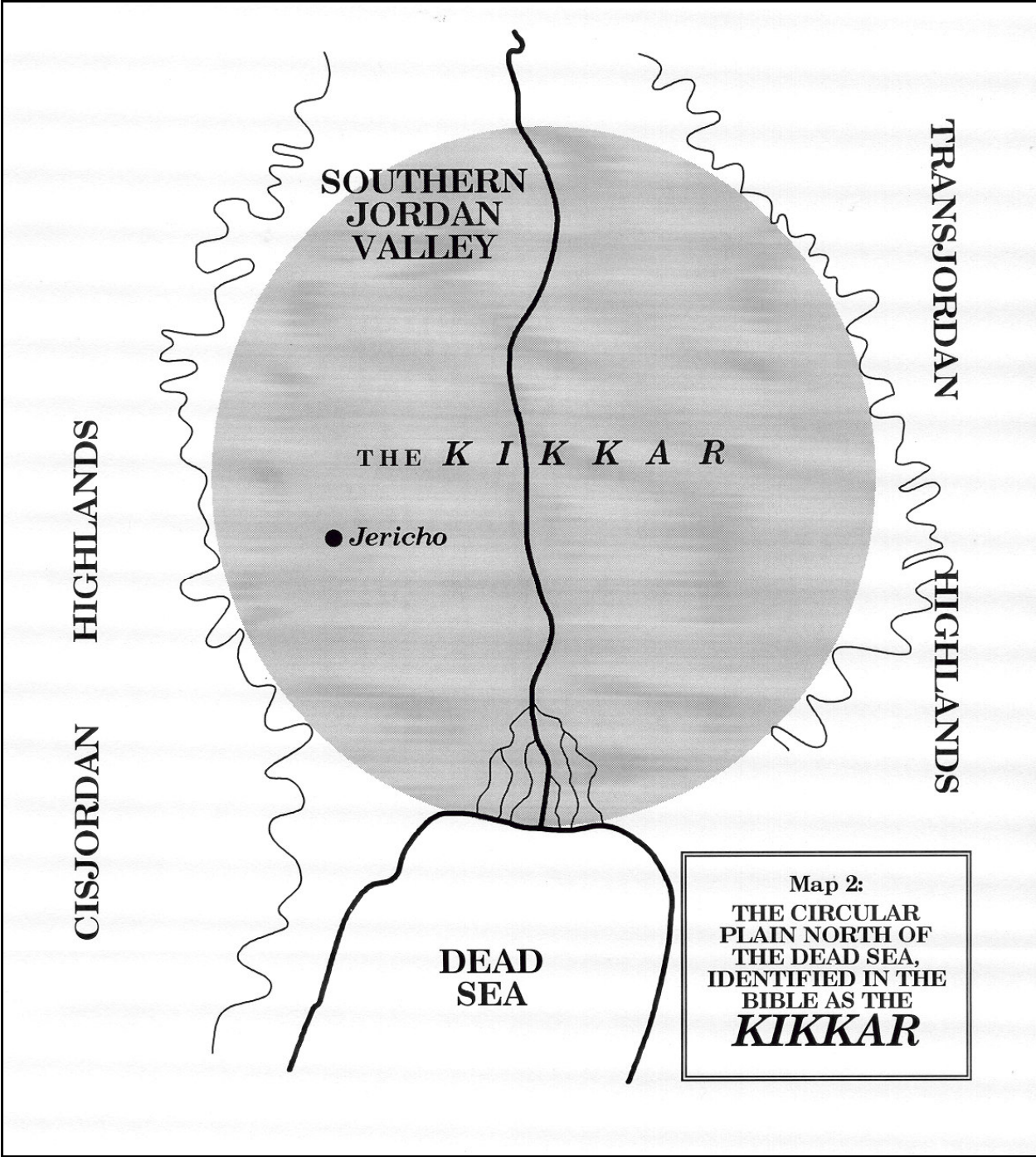
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Gelb, Oppenheim, and Reiner, *The Assyrian Dictionary vol. 8* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1971) 49-50. The equivalent of Heb. *kikkar* in Ugaritic is *kkrl/kakkar*, meaning “metal disk” (“talent”); see C.H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, Revised Reprint (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1998) 419. Even Egyptian *kerker* means “to circle, to mark out a circle with a stick” and “talent” (a disk of metal); see E.A.W. Budge, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary vol. 2* (New York: Dover, 1920/1978) 696.

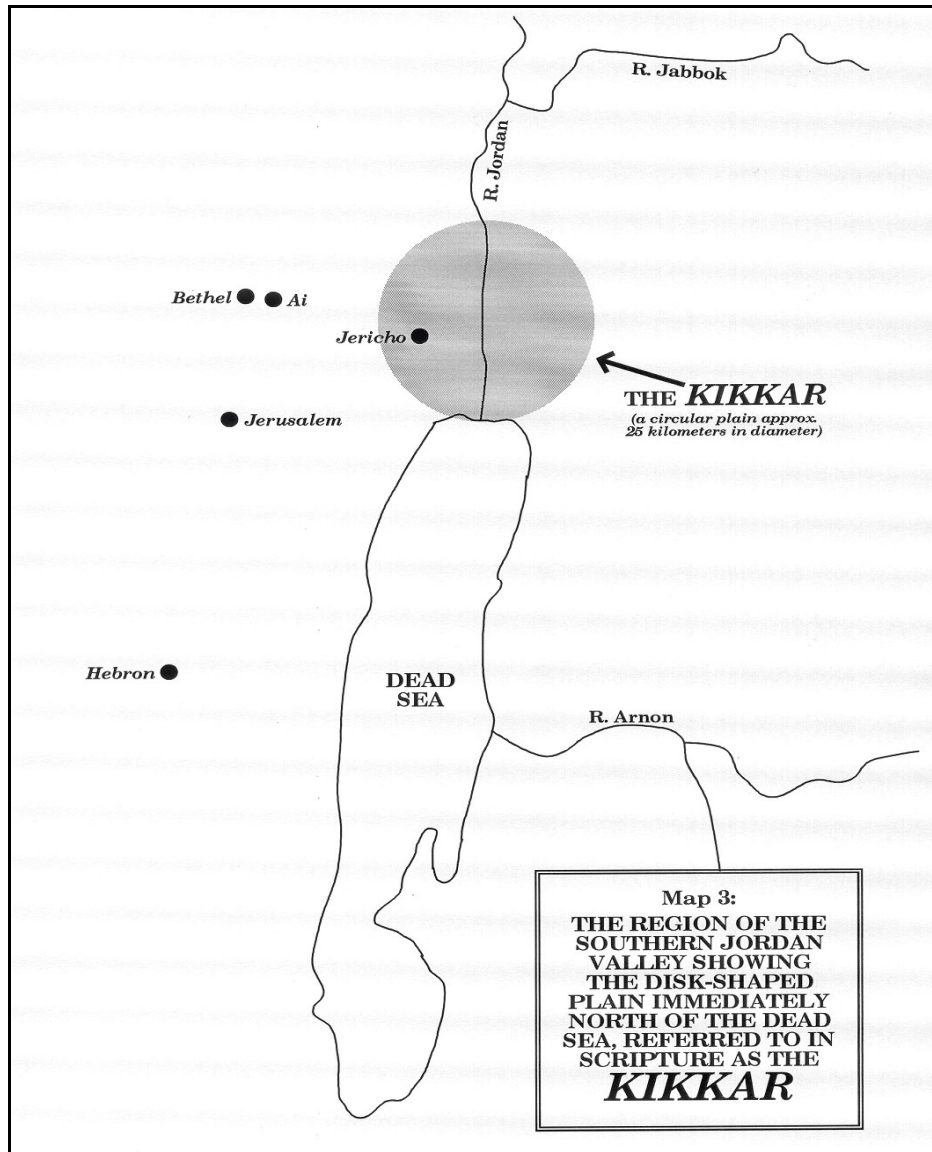
<sup>16</sup> Common Hebrew words such *biqah*, ‘*emeq*, *gey*’, *nakhal*, ‘*arabah*, ‘*elon*, *mishor* and *shephelah*, for example, all have a wide range of meanings having to do with low places, topographical depressions, low-lying plains, cleft valleys, and wadis. But this is not true of *kikkar* which, when used geographically, refers only to a circular area resembling a talent (metal disk) or a round, flat loaf of bread. And *kikkar* is absolutely consistent in retaining its meaning of “flat circle” throughout all its known uses among the Semitic cognates.

<sup>17</sup> Harrison, “Cities of the Valley” 704. Harrison erroneously translates Heb. ‘*are hakikkar* as “cities of the valley,” in spite of the fact that he correctly describes *kikkar* as “actually the old Canaanite term for ‘circle’...” But from that point he proceeds into a completely illogical meandering and ends up concluding (for no real reason at all!) that “modern scholarship locates [the Cities of the Valley] under the waters of the southern end of the Dead Sea.” Of course, when you look at the bibliography for his entry, it is dominated by two prominent names: W.F. Albright and G.E. Wright who championed that hypothesis. The fact of the matter is that *kikkar* never means “valley,” not in Hebrew, not in any of the Semitic cognates (*kakkarulkk*), not even in Egyptian (*kerkar*).

<sup>18</sup> Through the years I have spent a good deal of time in the region of the Lower Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea, and I have made two visits to the area in the year of this writing (2002). When you stand on Mount Nebo, for example, and look toward the Jordan and the northern end of the Dead Sea, the view of the circular plain (*kikkar*) is quite dramatic. The disk-like character of the area immediately north of and touching the Dead Sea is especially distinct when looking at a satellite photograph of the area; see the monumental geographical work by R. Cleave, *The Holy Land Satellite Atlas vol. 2* (Nicosia, Cyprus: Rohr Productions, 1999) 126-127, 130-131, 140. My good friend Richard Cleave has (admittedly) depended upon traditional sources for his location of Zoar and his discussion of the Cities of the Plain, but at least has resisted putting Sodom and Gomorrah on his maps of the southeastern Dead Sea region. By using both overhead and oblique lines of sight, he has provided the most stunning collection of views of the Lower Jordan/Dead Sea region available (his whole two-volume *Atlas* is superlative), providing a truly Divine geographical perspective of the *kikkar*. And from that Divine aerial perspective, presented so wonderfully by Cleave, one can clearly see why God inspired the biblical writers to select *kikkar* as the descriptive term for the disk-shaped plain of the southern Jordan Valley.



MAP 2



**MAP 3**

“Jordan” (13:10). The “plain” (*kikkar*) we have been discussing is the plain of the Jordan River. It is not the plain of the Dead Sea. It is ludicrous to think that the ancients would have included the Dead Sea portion of the rift valley as a part of “the plain of the Jordan.” All you have to do is visit the area and look for yourself, as I have many, many times (and again only a few days before writing this!). In fact, the writer of Genesis has a distinct term for the Dead Sea area proper, and it is “the Valley of Siddim (the Salt Sea)” (Genesis 14:3; see Map 6). The Hebrew word for “valley” (*emeq*) in “Valley of Siddim” is a different idea altogether, the root of which means “deep.”<sup>19</sup> Observably, the Dead Sea lies at the bottom of a deep valley, so the term is a perfect description of the fact. But the term *kikkar* has nothing at all to do with

<sup>19</sup> C. Rasmussen, “6677 עמק,” *NIDOTTE* vol. 3 440-441.

elevation or valley-ness and, in its relationship to Sodom and Gomorrah, refers only to an area specifically associated with the Jordan River that ends at the northern end of the Dead Sea.

“well watered” (13:10). The Hebrew word for “well watered” is *mashqeh*. It is also the word for “cupbearer” and “drink.”<sup>20</sup> The idea is clear enough. The plain (*kikkar*) of the Jordan was blessed with abundant sources of water including the Jordan River itself, numerous perennial springs, and many major wadis through which flowed the seasonal runoff from both the Cisjordan and Transjordan highlands. All these water sources are still evident today, particularly in the Transjordan portion of the Kikkar.<sup>21</sup>

“like the garden of the Yahweh” (13:10). The metaphorical reference here is obviously to the Garden of Eden, which was also well watered (see Genesis 2:10ff) by a river—seemingly spring-fed—that subsequently separated into multiple channels. There are multiple springs in the Kikkar area which flow down from the surrounding hills and wadis.

“like the Land of Egypt” (13:10). This metaphor is interesting because the well-watered Kikkar is compared to (lower) Egypt<sup>22</sup> and the Nile River, which empties northward into the Mediterranean Sea through a system of tributaries comprising the Nile Delta. Both the Nile and the Jordan empty into saline waters. And—on a much smaller scale—the Jordan, like the Nile, also has an alluvial “delta” through which it empties into the northern end of the Dead Sea. In antiquity, both rivers underwent an annual inundation due to rainfall and snowmelt far upstream. It seems that the writer/compiler of Genesis<sup>23</sup> was familiar with the lower Nile area and viewed the Jordan as a “Nile in miniature.”

“toward Zoar” (13:10). The Hebrew word *zo’ar* means “small.” Thus, Zoar was probably a rather nondescript place, perhaps a caravan center on one of the routes to and from Egypt.<sup>24</sup> Although Zoar (it was also known as Bela) is often listed as one of the five Cities of the Plain, the biblical record at no point tells us that there were five such cities. In fact, there are only four cities stated or implied: Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim (Zeboiim is plural; perhaps it consists of two or more villages). These are the four cities destroyed along with that portion of the Kikkar with which they were associated. As I stated previously, after their destruction these four cities are never mentioned again in the Bible as living cities or even as geographical markers. But unlike Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, Zoar is found beyond the book of Genesis at least as a geographical marker (Deuteronomy 34:3; Isaiah 15:5; Jeremiah 48:34). Clearly, Zoar was on the route to Egypt from Sodom, and it was where Lot fled to escape the destruction of Sodom and the Kikkar. The location of Zoar remains unknown and current identifications are highly speculative. The point is this: the location of Zoar cannot be used to determine definitively the location of the Kikkar or the cities associated with it, except to say that the Cities of the Plain were north of Zoar. However, if Zoar was positioned just north of the Arnon River border in the Transjordan Israelite territory of Reuben, as several scholars have

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<sup>20</sup> R.H. O’Connell, “9197 שִׁקְיָה,” *NIDOTTE* vol. 4 (see notation on *mashqeh*) 231-234.

<sup>21</sup> From now on, I will routinely use the term “Kikkar” as a proper noun designating the flat, circular region of the southern Jordan Valley immediately north of the Dead Sea, as I have described it in this paper (as one would capitalize the proper noun, “Negev”).

<sup>22</sup> This makes abundant sense if Moses was the writer/editor of this section of Genesis.

<sup>23</sup> Moses was intimately familiar with both the Nile and the Jordan as he viewed it from Mount Nebo.

<sup>24</sup> M.D. Carroll R., “7592 צֶעַר,” *NIDOTTE* vol. 3 830-831.

suggested is the meaning of Deuteronomy 34:1-4, then the (former) Cities of the Plain would have to have been north of the Arnon, effectively eliminating the traditional southern location of Sodom and Gomorrah within the borders of Moab and Edom, kingdoms that were off limits to the Israelites.

“before Yahweh destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah” (13:10). The plain (*kikkar*) was well watered like the garden of Yahweh until the time of its destruction. Whatever the plain looked like before it faced the wrath of God, it looked very different afterward. It is strongly implied that the plain was so severely damaged that habitation would have been difficult for a significant period of time. Thus, the archaeology of the involved area should reveal an occupational hiatus of considerable length (say, several hundred years).

“whole plain of the Jordan” (13:11). This is what Lot chose for himself. It was not the entire Jordan Valley, but the Kikkar section of the valley just north of the Dead Sea into which the narrower Jordan Valley opens (see Maps 2 and 3).

“set out toward the east” (13:11). Since Abram and Lot were at that time located in the vicinity of Bethel/Ai—about sixteen to twenty kilometers north of Jerusalem, almost due west of Jericho—when Lot separated from his uncle and traveled “toward the east,” he was headed directly into the circular plain of the southern Jordan River (the Kikkar).

“east” (13:11). From Bethel/Ai, Lot went east; not north, not south. And that is precisely where the Kikkar of the Jordan is located. If Sodom and Gomorrah had been located toward the southern end of the Dead Sea, or even in the area of the Lisan peninsula, Lot’s eastward trek would have lasted only until he had crossed the Jordan. In fact, if a southern destination had been his goal, he would not have traveled in an easterly direction at all, but toward the southeast, in order to cross the Jordan. At that point, or shortly thereafter, he would have made a hard right turn toward the south. If Lot had had a more southern location in mind, then you could only say that he traveled eastward (if southeastward = eastward) for about a third or a fourth of the trip. He would have spent two-thirds to three-fourths of the distance traveling due south. The biblical text gives us no hint whatsoever that Lot’s journey toward Sodom ever took him in a southerly direction. (The only biblical reference that may use the term “south” in association with Sodom is Ezekiel 16:46; but the passage, which speaks judgment against Jerusalem, uses both “Samaria” and “Sodom” metaphorically.<sup>25</sup>)

“Abram lived in the land of Canaan” (13:12). Canaan never extended over the Jordan River. Abram lived on the west side of the river, in Canaan. Thus, the distinction between where Abram lived, in Canaan, and where Lot chose to live, in Sodom, was that they were on opposite sides of the Jordan.

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<sup>25</sup> The passage (Ezekiel 16:45-46; see all of chap. 16) speaks judgment against Jerusalem and reads: “Your mother was a Hittite and your father an Amorite. Your older sister was Samaria, who lived to the north of you with her daughters; and your younger sister, who lived to the south of you with her daughters, was Sodom.” This chapter not only condemns the spiritual crimes of Jerusalem as being far worse than those of Samaria and Sodom, but also promises the complete restoration of Samaria, Sodom, and Jerusalem (v. 53 ff.). But how could it be that Yahweh would someday restore the very city of Sodom, which had been the object of such particular judgment as recorded in Genesis 19? The passage in Ezekiel makes sense only if the usage of both “Samaria” and “Sodom” are literary metaphors, i.e., Jerusalem is metaphorically flanked by Samaria and Sodom, her “partners” in corruption. This can be further supported by the fact that the words translated “north” and “south” are literally “the left hand” and “the right hand,” respectively, and, more often than not, refer simply to the concepts of “left” and “right.” See D.F. O’Kennedy, “שמאל 8521,” *NIDOTTE* vol. 3 1247-1250; and F.C. Putnam, “3545 ימין,” *NIDOTTE* vol. 2 466-471. Thus, there is no geographical point to be made from the terms “left/north” and “right/south” in Ezekiel 16.

“Lot lived among the cities of the plain” (13:12). Even though the circle of the Kikkar extended to both sides of the Jordan, Lot did not choose to live on the Canaan side with Abram, but on the Transjordan side where the cities of his interest—particularly Sodom-Gomorrah and Admah-Zeboiim—were located. Since Lot was a chieftain among nomadic herdsmen and caravaners, it was a strategic place to be.<sup>26</sup>

“cities of the plain” (13:12). The four cities of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim were located on the Kikkar. The location of an ancient city was dependent on three primary criteria: water resources, arable land, and proximity to trade routes. The Kikkar area met all of these criteria.<sup>27</sup> (Another important consideration for the location of an ancient city during most archaeological periods was the defensibility of the micro-locale, which, in many cases, meant either building on an already-existing rise in the terrain or constructing earthen ramparts around the site.) The plain that is clearly the Kikkar of the Jordan River is, by size, only capable of supporting a very limited number of medium-to-large walled towns (city; Heb. sing., *‘ir*). There is only one city of this size on the Cisjordan side of the Kikkar, i.e., Jericho. By comparison, I estimate that the Transjordan side of the Kikkar could accommodate two such sites (with a few daughter towns and/or villages), but no more. The fact that the Bible lists only four *‘irim* on the plain—with only two, Sodom and Admah, as the likely larger, principle cities—is a good indication of the organic, historical link between the actual Kikkar region and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. The geographical description of two prominent cities, each with one main “daughter” town in tow, perfectly matches the resource capabilities of the Kikkar area east of the Jordan.

“pitched his tents near (as far as) Sodom” (13:12). There was a tent city next to Sodom, and Lot’s tents were probably not the only ones. If Sodom was a relatively large city on a main trade thoroughfare, with abundant water resources and plenty of arable land, then it probably had a considerable history prior to the time of Abram and Lot, as is evidenced in Genesis 10:19, which speaks of the existence of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim at an extremely early date. The phrase “near Sodom” is probably better translated “as far as Sodom,”<sup>28</sup> suggesting that Sodom may have been on the extreme eastern edge of the Kikkar, or possibly the eastern-most location of the two large Kikkar cities, the other being Admah.

“Mamre near Hebron” (13:18). After Abram and Lot parted ways, Abram ventured to the region near Hebron. Hebron lies on the spine of the central highlands south of Jerusalem. From this vantage point, he would later view the rising smoke from the destruction of Sodom and the Cities of the Plain (Genesis 19:28). The visual distances and lines of sight from the area east of Hebron are virtually the same toward both the southern and northern ends of the Dead Sea, so to say that Abraham’s ability to see the rising smoke from the vicinity of Hebron supports only a southern location for Sodom and Gomorrah is geographically in error.

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<sup>26</sup> Aharoni, *Historical Geography* 43-63; D.A. Dorsey, *The Roads and Highways of Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1991) 202-204; Cleave, *Satellite Atlas vol. 2* 126-127.

<sup>27</sup> F.S. Frick, “Cities: Overview,” *OEANE vol. 1* 14-19; V. Fritz, “Cities: Cities of the Bronze and Iron Ages,” *OEANE vol. 1* 19-25; R. Gophna, “Early Bronze Age Canaan: Some Spatial and Demographic Observations,” *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land*, T.E. Levy, ed. (New York: Facts on File, 1995) 269-280.

<sup>28</sup> The phrase in Hebrew is עַד־סֹדֹם.

“looked down toward Sodom” (18:16). The same logic applies here as in the previous paragraph. From the vicinity of Abraham’s tent near Hebron (no doubt east of Hebron), he would have been able to look down toward Sodom.

“a town near enough to run to” (19:20). The location of Zoar is unknown. Past attempts to associate it with sites such as es-Safi are purely speculative. It seems from Deuteronomy 34:1-4 that its location is south of the Kikkar near the Arnon River.

“small” (Zoar) (19:20). See my note on Zoar above (Genesis 13:10).

“the entire plain” (19:25). When God overthrew the four cities of the Kikkar, how much of the plain did he destroy? It is reasonable to think that only the part of the plain associated with the targeted cities was destroyed, i.e., the portion of the Kikkar lying to the east of the Jordan. However, it is entirely possible that there was collateral damage in areas surrounding the primary destruction targets. For example, Jericho was the prominent city on the Kikkar west of the Jordan and was certainly occupied throughout this patriarchal period; therefore, it may have suffered from the peripheral effects of the calamity.

“the vegetation in the land” (19:25). This underscores the fact that the Kikkar was full of vegetation before its destruction and devoid of vegetation immediately afterward. This is not to say that over time the effects of this localized ecological disaster did not lessen, even reverse. Certainly one would not be surprised to find that several decades, or even centuries, would be needed for such a recovery to be complete enough for the land to again support the existence of cities and towns.

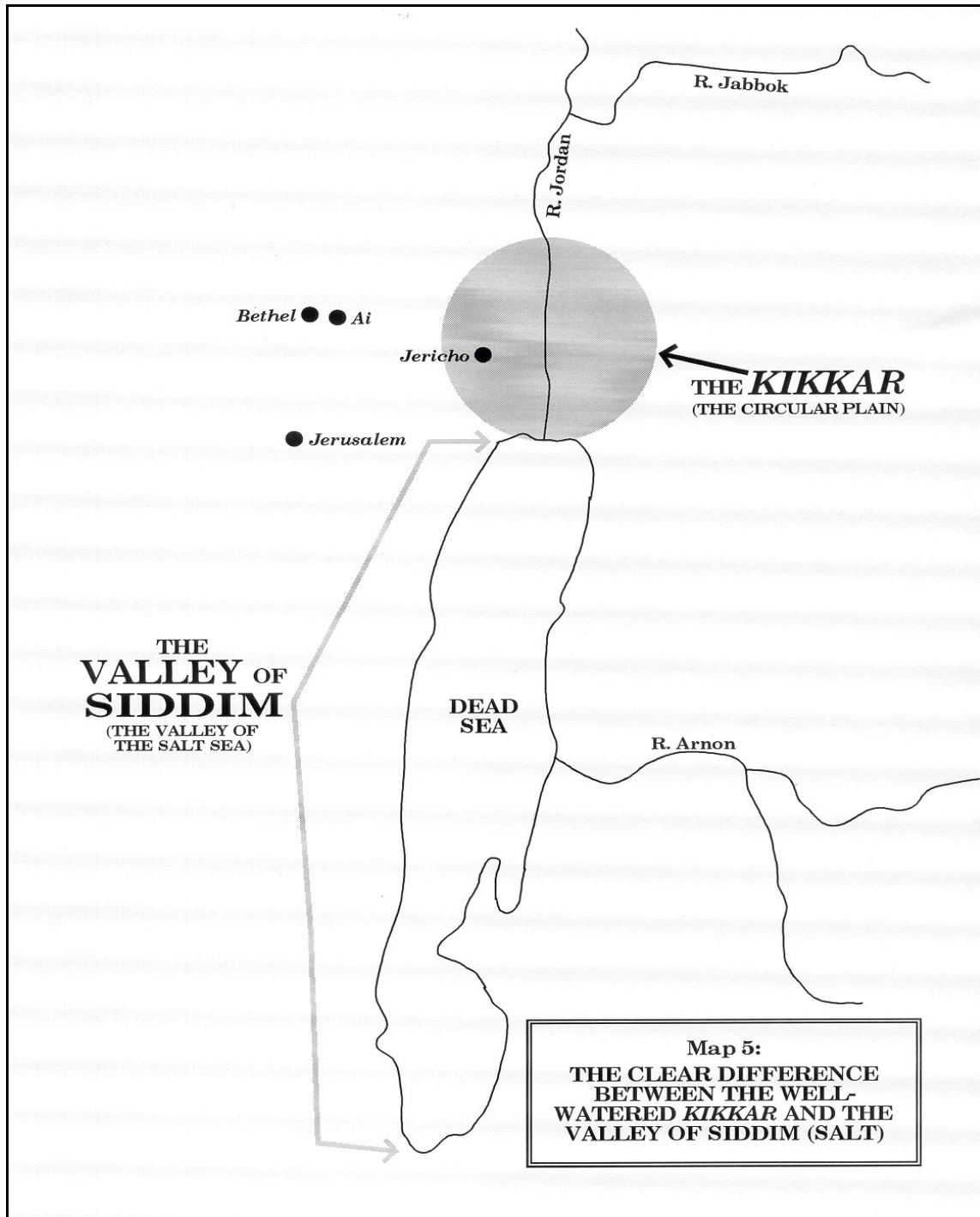
#### A SUMMARY OF GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATORS FROM THE BIBLICAL TEXT

The foregoing geographical indicators from the biblical text provide a very clear picture of the location of the Cities of the Plain. In a nutshell, here are the geographical facts derived from the relevant biblical passages:

1. There were probably two prominent cities on the plain (*kikkar*): Sodom and Admah. Each of these cities controlled a nearby smaller town (city), Gomorrah and Zeboiim, respectively, that was still significant enough always to be linguistically coupled with its larger neighbor, i.e., Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim. Other such “daughter” villages cannot be ruled out.
2. Abraham remained in Canaan on the west side of the Jordan. Lot chose to live on that portion of the plain lying on the east side of the Jordan. Thus, the Cities of the Plain where Lot lived were not in Canaan (Cisjordan), but in the Transjordan area.
3. When standing in the vicinity of Bethel/Ai (to the east of Ai), one’s line of sight to the east primarily included the southern end of the Jordan Valley just north of the Dead Sea. Locations farther north and south were not visible (see Map 4).
4. From (east of) Bethel/Ai, the “whole plain of the Jordan” was visible, not just a small portion of it. This meant that the plain was mostly, if not entirely, visible from the foothills east of Ai overlooking the southern Jordan Valley (see Map 4).
5. In order to reach the plain and its cities, one traveled eastward from Bethel/Ai, not southeastward or southward.

6. The plain upon which the cities were located was a flat, circular region that visually gave the impression of a large disk, hence the use of the specialized term Kikkar, which primarily referred to a talent (a circular, flat disk of gold, silver, or other metal used as a medium of exchange) or a loaf (a circular, flat, disk-shaped bread commonly baked in antiquity) (see Maps 2 and 3).
7. The circular plain was associated with the Jordan River, not with the Dead Sea (the valley of which had its own specific term: the Valley of Siddim) (see Map 5).
8. The circular plain was well watered, not only by the Jordan, which cut through it and provided an annual inundation (similar to that of the Nile River), but also by subterranean sources (like Eden).
9. The size of the circular plain was such that the arable land and water resources of its Transjordan portion were only capable of supporting two large cities and several smaller “daughter” towns or villages. Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim held the bulk of the circular plain’s population.
10. The Cities of the Plain existed on a main trade thoroughfare (probably both north/south and east/west), giving rise to their very early development and longevity (until they were destroyed).
11. Because “the entire plain” was destroyed, other cities on or around the Kikkar may have suffered collateral damage or even destruction, but not to the degree that the four primary targets did.
12. At the time of the destruction of the plain and its cities, the vegetation of the Kikkar was obliterated in an ecological disaster that would have required a considerable period of time (decades or centuries) for recovery.





**MAP 5**

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS ON THE LOCATION OF THE KIKKAR**

The biblical geography of the Cities of the Plain is abundantly clear: the Kikkar and the cities that thrived upon it were located at the southern end of the Jordan Valley at the northern end of the Dead Sea. One has to play fast and loose with the biblical text in order to place them

anywhere else. But it is a matter of fact that such a place (the Kikkar) as described in Scripture does actually exist (even today) in the very place that the biblical evidence locates it: a flat, circular plain twenty-five kilometers in diameter, split precisely in two by the Jordan River which, at the southern edge of the circle, empties into the Dead Sea (see Map 2). This circular plain is watered not only by the Jordan, but also by many springs (particularly on both the east and west thirds) and by seasonal runoff from the Cisjordan and Transjordan highlands through numerous wadis. It is highly probable that the area was even wetter in early antiquity.<sup>29</sup>

At this point, an additional comment about the term *kikkar* is in order. I have already noted that the primary meaning of the word does not point to a geographical semantic referent, but to circular, flat disks like talents of gold or loaves of bread. Let me add that, linguistically speaking, such commonly used material referents are always primary and are only applied to geographical contexts secondarily, specifically those cases where the secondary geographical referent bears a distinct phenomenological similarity to the primary referent. In discussions on cognitive grammar and the way language is structured, we see many examples where a frequently-used morpheme or lexical term has a variety of interrelated senses that can be thought of as forming a network, where some senses are prototypical or primary and others constitute either extensions or specializations of a prototypical value.

In the case at hand, we see where the primary or prototypical meaning of the word *kikkar*—referring to circular, flat disks like talents of gold or loaves of bread—is then extended to geographical phenomena. This kind of linguistic convention is universal and easily demonstrated. For example, in the American Southwest where I live, a hill or elevated area that is flat on top is typically referred to as a *mesa*, which in Spanish means “table”; in specific contexts, if you say, “Meet me on the mesa,” you are actually referring to a specific geographical area known by locals as “the mesa.” Likewise, when you mention the “boot heel” of Italy or the “panhandle” of Texas, most people know the precise geographical area you are describing. Another example of this type of semantic pattern involves extending the term for an animal to indicate a person who resembles that animal in certain aspects, e.g., “He’s a pig,” “The lawyer is a real fox,” and “You’re a rat.” But such usage is not limited to English. In Cora, we see a relationship of extensionality between the view of a dog’s tail from the rear or side and the slope of a mountain.<sup>30</sup>

Such is the nature of the secondary geographical meaning of *kikkar* in the Bible. The primary meaning is a circular, flattened disk of metal (a talent) or bread (a loaf), the secondary meaning of which is a specific geographical area that has those phenomenological characteristics. That only thirteen of the 65+ biblical usages of *kikkar* refer to a geographical area, and all but two of those refer to the same approximate region, is a strong indicator that the secondary meaning of the term in antiquity was locally identified with a particular place that, from every direction, looked like a giant *kikkar*, i.e., a circular, flat disk. Again, I emphasize that the area unequivocally located by the Genesis data immediately north of the Dead Sea looks exactly like

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<sup>29</sup> A.D. Crown, “Toward a Reconstruction of the Climate of Palestine 8000 BCE-0 BCE,” *JNES* 31 (1972); G.W. Ahlstrom, *The History of Ancient Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 158.

<sup>30</sup> R.W. Langacker, *The Cognitive Basis of Grammar*, second ed. (Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002) 35-57, 276-277. Also, my lengthy discussions of this topic with renowned linguist J.W. Oller, Jr., (University of Louisiana, Lafayette) with whom I have had the privilege to collaborate on several projects, confirm the phenomena I have described.

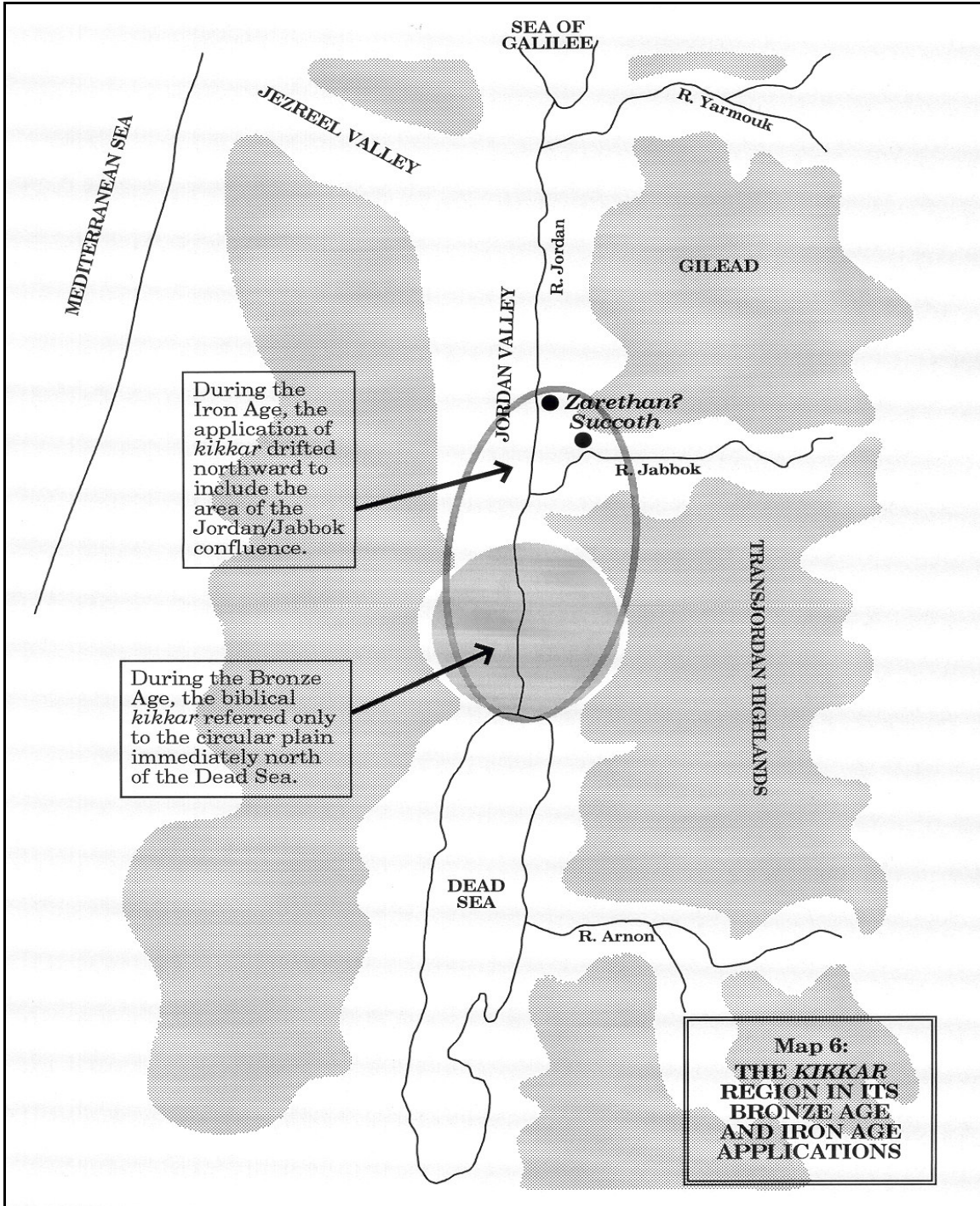
that. Whether you look at that section of the southern Jordan Valley from land or air, it is just what the primary meaning of *kikkar* lends to its secondary referent: circular and flat.

But as word usages tend to meander over time, *kikkar* does seem to have a definite drift in the application of its geographical meaning from the Bronze Age through the Iron Age. And, as will become obvious, the drift is never (ever!) to the south. Of the seven instances of *kikkar* that appear in an Intermediate Bronze through Middle Bronze Age context (Genesis 13:10, 11, 12; 19:17, 25, 28, 29), all of them refer specifically to the circular plain at the south end of the Jordan Valley (as discussed above) associated with Sodom and Gomorrah. The single occurrence of *kikkar* within the timeframe of the Late Bronze Age (Deuteronomy 34:3) refers to “the plain (*kikkar*) of the valley of Jericho,” which is simply the Cisjordan extension of the same circular plain found in the Genesis passages cited above. The three uses of the word *kikkar* in an Iron Age setting (2 Samuel 18:23; 1 Kings 7:46; 2 Chronicles 4:17), all refer to a section of the Jordan Valley near the Jabbok confluence immediately north of and contiguous with the circular plain of the earlier (Bronze Age) passages (see Map 6).

From the Persian Period, there are two instances of *kikkar* (Nehemiah 3:22; 12:28) with reference to the place of origin of men involved in the rebuilding Jerusalem’s city walls. While in each case the meaning could be construed as “surrounding region,” the meaning of *kikkar* as the larger area encircling a locale (in this case, Jerusalem) still preserves the idea of a circular geographical referent. However, I must point out that in each of these passages in Nehemiah, the use of *kikkar* could still be taken as a reference to men whose home villages were located in the vicinity of Jericho in the southern Jordan Valley to the east of Jerusalem.

These are all of the geographical usages of *kikkar* in the Old Testament. And it is abundantly clear that every time it is used in a Bronze Age context the meaning is confined to the circular plain of the southern Jordan Valley at the north end of the Dead Sea, upon which were built the cities of Jericho (the western Kikkar) and those targeted for destruction (the eastern Kikkar): Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim. In fact, when the term was used geographically in the Bronze Age, it was likely heard as “the talent” or “the flat loaf” (the pita bread!) in the same way that the Spanish word mesa (table) refers to a “table” of land; i.e., mesa is never used without the conscious understanding of “table” any more than *kikkar* would have been used without the conscious understanding of “talent” or “flat loaf” as referring to a distinct locale.

In other words, at least in biblical passages set in the Bronze Age, *kikkar* was not a common Hebrew term for “plain” that could be applied to any flat land surface, but only to the circular plain at the southern end of the Jordan Valley. [Hebrew has several other words for the general meaning “plain” or “low place” that are applied to many different geographical areas (such as *mishor*, *biq’ah*, *‘arabah*, *shephelah*, and *‘abel*).] Several hundred years later, in passages with an Iron Age setting, the application of *kikkar* drifts slightly northward to include the southern Jordan Valley up to the area of the Jabbok confluence, suggesting a slight movement toward a more generalized idiomatic application, although the area is still contiguous with the original Kikkar of the Bronze Age. A thousand years or more after its Bronze Age specificity, the geographical use of *kikkar* in the Persian Period (Nehemiah) may reflect a drift into a truly generalized usage (“surrounding region”), but even that can be questioned.



**MAP 6**

In summary, here is the point: given the geographical data<sup>31</sup> from the biblical text regarding the location of the plain (Kikkar) associated with Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, logic precludes that it could be anywhere south of the circular plain of the southern Jordan Valley located immediately north of the Dead Sea. The very low section of the rift valley, which holds the Dead Sea, is a different and distinct geographical area (the Valley of Siddim) never confused in Scripture with the Kikkar. When the biblical geography of Sodom and Gomorrah is superimposed upon the physical geography of the actual land itself, it is a perfect match, and the Cities of the Plain are nowhere near the Lisan peninsula or the southern end of the Dead Sea.

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<sup>31</sup> B.G. Wood, who has probably made the best case for the identification of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira as Sodom and Gomorrah, in his 1999 *BS* article (see reference in my footnote 5), refers to an article by W.S. Shea [see W.S. Shea, "Two Palestinian Segments from the Eblaite Geographical Atlas," *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth*, C.L. Meyers and M. O'Connor, eds. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 589-612] in order to demonstrate support for a southerly location of the Cities of the Plain. But Shea's identifications suffer from the same acceptance of the mid to southern Dead Sea locale for Sodom and Admah as those of many other scholars, including Wood. A careful analysis of Shea's site "identifications" based on the Eblaite "Atlas" reveals a level of speculation that would make any cartographer nervous. The fact is that Shea draws his "roads" in order to match his ideas of where certain sites might be located. If the Cities of the Plain were located in a more northern area, then Shea's dot-to-dot approach would simply adjust. Ancient trade routes course throughout the region of the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea in a wide variety of configurations. I must also point out that most of Shea's identifications are highly speculative in nature and would be rejected by most (if not all) scholars of Eblaitica (Shea's analysis was based on the early work of Pettinato, most of which has been either rejected or corrected by more recent research [for example, see C.H. Gordon, G.A. Rendsburg, and N.H. Winter, *Eblaitica: Essays on the Ebla Archives and Eblaite Language*, 3 vols (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1987, 1990, 1992); see also Mulder, "Sodom and Gomorrah," *ABD vol 6* 102]. But even if Shea's identifications were correct to some degree, the order of toponyms could just as easily wrap around the northern end of the Dead Sea as around the southern end. But regardless of their geographical placement, the date of the Eblaite toponym lists is much too early to be contemporaneous with the time of Abraham.