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## Tall el-Hammam 2008: A Personal Perspective

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### Abstract:

This popular article is a “personal take” on the Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project by one of its Senior Archaeologists who has participated in each of the first three dig seasons as a part of the TeHEP staff. The article has appeared in various venues, including those of the Associates for Biblical Research, and appears here with permission of the author.



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# Tall el-Hammam 2008: A Personal Perspective

by **Gary A. Byers, PhD(c)**

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**A**fter finishing our third season of excavating at Tall el-Hammam,\* it seems like a good time to review what we know about the site down through history, especially as it relates to the Bible. Surface surveys and archaeological excavations suggest that activity at the site began with the earliest Biblical references to the region and continued intermittently right through New Testament times. Tall el-Hammam is rich with remains from almost every period.

One of the most important things that happened this past season was the completion of a joint agreement with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. While we already have an excavation permit from the Kingdom's Department of Antiquities (DoA), we now have officially entered into a whole new level of relationship with the department. The Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project (TeHEP) is now a cooperative effort between the College of Archaeology, Trinity Southwest University and the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. This partnership allows for our excavation team to work hand-in-hand with our Jordanian counterparts both in the field during the excavation season as well as in the research lab the rest of the year. Their expertise will provide great insight and support to our research.



Author, left, discussing a find with Dr. Collins, TeHEP Director, during the the 2008 Season.

## **The Early Bronze Age: Tall el-Hammam and the Table of Nations**

The earliest city was centered on the lower tall (*tel* in Hebrew [Jos 11:13] and *tell* or *tall* in Arabic; an artificial mound created by the building, destruction and rebuilding of cities at the same location) and pottery we collected here suggests that occupation goes back well before 3,000 BC. It appears the site was continuously occupied from the Chalcolithic Period through the Middle Bronze Age.

The working hypothesis of the Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project is that our site is the best candidate for the Biblical city of Sodom. That would make the lower tall the city mentioned in Genesis 10 (the Table of Nations). This chapter describes the post-Flood population as it spread throughout the ancient Near East, listing a number of cities by name. It says that descendants of Ham built four cities in ancient southern Mesopotamia (Babel, Erech, Accad and Calneh), four cities in northern Mesopotamia

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\* The Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project (TeHEP) is a joint scientific effort shared by the College of Archaeology, Trinity Southwest University and the Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. TeHEP is co-directed by Dr. Steven Collins (Dean, TSU College of Archaeology) and Mr. Abdelsamii Abu Daieh (Director of Excavations, DoA, Jordan). Author, Gary Byers, is a Senior Archaeologist and Field Supervisor for TeHEP.

(Nineveh, Rehoboth, Calah and Resen), three cities on the western border of Canaan (Sidon, Gerar, Gaza) and five cities on Canaan's eastern border (Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboim and Lasha).

Scholars generally believe the Bible locates Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboim (called cities of the plain/*kikkar* of the Jordan—Gn 13:10) on the eastern side of the Jordan River and Dead Sea. That would also locate the eastern border of Canaan and the Canaanite culture there (Gn 19:10). While rivers regularly served as ancient national borders, the Jordan River appears not to have been the eastern boundary of Canaanite culture throughout many of the Biblical periods. Apparently an even greater boundary in the area was the high Jordanian mountains. Getting up and down those



Danette Collins (top), Supervisor in Square UC-28J, with volunteer Olga Garcia clarifying a clay-lined storage bin.

mountain slopes was even more difficult than fording the Jordan River. Similarities in the archaeological evidence from both sides of the Jordan River Valley support such a cultural boundary. Pottery from the Early Bronze Age at Tall el-Hammam connects most closely to pottery at early sites west of the Jordan River.

Consequently, our lower tell would represent the Sodom whose wickedness brought God's judgment by the time of Abraham (Gn 13:13; 18:20). Based on architectural and ceramic evidence we found this season, it appears this oldest city was actually twice as large as we thought before the season began. The lower tell (over 40 acres) was surrounded by a four-meter wide city wall with towers. A continuation of the wall's stone foundation was traced this year around the base of the upper tell (another 40 acres), as well. That would make Early Bronze Age Tall el-Hammam about a kilometer long from east to west, with a circumference of three to four kilometers – one of the largest cities at that time in all the ancient Near East.

In connection with this Early Bronze city at Tall el-Hammam, and less than 200 meters east of the site, is a massive dolmen field on the edge of the foothills. Dolmens are ancient mini "Stonehenge"-type structures. Each one was constructed with upright megalithic stones serving as the four walls and flat top, 2 x 2 x 2 meters on average. While scholars are not really certain how they were used, the lack of both pottery and bones seems to suggest they were neither houses nor tombs. Instead, they may have served a cultic or ceremonial purpose, each one possibly representing an extended family. Dating as far back as the beginning of the Early Bronze Age (3000 BC), they may have served as a sort of family shrine or funerary monument for the departed.

Called the Ar Rawda Dolmen Field, with over 100 extant dolmens, the area is being threatened by development. So, TeHEP is fortunate to have a couple of contemporary studies being done on this dolmen field connected to our site. An international project

is conducting an ongoing spatial analysis of the dolmen field while a comprehensive survey to identify and record all the dolmens in the area has been undertaken by Hussein al-Jarrah on behalf of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities. Hussein is also the DoA director of the region where Tall el-Hammam is located and he works side by side with us when we are excavating as a member of the TeHEP staff.

### **The Middle Bronze Age: Tall el-Hammam in the Days of Abraham and Lot**

The Middle Bronze Age city that was destroyed was centered on the 40-acre upper tall. In fact, the shape of the tell today is due to the construction of a mudbrick rampart which may extend from the top of the tall and down the slope all the way to that Early Bronze Age city wall at its base. This year we have seen the rampart beneath Iron Age city structures in a number of squares. Such a construction project was a massive undertaking and evidence of both a strong government and a prosperous community.

Yet, this year we were also able to trace the Middle Bronze Age stone city wall and a couple of towers around much of the western end of the lower tall. That, along with ceramic evidence in the lower city suggests the Middle Bronze Age city also extended over that area as well. We will need to excavate in the lower tall to clarify these things, but either way, the massive rampart makes it clear that the central city at that time was focused on the upper tall.

On the upper tall, a number of mudbrick walls have been found still partially standing along with a massive amount of disintegrated mudbrick debris everywhere we dig. *In situ* Middle Bronze Age pottery has been found in a couple of squares 12 feet below the present surface of the mound. When this city was finally destroyed, possibly in the days of Abraham and Lot (see Gn 19), it was after some 2,500 years of occupation. This level would be the one that we believe could be the Sodom of the Bible.



Trench in Field UD reveals the Iron Age II city wall (stones, top) built over Middle Bronze Age mudbrick and earthworks forming the MB defensive rampart system.

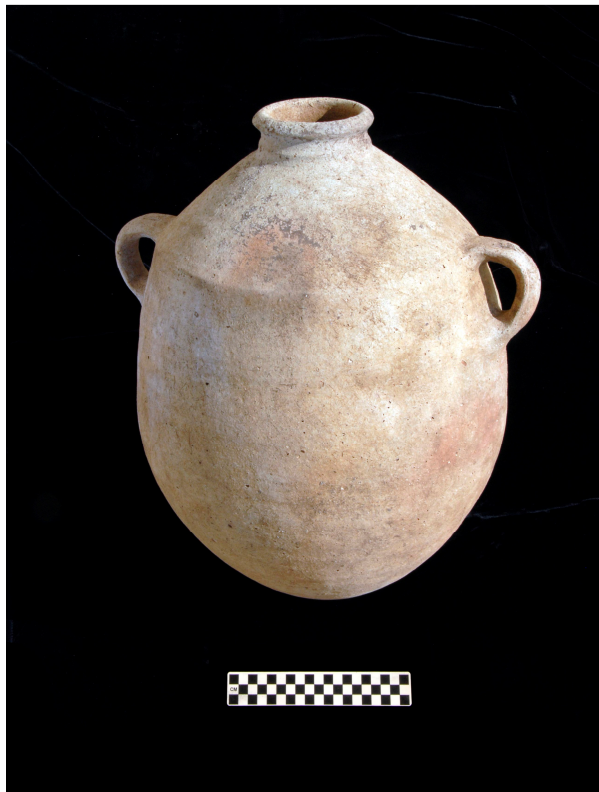
### **The Late Bronze Age: Tall el-Hammam in the Days of Moses**

After destruction of the Middle Bronze city (sometime before 1600 BC), the whole site appears to have no city wall or permanent occupation for 500-700 years. During this same period, all the cities on the eastern Jordan plain (*kikkar*) appear to have the

same hiatus in settlement. That was also the time period when the Israelites passed through this area—called at that time “the plains (*araboth*) of Moab” (Nu 22:1). Moab was one of the non-Canaanite cultures living in the Jordanian mountains. Their kingdom centered in the highlands between the Arnon River (modern Wadi Mujib) and the Zared River (modern Wadi Hasa) Rivers (Nu 21:13). God specified to the Israelites that they could not fight with or occupy Moabite land (Dt 2:9).

So, it is an interesting paradox that this land, about 20 miles north of the Arnon (Mujib), would be called the plains of Moab. Apparently, at some point during the occupational hiatus in the *kikkar* of the Jordan (from MB destruction to 1400 BC), the Moabite kingdom controlled this region and it is thus mentioned in the Exodus narrative as the plains (*araboth*) of Moab. Yet at the time of Moses, King Sihon of the Amorites, living in Heshbon, had captured this land formerly under Moabite control (as far south as the Arnon; Nu 21:26). The Israelites defeated him in battle and took control of their lands (Nu 21:23-24).

The Israelites’ last camp east of the Jordan is mentioned at Abel Shittim (Nu 25:1; and vicinity Nu 33:49) in the plains (*araboth*) of Moab. The name Abel Shittim (“meadow of the *shittah* trees”) suggests an area where many of these trees grew in the midst of an *arabah* (“desert;” the Hebrew word from which we get Arab or “desert dweller”). The *shittah* tree (called acacia today) was used to construct both the tabernacle and its furniture at Mount Sinai (Ex 25-38). It grows in arid climates and fits both the term *arabah* and the southern Jordan Valley region. While I have not seen any acacia trees in the immediate area, Lieutenant W. E. Lynch of the United States Expedition to the Jordan River and the Dead Sea reported seeing them in this region in 1848.



Iron Age II storage jar from a house in Field UC.

Abel Shittim does not sound like a city, but more like an oasis. An oasis indicates a water source and the modern Arabic name Tall el-Hammam means the “mound of the hot spring.” Since the Biblical text puts Abel Shittim in the vicinity of Tall el-Hammam, as the largest tall in the whole region, it is tempting to put Moses, Joshua, the Israelites, and the tabernacle all camping in the midst of the ruins of the upper and lower tells. For this very reason, and without any archaeological evidence, many scholars have assumed that Tall el-Hammam must have been the site of Abel Shittim (check the maps in the back of your Bible). From there Moses went east back up into the Jordanian highlands and died on Mount Nebo. Joshua, the Israelites and the tabernacle went west to the Jordan River. To this point in our excavations, we do not have any evidence that the Israelites did stay here for a short period of time—

but our extensive observations of the region suggest it was indeed the most logical place to camp.

It was while Israel was camped here that Baalam, the son of Beor, looked down on them from the Jordanian highlands and pronounced four blessings on them (Nu 22-24). Also, at Abel Shittim the Israelites fell into immorality associated with the worship of Baal Peor apparently at Balaam's prompting (Nu 31:16—see also 2 Peter 2:15; Rev 2:14) and suffered God's judgment (Nu 25:1-9). Balaam must have been an important religious figure in this region because additional oracles of "Baalam the son of Beor," were found by archaeologists inscribed on limestone plaster at Deir Alla (dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC), some 50 km north of Tall el-Hammam.

### **The Iron Age: The Tall el-Hammam of Solomon and the Kingdom of Israel**

At the time of the Conquest of Canaan, the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh requested and were allowed to occupy land on the east of the Jordan River that belonged to the kingdoms of Og (king of Bashan) and Sihon (king of the Amorites). But they were expressly forbidden from occupying the property of the Edomites, Moabites or Ammonites (Nu 32). The border between the inheritance of Gad (north) and Reuben (south) passes right by Tall el-Hammam (Jos 13:15-28). At this point we are not able to clarify the precise border line or on which side our site was located. Either way, it was in the territory of Israelite occupation. Again pottery from the excavation at Tall el-Hammam suggests a cultural connection to Canaan west of the Jordan River and not the Jordanian highlands (Moabite or Ammonite).

After the occupational hiatus in the region, during the first millennium BC, the upper tall of our site was again occupied. This was a major city with a three-meter wide wall circling the top of the tall, sitting on the top of the mudbrick rampart of the Middle Bronze Age city. Many stone and mudbrick walls from the city of this time can be seen right on, and just beneath, the surface of the tall. Because the pottery does not suggest either a strong Ammonite or Moabite presence at Tall el-Hammam, it is interesting to wonder if the site was part of Solomon's twelfth administrative district in Gilead (I Kgs 4:19) with Geber the son of Uri as the district administrator (in the former area of Sihon and Og). It was in this district that Solomon also had the bronze items of his Temple cast in clay molds in the plains of the Jordan (2 Chr 4:17). Is it possible that this district's capital city was located at Tall el-Hammam, in eyesight of Jerusalem's Mount of Olives?



**Iron Age II monumental building (tower?) in Field UB;  
some wall in this structure are 2 meters thick.**

Either way, archaeological evidence does indicate at least two destructions of this city during the Iron Age—either by earthquake or enemy. It is tempting to wonder if the same 8<sup>th</sup> century BC earthquake that destroyed Deir Alla (perhaps the earthquake

of Amos 1:1 and Zech 14:4-5, the one probably responsible for the 8th century BC destructions at Hazor and Samaria) also caused the destruction at Tall el-Hammam.

### **The Greco-Roman Period: The Tall el-Hammam of the New Testament**

Yet occupation at Tall el-Hammam continued after the Iron Age. To date, how things progressed at the site from the end of the Iron Age into the Hellenistic and Roman periods is not yet clear. In the early 1800's, W. M. Thomson identified warm sulfur springs and ancient baths on the plain right next to where the upper and lower tells connect. This is the same area where we uncovered a significant structure from the Roman period this year. Many artifacts from both the Roman and Byzantine periods have been found there, including coins, pottery sherds and fragments of blown glass. This season we also uncovered a Roman aqueduct just off the southeast edge of the site. It ran low along the ground (with about a 10 degree slope) for at least 165 meters of which we have clarified 93 meters. Since Roman and Byzantine mosaic floors have been discovered from plowing of banana fields and digging modern graves in an over 2 km area to our southwest, it is clear that a major Roman era city was once located at the edge of our tells. It appears that the Greco-Roman city at Tall el-Hammam followed the usual pattern of not resettling on the ancient tells but building cities down below,



**Section of aquaduct feeding the Roman occupation on the south side of Tall el-Hammam.**

near the water source. Still, pottery and some walls on both the eastern and western ends of the upper tell indicate some level of occupation at this time.

In reality, the whole region was rich with activity in New Testament times. At basically the same place along the Jordan River that Joshua, the Israelites and the Ark of the Covenant crossed from east to west (Jos 4-5), Elijah and Elisha crossed from west to east (2 Kgs 2). Elijah left in a whirlwind for heaven from the east bank, while Elisha crossed back again. Here, too, was probably the location where John the Baptist, "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Mt 11:14, 17:11-13; Lu 1:17) was baptizing in Bethany (Bethabara) beyond the Jordan. This was also the area where Jesus was baptized (Jn 1:28; 10:40).

A site called Abila was known in the southern Jordan Valley during Roman times. That name comes from the Old Testament name Abel Shittim ("meadow of the acacia trees"). With minimal excavation in the whole area to date, modern scholars suggest Abila might have been located at Tall Nimrin, near Tall el-Hammam. Wherever it was located, it

represents the same basic name in the same basic place at a later time period.

In his last days, Herod the Great visited the hot springs at Kallirrhoe (*'Ayn az-Zara*) just south of our hotel along the northeastern shore of the Dead Sea. Shortly afterward he died at Jericho (within eyesight of Tall el-Hammam) and was buried, according to Josephus, at one of his palace/forts, Herodium (almost directly across the Dead Sea and clearly seen from our hotel).

After Herod the Great's death, his kingdom was divided and ruled by three of his sons. Son Herod Antipas, ruled as tetrarch (Mt 14:1), under Roman authority, of Galilee (Lu 3:1) and Perea. As the ruler of Galilee, Antipas ruled from Sepphoris and later Tiberias. Because of His connection to Nazareth in Galilee, Jesus was sent by Pilate to appear before Antipas on the day He was crucified (Lu 23:6-12). But Antipas is also well known for another infamous act in the other part of his kingdom, Perea. Here sat one of Herod the Great's palace/fort complexes—Machaerus (Arabic Mukawir) on the edge of the Jordanian hills north of the Arnon (Mujib) with a beautiful view of the Dead Sea and within eyesight of Masada. Josephus (*Antiquities* 18.5.1-2) recorded that it was at Machaerus that Antipas imprisoned and beheaded John the Baptist (see Mt 14:1-3).

Antipas also fortified an older city, renamed it Livias (apparently in honor of the wife of Emperor Augustus) and made it his own capital for Perea. Also known as Julias, it was located in the general area of Tall el-Hammam (as attested by Josephus, Eusebius and Jerome). The 4<sup>th</sup> century CE pilgrim Egeria mentions looking down from Mount Nebo and seeing Livias north of the Dead Sea and all the land of the Sodomites to the left. The reference to a

Bishop of Sodom attending the Council of Nicea in AD 325 makes it reasonable to suggest the connection of Tall el-Hammam with both Sodom and Livias. With minimal excavation in the region, scholars generally place Livias at either nearby Tall Nimrim or Tall Rama, but initial finds at Tall el-Hammam suggest it, too, must be considered as the possible site of Antipas' ancient capital (perhaps Livias extended all the way from Tall el-Hammam to Tall Rama).



The "black line" on the floor of the Madaba Church "points" almost directly to a city on the Madaba Map that could very well be associated with Tall el-Hammam. Note the northern part of the Dead Sea with the Jordan River flowing in from the left (north).

### **The Byzantine Period: The Tall el-Hammam of the Madaba Map**

The 6<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine Madaba map shows two cities northeast of the Dead Sea whose inscriptions have been lost. Highlighting both Old and New Testament sites, it was no doubt designed as a pilgrim's map of the Holy Land. The map represented both a visual illustration of God at work in history as well as a pilgrim's guide to finding these Biblical sites. Presumably these two unknown sites northeast of the Dead Sea were Biblical sites as well. Scholars have suggested these two sites may have been



Tall el-Hammam Field UB looking westward over the well-watered plain (*kikkar*) of the Jordan River. Smoke from winter “smudge pots” obscures the view beyond the river channel and Jericho to the west.

Beth Nimrah (Nimrin) and Beth Haran (or Beth Aram; modern Tall Rama or maybe nearby Iktanu) as cities in the Jordan Valley that were inherited by the tribe of Gad (Nu 32:36; Jo 13:27). Both Biblical names can be seen reflected in the modern Arabic names, and since they were Biblical sites, both would be appropriate for the pilgrim’s map. But neither site would hardly be considered famous in Biblical history.

There is another intriguing possibility. Since

the Madaba map mentions both the city of Zoar (Balak...Zoor) as well as Lot’s cave (“the sanctuary of holy Lot”), it is not unreasonable to suggest the map would also represent the two most famous cities of the plain in the Lot story—Sodom and Gomorrah. Maybe the two unnamed cities northeast of the Dead Sea (in the *kikkar* of the Jordan) were originally identified on the map as none other than Sodom and Gomorrah. If that is true, and if Tall el-Hammam is ancient Sodom, it could well be one (presumably the southernmost) of those two unnamed cities.

## Summary

So let’s review. Our site was a major city from earliest times and may be one of the oldest cities mentioned in the Bible, in the Table of Nations (Gn 10). Maybe it was Sodom from those earliest days to the time of Abraham, well over 2,500 years. Then, after its destruction in the Middle Bronze Age, and with no evidence of occupation for maybe 700 years, it may have been known as Abel Shittim (“meadow of the acacia trees”) at the time of Moses. During the Iron Age, a city was built on the upper tall, and it is a reasonable candidate to be the capital of Solomon’s twelfth administrative district, in eyesight of the Mount of Olives at Jerusalem, Solomon’s capital. In New Testament times, a new city arose around the base of the tall and may have been Abila or even Livias (Julias), the capital of Perea. Finally, our site may be one of the unnamed sites on the Madaba map. Whatever our excavations and research may eventually tell us about Tall el-Hammam, there is no question that it was an important site throughout the Biblical period. Through each period of history, it stood there, a witness to some of the Bible’s greatest people and events.