

Biblical Problems with Identifying Tall el-Hammam as Sodom

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Abstract

Over the last several years, a number of evangelical archaeologists and biblical scholars have concluded that the best candidate to date for biblical Sodom is to be found north-east of the Dead Sea at Tall el-Hammam. The claim to have discovered the infamous city of Sodom has excited many Christians, but there are several reasons to reject this conclusion. In order to show why Tall el-Hammam, should not be identified as biblical Sodom, this paper proceeds by answering the following questions: (1) When was Sodom destroyed? (2) How should the lifespans of the patriarchs be understood? (3) Was Sodom inhabited again after its destruction? The answers to these three questions will show why Tall el-Hammam is not biblical Sodom.

Keywords: Sodom, Tall el-Hammam, biblical chronology, long sojourn, patriarchal period, patriarchal lifespans

Introduction

The names Sodom and Gomorrah are infamous for God's judgement upon the wickedness of the people who lived in those cities (Genesis 13:13).¹ Sodom is seen as the epitome of wickedness and an expression of God's wrath (Jeremiah 23:14). The destruction of Sodom is important since it serves as a sign of judgment on those who remain unrepentant in their sin against God (Deuteronomy 29:23; Isaiah 1:9–10; Zephaniah 2:9; Romans 9:29; Revelation 11:8). The Bible clearly teaches that the destruction of Sodom was a genuine historical event in which God justly judged the wicked inhabitants of that city (Matthew 10:15; 11:23–24; Luke 17:28–29).

The position that Sodom has been discovered at Tall el-Hammam² approximately 8 miles on the north-eastern side of the Dead Sea, has been

popularized today by evangelical archaeologist Dr. Steven Collins (Collins 2013a; Collins and Scott 2013).³ Tall el-Hammam is in the area of Abel-Shittim (cf. Numbers 33:49).⁴ Collins came to the conclusion that Sodom was located north east of the Dead Sea from the geographic details for the "cities of the *kikkār*"⁵ in Genesis 13:10–12 (Collins and Scott 2013, 113–121).⁶ This is because Genesis 13 indicates that after Lot separated from Abraham at Bethel and Ai (Genesis 13:3), he went east to the region of the "*kikkār* of the Jordan" and arrived at the northern end of the Dead Sea. Collins stresses the point that from Bethel and Ai "You can see the northern tip of the Dead Sea...but you can't see farther south, and certainly not the area of the Lisan land bridge or anything remotely close to it." (Collins and Scott 2013, 103–104). Although Collins may be in the right geographical area for Sodom

¹ The Bible gives greater prominence to Sodom than to Gomorrah. Gomorrah is always paired with Sodom (Genesis 10:19; 13:10; 14:2, 8, 10, 11; 18:20; 19:24, 28; Deuteronomy 29:23; 32:32; Isaiah 1:9; 13:19; Jeremiah 23:14; 49:18; 50:40; Amos 4:11; Zephaniah 2:9; Matthew 10:15; Romans 9:29; 2 Peter 2:6; Jude 1:7) whereas Sodom is mentioned by itself numerous times (Genesis 13:12, 13; Isaiah 3:9; Lamentations 4:6; Ezekiel 16:46; Matthew 11:23–25; Luke 11:12; 17:29; Revelation 11:8).

² Also referred to as Tell el-Hammam (a 'tell' is a mound of remains from a human settlement). However, the word 'tall' (Tall el-Hammam) is Arabic and is used because the site is in Jordan.

³ The book "Discovering the City of Sodom" is co-authored by Dr. Steven Collins and Dr. Latayne C. Scott. For sake of brevity this paper will refer to Collins when quoting from this work.

⁴ A problem for Tall el-Hammam is that it has no name preservation associated with Sodom, nor do any sites nearby have any name preservation related to the other cities of the plain. The site of Tall el-Hammam carries no historical or traditional association with Sodom. Furthermore, before the Israelites crossed the Jordan to go over to the Promised Land, they were encamped at Abel-Shittim in the plains of Moab (Numbers 33:49), which is located at Tall el-Hammam. It was in Moab that Moses warned Israel that if they were disloyal to the covenant terms they had agreed to, then they would be "overthrown" like Sodom (Deuteronomy 29:23). However, when encamped at Abel-Shittim, it is interesting that Moses makes no mention of Sodom or any other the other cities of the plain, which would indicate they were not located there.

⁵ The Hebrew word *kikkār* (קִּכָּר) is translated "region" (NET), "vicinity" (NASB), or "plain" (ESV; NIV; NKJV), and occurs 13 times in the Old Testament as a geographical location (Genesis 13:10, 11, 12; 19:17, 25, 28, 29; Deuteronomy 34:3; 2 Samuel 18:23; 1 Kings 7:46; 2 Chronicles 4:17; Nehemiah 3:22; 12:28).

⁶ Not all Christian scholars and archaeologists agree that Sodom is to be found north of the Dead Sea. The view that Sodom is to be found south of the Dead Sea, at Bab edh-Dhara, has been argued by archaeologist Dr. Bryant Wood (Wood 1999) and Old Testament scholar Dr. William Barrick (Barrick 2020).

(cf. Genesis 10:19⁷; Ezekiel 16:46⁸), it does prove troublesome for other locations associated with the infamous city. Collins locates Zoar near the Arnon River (Collins 2020; cf. Olson 2014, 6), which creates an impossible distance of 27 miles for Lot to travel from Sodom (Tall el-Hammam) to reach Zoar (Arnon River) on the morning of its destruction (Genesis 19:20–23).⁹

The size of Tall el-Hammam is impressive, as Collins explains: “With over 100 acres of Bronze Age occupational footprint and over 60 acres of that situated behind an enormous defensive system, Tall el-Hammam was—on average over its 3,000-year history prior to its destruction toward the end of the Middle Bronze Age—the largest continuously-occupied city in the southern Levant” (Collins 2013b, 6).¹⁰ Tall el-Hammam’s end was brought about through a “violent conflagration that...produced melted pottery, scorched foundation stones and several feet of ash and destruction debris churned into a dark gray matrix as if in a Cuisinart” (Collins 2013a, 41). Based on the date range from pottery Tall el-Hammam’s final destruction took place between 1750–1650BC (MB II) (Collins 2013b, 8). After Tall el-Hammam was destroyed it wasn’t occupied again

until Iron Age II (c. 1000BC), at the beginning of the Israelite monarchy (Collins 2013a, 41). Since Collins began excavation in 2005, he has brought about a lot of interest in Tall el-Hammam as the proposed site for Sodom. The position that Tall el-Hammam is Sodom has also been affirmed by Craig Olson (Olson 2014) and David Graves (2014).

The identification of Tall el-Hammam as biblical Sodom may be a settled issue for some Christians, but it is important to clarify several points that show why this archaeological site should not be associated with biblical Sodom. First, to arrive at the biblical date for the destruction of Sodom it is first necessary to establish the date of the exodus, the length of the Israelite sojourn in Egypt, and the historical setting of the patriarchs. Once this is done it will be shown it is impossible to synchronize the biblical date for the Sodom destruction with that of Tall el-Hammam. Second, an issue that is related to the date of Sodom’s destruction involves the lifespans of the patriarchs. Should they be understood as normal lifespans or are they honorific/symbolic? Proponents of Tall el-Hammam argue that they are not normal lifespans but are instead honorific. This is so they can significantly shorten the length of time from

⁷ In Genesis 10:19 the description of Canaan’s territory extends from Sidon in the north to Gerar in the south and then “in the direction of” Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and as far as Lasha. Sodom is named alongside of Gomorrah and the other two lesser known “cities of the plain”, Admah and Zeboiim (cf. Hosea 11:8). These all seem to be part of a grouping of cities that are close to each other (see Genesis 14:2, 8). The toponym Lasha only occurs here in the Old Testament, and its location is unknown. The territory line drawn by Moses is from the north-west (Sidon) to south-west (Gerar), and then in the direction of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim. Since Sodom and the other cities are “in the direction of” Gerar, which is south of Sidon, this would seem to place them in the region of the southern end of the Dead Sea. Sidon is placed as the northernmost boundary and the southwestern boundary as Gerar. Gerar runs directly horizontally through the south-eastern region of the Dead Sea, whereas Tall el-Hammam is north east of Gerar. Since Moses is describing Canaan’s boundaries, Tall el-Hammam (north-east of the Dead Sea) would seem to be superfluous to understanding the boundary markers.

⁸ As well as questioning whether a poetic verse should be treated the same as narrative literature (i.e., Genesis 13), Collins raises an objection to the use of Ezekiel 16:46 as a proof for the location of Sodom, that is the Hebrew phrase *mimînēk* translated as “to the south of you” is literally in Hebrew “from [i.e., on] your right.” Therefore, he believes the phrase is not being used in a geographic sense (Collins and Scott 2013, 119). The question is, how well attested is the use of the Hebrew word *yāmīn* to indicate “south” as opposed to its much more common meaning, “right”? Importantly, *yāmīn* is used several times in the Old Testament in a geographical sense (Joshua 17:7; 1 Samuel 23:19, 24; 2 Samuel 24:5; Psalm 89:12; 107:3; Ezekiel 10:3). It would seem the position of Jerusalem between Samaria and Sodom could be intended to reflect her geographical location. If this is the case, then Tall el-Hammam cannot be Sodom as she is 26 miles northeast of Jerusalem and would suggest a location for Sodom southeast of Jerusalem.

⁹ Zoar could not have been that far from Sodom as on the day of its destruction, when the angels removed Lot from Sodom, it was near enough to escape to (Genesis 19:20). Collins tries to get around this long travel distance (27 miles) by suggesting: “...the statement of Genesis 19:23 that ‘the sun had risen over the land when Lot came to Zoar’ is better understood as ‘the sun had gone forth over the land, and Lot came to Zoar;’ that is, the sun had completed its daily course and was in the process of setting in the west by the time Lot reached Zoar. Thus, Lot had from dawn to dusk to travel from Sodom (Tall el-Hammam) to Zoar” (Collins 2020). Collins’ translation of Genesis 19:23 is simply a matter of stretching the text to say what he wants it to mean for him to allow enough time for Lot to get from Tall el-Hammam to Zoar (Arnon River). If Genesis 19:23 had been referring to “sunset/dusk” the appropriate verb to accompany *šemes* (שֶׁמֶשׁ) would have been *bō* (בָּ) to “come in” or “go in” (see Genesis 15:17; 28:11). Instead, the verb that accompanies *šemes* (שֶׁמֶשׁ) is *yāsā* (יָסָא) which means “come out.” The “coming out” of the sun is the Hebrew way of expressing the time of sunrise (Exodus 22:3; Judges 5:31; Isaiah 13:10). Lot had to move quickly (*māhar*, Genesis 19:22) to get from Sodom to Zoar as there was little time (c. 3 hours) for sunrise to have passed and the sun to be clearly visible in the sky.

¹⁰ Although Tall el-Hammam is impressive in size, the size of Sodom is not specifically stated in the Genesis narrative; there is no parenthetical remark stating that Sodom is an *‘ir haggēdōlā*, “great city” (Genesis 10:12; cf. Joshua 10:2; Jonah 1:2; 3:2). Interestingly, Ezekiel 16:46 describes Sodom as being “smaller” (*qēṭannā*) than Jerusalem: “And your elder sister is Samaria, who lived with her daughters to the north of you; and your younger sister, who lived to the south of you, is Sodom with her daughters.” The historical context of this verse makes it clear that “bigger” (*gēdōlā*) and “smaller” (*qēṭannā*) are the preferable terms (rather than “elder” and “younger”). First, Jerusalem was a much older city than Samaria, and so was Sodom. Second, the comparison only works in terms of size and not of age. The northern city Samaria was much bigger than Jerusalem. As for Sodom, Tall el-Hammam was much bigger than Jerusalem (Collins 2013b, 21), but Ezekiel states that Sodom is a smaller city than Jerusalem.

Abraham to the exodus in order to synchronize Tall el-Hammam with the destruction of Sodom. Third is the question of whether Sodom was inhabited again after its destruction. Later biblical prophets suggest that after Sodom's destruction no person would live there again. By examining these three questions, this paper will aim to show why it is wrong to identify Tall el-Hammam as biblical Sodom.

When Was Sodom Destroyed?

Establishing the biblical date for the destruction of Sodom is perhaps the most important question to answer as it will help determine whether Tall el-Hammam is Sodom or not. If the chronology is not correct, then the historical synchronism will not be right. Collins argues against the primacy of biblical chronology in determining Sodom's location: "I had to decide that the geographical data and its certainties must outweigh the chronological uncertainties" (Collins and Scott 2013, 142; cf. 145, 147). Olson, on the other hand, rightly recognizes that biblical chronology is the strongest argument against Tall el-Hammam being Sodom, as it does not seem to fit with biblical record of Abraham's life (Olson 2014, 7–8). This is because, as will be argued below, the biblical record strongly indicates that Abraham's life falls between 2166–1991 BC, which means Tall el-Hammam cannot be Sodom as it was destroyed between 1750–1650 BC (Collins 2013b, 8). Both Collins and Olson attempt to solve this by 1) redating the biblical date for the exodus,¹¹ 2) arguing for a short Israelite sojourn in Egypt, and 3) using honorific/symbolic numbers for the lifespans of the patriarchs (Collins and Scott 2013, 141, 250; Olson 2014, 8–12). Collins places the patriarchal period between Abraham and Joseph in 1750–1540 BC (Collins and Scott 2013, 146) whereas Olson places Abraham's life between 1900–1650 BC (Olson 2014, 13).

Table 1. The sequence of the Bronze Age..

The Sequence of the Bronze Age		
Early Bronze		3000–2000
	Early Bronze I	3000–2800
	Early Bronze II	2800–2500
	Early Bronze III	2500–2200
	Early Bronze IV	2200–2000
Middle Bronze		2000–1550
	Middle Bronze I	2000–1900
	Middle Bronze II	1900–1550
Late Bronze		1550–1200
	Late Bronze I	1550–1400
	Late Bronze II	1400–1200

In order to establish an accurate chronology for Sodom, it is important to know that the textual data being used has been preserved correctly. For Collins the LXX, in its variant readings of certain chronological passages (see below), is preferable in determining Tall el-Hammam as Sodom. Collins urges,

...extreme caution when using the Masoretic Text (MT) as an authority for determining OT numbers ...To take the MT "at face value" is *not* the best approach. The fact that Dead Sea Scroll readings generally match the LXX when it differs from the MT is instructive in this regard. (Collins 2013b, 8, 20)

This argument severely underestimates the legitimacy of the MT as we have it. Even though his main focus was on Israel's kingdoms, Edwin Thiele has shown that in chronological matters the MT is superior to the LXX (Thiele 1994, 90–94). A careful examination of the relevant biblical texts in Genesis 5 and 11 shows that the MT has a superior claim to preservation and a superior chronology to that of the LXX (Costner and Carter 2015, 99–105). As will be demonstrated, the MT is further confirmed in its superiority when it comes to the specific length of time Israel was in Egypt mentioned in Exodus 12:40 (the specific example Collins uses for the problem with the numbers in the MT).

Based on a straightforward reading of the MT, there are three dates in biblical history that give us great confidence for establishing a dating scheme for the Old Testament: 967 BC, 1446 BC, and 1876 BC. These three dates give a solid foundation for determining the date of the destruction of Sodom.

The foundation of Old Testament history in establishing a solid chronology is 1 Kings 6:1:

In the four hundred and eightieth year after the people of Israel came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, he began to build the house of the LORD.

The information in 1 Kings 6:1 uses very precise chronological language (i.e., 480th year, 4th year, the 2nd month) and tells us that the exodus from Egypt took place 480 years before the construction of the temple, signifying an elapsed time of 479+ years (Young 2003, 602). 1 Kings 6:1 presents two issues that need to be determined: when did the 480 years begin, and should the number 480 be understood symbolically or at face value? It is agreed by scholars who hold to a late (1267 BC) and who hold to an early date (1446 BC) for the exodus that the 480 years began in the May of 967 BC (Kitchen 2003, 202–203; Young 2003, 599–601).

The date of 967 BC is in exact agreement with the date that archival records of Tyre give for sending

¹¹ Collins dates the exodus to 1416–1386 BC (Collins and Scott 2013, 140–141) while Olson takes a late date, 1280 BC (Olson 2014, 8).

material to Solomon for building the temple (Young 2017). There are compelling reasons why the 480 years should be taken at face value; rather than symbolically (Kitchen 2003, 307–308; Olson 2014, 9).¹² In the Old Testament when numbers are presented in an ascending order such as “eightieth and four-hundredth” the text is giving technical data (Cassuto 1961, 62).¹³ In 1 Kings 6:1 the smaller number (80th) is followed by the larger number (400th) and is “intended to be a technically precise figure” (Wood 2005, 486). Normal hermeneutics give an objective basis for the chronological information in 1 Kings 6:1 that places the exodus in 1446BC (967+479=1446BC).

Based on a textual variant of 1 Kings 6:1 in the LXX, which is 40 years shorter than the 480 years of the MT, Collins accepts a 1416–1386BC date for the exodus (Collins and Scott 2013, 140). However, the internal and external evidence clearly show that “480th year” is the original reading, and the historical evidence related to the internal evidence demonstrates that the reading “440th year” is impossible (see Petrovich n.d., 1–4). Appealing to the weak textual variant reading of 1 Kings 6:1 is not helpful in attempting to synchronize the destruction of Sodom with Tall el-Hammam.

Two other biblical evidences confirm the 1446BC date for the exodus. First the early date for the Israelites in Egypt is affirmed in Jephthah’s statement in Judges 11:26:

While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages, and in Aroer and its villages, and in all the cities that are on the banks of the Arnon, 300 years, why did you not deliver them within that time?

Jephthah is telling his Ammonite enemies that they have no foundation for their hostility toward Israel as they have been in the land for 300 years. Since the exodus took place in 1446BC, and the conquest was forty years later (1406BC), then Jephthah is communicating with the Ammonites around 1106BC (Merrill 2008, 191; cf. Archer 1985, 230, 283). Olson tries to get around taking the 300 years at face value by arguing that Jephthah’s speech was political and therefore was an exaggeration meant for rhetorical effect (Olson 2014, 9) The fact that Jephthah was making a political speech does not mean the chronological reference is not accurate. Grisanti rightly argues that Jephthah’s “point is that Ammon did not have a legitimate claim to the

land. The Israelites took it from Sihon the Amorite, who had taken it from Moab. This fits Jephthah’s reference to Chemosh (the Moabite god) instead of Milcon (the Ammonite god) and does not totally discredit his chronological statement” (Grisanti 2011, 200). There is no good reason to try and explain away the 300 years unless you are trying to fit it with a certain chronological view.

Another evidence that establishes a 1446BC date for the exodus comes independently of 1 Kings 6:1, through the Jubilee years. The Jubilee year is the only one to begin on the 10th day of the month, the 10th of Tishri, the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 25:9). This was the start of the sabbatical cycle, and therefore the first Jubilee cycle began on Israel’s entry into the land of Canaan (Leviticus 25:2–10). Chronologist Rodger Young has shown that Ezekiel 40:1 gives an exact date for a Jubilee year in 574BC. Since the first Jubilee was in 622BC (49 inclusive years), therefore:

If we go back 16 Jubilee cycles (16×49=784 years) from 622t,¹⁴ we find that the year beginning in Tishri of 1406BC was the first year of a Jubilee cycle. According to the religious calendar that started the year in Nisan (Ex 12:2), this was in the year beginning on Nisan 1 of 1406BC. (Young 2008, 118).

This was precisely forty years after the Israelites left Egypt (Deuteronomy 1:3), it is further confirmation that the exodus would have taken place in 1446BC.

Taken as a whole, 1 Kings 6:1, Judges 11:26, and the Jubilee years place the exodus from Egypt in 1446BC. Compelling arguments have even been made for the precise date of the exodus on Friday 24th of April 1446BC; synchronizing perfectly with the eighteenth dynasty of Egypt under the reign of Amenhotep II (Petrovich 2006, 4–5).¹⁵ The occasion of the biblical statements along with various archaeological discoveries strongly favours the early exodus position (Wood 2005).

The critical passage for the length of the Israelites’ sojourn in Egypt is found in Exodus 12:40:

Now the sojourn of the children of Israel who lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. (NKJV)

Moses, the author of the exodus narrative (Exodus 17:14; 34:27), explicitly states that Israel lived in Egypt for 430 years, giving strong support to the long sojourn position. Even though there is debate as to the length of the sojourn, Petrovich has extensively reviewed all of the relevant passages that are used

¹² The late date for the exodus views the 480 years in 1 Kings 6:1 as being symbolic (12 generations of 25 years each, this number more accurately reflects 300 years than 480).

¹³ For other biblical examples of this ascending order see: Genesis 11:13, 15, 17; Exodus 12:40–41.

¹⁴ The “t” after the year 622 means that the official regnal year began in Tishri (roughly October) of the BC year indicated (Young 2008, 116).

¹⁵ This would make Amenhotep II the Pharaoh before whom Moses and Aaron appeared and the Pharaoh of the plagues (see Exodus 5:2, 7–8; 12:31–32). Amenhotep II is the only candidate in the second millennium BC that matches all the autobiographical requirements of the exodus Pharaoh.

to support the short sojourn view (Exodus 12:40–41; Genesis 15:13; Galatians 3:15–18; Acts 13:17–20), and shown that when interpreted correctly they consistently support the long sojourn view (see Petrovich 2019). Nevertheless, the supposed problem that arises for the long sojourn position is because of the LXX reading of Exodus 12:40 and from the apostle Paul’s use of this passage in Galatians 3:17. The text of Exodus 12:40 in the LXX reads:

ἡ δὲ κατοίκησις τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ ἦν κατ’ὄκησον ἐν γῆ Αἰγύπτῳ καὶ ἐν γῆ Χανααν ἔτη τετρακόσια τριάκοντα,

And the residing of the sons of Israel during which they resided in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan is 430 years.¹⁶

According to the short sojourn position, this encompasses the patriarch’s time in Canaan *and* Egypt, supposing that the sojourn in Egypt only lasted about 215 years. The LXX reading, however, is seemingly embraced in order that a certain chronological view of history can be sustained. It is a proof text used to support historical conclusions. In this case, both Collins and Olson appeal to the LXX in order to synchronize the patriarchal period with the destruction of Tall el-Hammam (Collins and Scott 2013, 135; Olson 2014, 11). Proponents of Tall el-Hammam are dependent upon a short sojourn in order to identify it with Sodom. Because Collins takes the patriarchal lifespans as honorific “the actual time would have not been 215 years, but something less” (Collins 2013b, 20). Interestingly, Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen, whose dates Collins and Olson are heavily reliant upon for their patriarchal chronology, accepts an Israelite sojourn in Egypt of 400/430 years (Kitchen 2003, 355–356, 359).

Collins rejects the MT reading of Exodus 12:40, which he sees as the “sole witness” for the long sojourn view. He reasons:

Virtually every other line of evidence—all LXX versions, the Samaritan Pentateuch, Josephus (who even expresses his irritation at the long Egyptian sojourn), the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3:16–17 supports that the 430 years includes time in Canaan and Egypt, from the time of Abr(ah)am to the giving of the Law. (It is probably worth mentioning here the fact that when MT and LXX readings of a given passage differ, the Dead Sea Scrolls version(s) of that same passage almost invariably sides with the LXX against the MT. This is common knowledge. So it cannot be argued that the MT is in anyway categorically superior to the biblical DSS and LXX). (Collins 2013b, 8).

In order to confirm the short sojourn position, Collins has overstated his case. Even though in *Antiquities* Josephus mentions the “two hundred and fifteen years only after Jacob removed into Egypt” (*Ant.* 2.15), he also clearly states, in the same work, that Israel spent “four hundred years...under these afflictions” (*Ant.* 2.9). Given these conflicting numbers Josephus cannot be considered a reliable source for the short sojourn view.

There are a several reasons to accept the MT reading of Exodus 12:40 and reject the reading found in the LXX. Petrovich points out: “While the oldest extant manuscript of the MT formally dates only to about AD 1009, it represents an underlying Hebrew text that goes back much further, since the MT derives from the sopherim—specifically the tannaim of the first century BC to the third century AD—who transmitted the text with great care.” (Petrovich 2019, 25). The MT has been shown to be the superior witness to the original text, as the discovery of 4Q14Exod at Qumran dates to the first century BC and confirms the reading of Exodus 12:40 found in the MT. As well as 4Q14Exod, the reading of Exodus 12:40 in the MT is supported by other textual evidence: Targum Onkelos, Samaritan Targum, Syriac manuscripts, rabbinical sources of the LXX, the Armenian version, the Bohairic version, the Vulgate, and the Peshitta (Petrovich 2019, 25).

Importantly, the MT reading makes sense of the context. In Exodus 12:40 the LXX adds “and in the land of Canaan” after “in Egypt,” but chronologically the patriarchs sojourned in Canaan before Jacob came and settled in Egypt. The book of Exodus focuses on the nation of Israel’s time in Egypt not upon their earlier time in Canaan, which was to be their future homeland (Exodus 3:8, 17). Even though Egypt (before the Israelites’ affliction)¹⁷ had once been a place of great prosperity for the people of Israel (Genesis 47:7, 27), it was always a foreign land for them. The people named in Exodus 12:40 are called the *bēnē yisrā’el* (people of Israel; cf. 1 Kings 6:1), and not Hebrews. Abraham was called a Hebrew (Genesis 14:13), but was never called an Israelite. It is Jacob who is given the name “Israel” after he had striven with God (Genesis 32:28). The *bēnē yisrā’el* who sojourned in Egypt cannot refer to the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac), but must refer to the offspring of Jacob who came and settled in Egypt (Petrovich 2019, 26; cf. Bimson 1980, 83; Williams 1998, 102). These reasons demonstrate that the short sojourn view, based on the LXX, is not acceptable and the MT should be seen as the accurate witness.

¹⁶ The Samaritan Pentateuch (SP) also contains a variant reading of Exodus 12:40—“Now the sojourn of the children of Israel and their fathers, which they dwelt in the land of Canaan and in the land of Egypt, was 430 years.” Notice, that the order of the lands of Canaan and Egypt are reversed in the LXX and the Samaritan Pentateuch.

¹⁷ Petrovich believes that the people of Israel may have only been enslaved for 114 years, and not for the entirety of their time in Egypt (see Petrovich 2019, 32).

The second passage that is used to support the short sojourn is the apostle Paul's statement in Galatians 3:17:

This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void.

Collins believes that this verse settles the issue of the length of the sojourn as Paul uses the LXX chronology of Exodus 12:40 (Collins and Scott 2013, 135; cf. Olson 2014, 10). In the short sojourn view the 430 years are measured from God's initial promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3) to the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. However, Paul's reference to 430 years is no help to a short sojourn; the 430 years is not even referring to 215 years in Canaan followed by 215 years in Egypt.¹⁸ A more probable understanding of the 430 years, is not referring to the initial promise that God made to Abraham, but when the promise of the covenant was "previously ratified" (προκεκυρωμένην)¹⁹ to Jacob before his descent into Egypt (Genesis 46:1–7; see Merrill 2008, 94; Petrovich 2019, 32–36). The context of Galatians 3:15–17 supports this understanding. The final promise was received by Jacob in the same year that he and his descendants settled in Egypt (1876BC), and the reception of the Law at Mount Sinai, which took place in the very year of the exodus (1446BC) (see Petrovich 2019, 32–26).

Paul's words in Galatians 3:17 confirm the long sojourn as the 430 years echo the timeframe that the people of Israel spent in Egypt. It is also consistent with his sermon, which covered the history of Israel, in the synagogue at Antioch (see Acts 13:17–20). Even though these verses do not explicitly address the length of the sojourn they do mention three events: 1) Egyptian sojourn, 2) the 40 years of wandering in the desert, and 3) the conquest of seven nations in Canaan (Bock 2007, 452). Paul states that these three events: "took about 450 years" (Acts 13:20). These three events together total, with a 430-year sojourn, 476 years.²⁰ If Paul is rounding down the sojourn to 400 years, as in Genesis 15:16 (ἑξήκοντα, "generation," is best taken as one hundred years; Mathews 2005, 174–175) then the total comes to 446 years. This timeframe fits perfectly with the long sojourn but destroys the short sojourn view (see Petrovich 2019, 36).

Table 2. Basic Old Testament Chronological Scheme.

Basic Old Testament Chronological Scheme	
2166BC	Birth of Abram
2091BC	Abram leaves Ur
2067BC	Destruction of Sodom
1876BC	Jacob moved to Egypt
1446BC	Exodus from Egypt
1406BC	Israelites crossed into Canaan
967BC	Construction of Solomon's Temple

The date of the exodus (1446BC) along with the length of the Israelite sojourn in Egypt (430 years) helps establish the dates for the patriarchal period (2166–1806BC). This means that Jacob (Israel) and all his sons departed from Canaan and entered into Egypt exactly 430 years before the exodus, in 1876BC (Genesis 46:8–27) (Merrill 2008, 60–65, 92–96; Steinmann 2019, 421). Evidence for the family of Jacob being in Egypt at that time is confirmed by the recent translation of a caption on Sinai 115: "6 Levantines: Hebrews of Bethel, the beloved." This places Joseph's son Manasseh in Egypt in 1842BC (Petrovich 2016, 15–29). This would make it the world's oldest extrabiblical reference to the Hebrews (Israelites) in Egypt at the time the Bible places them there.

The narrative in Genesis portrays Joseph (1916–1806BC) as serving in the court of native Egyptian rulership, not Semitic (Hyksos), in their twelfth dynasty (see chronological scheme below). Many of the features of Joseph's lifespan reflect this setting: 1) the personal names are Egyptian; Potiphar, Asenath, Zaphenath-paneah (Joseph's Semitic name would not have been changed to an Egyptian name under a Hyksos ruler—Genesis 39:1; 41:45); 2) Joseph shaves himself before seeing Pharaoh, an Egyptian custom not a Semitic one (Genesis 41:14); 3) the embalming process was an Egyptian practice (Genesis 50:2–3) and 4) assuming that Joseph was Egyptian his brothers spoke Hebrew to one another when they first met him (Genesis 42:23), something they would not do if they supposed he was Hyksos (see Merrill 2008, 66–70).

The narrative in Genesis also has Joseph acting as an intermediary on behalf of his brothers and father when they arrive in Egypt, explaining their

¹⁸ Williams points out that the mention of the "people of Israel" (Jacob's descendants, see above) in the LXX of Exodus 12:40 helps clarify the meaning of 430 years, that has been misunderstood: "... the idea of a 215-year sojourn in Egypt preceded by 215 years in the land of Canaan finds no justification in the Septuagint. Though it is an ancient view that Paul used the Septuagint in Galatians 3:17, the Septuagint does not say what people assert it says. The Septuagint probably intends to speak of a 30 year stay of Jacob's children in Canaan, before they went down to join Joseph, and thereafter of a 400-year stay by the descendants of Jacob" (Williams 1998, 102).

¹⁹ The Greek verb *κυρώω* can mean to reaffirm (2 Corinthians 2:8).

²⁰ The sojourn was 430 years (Exodus 12:40–41), the wilderness wanderings 40 years (Joshua 5:6; Acts 7:29–30) and the conquest of the seven nations took 6 years (Joshua 14:7–10).

customs to Pharaoh and telling his family how to respond to him (Genesis 46:28–34). If the Pharaoh was Semitic, then it would seem unnecessary for Joseph to have to arrange a diplomatic meeting to introduce his Semitic family to him. The rulers of Egypt in Joseph’s day show contempt and prejudice for Semitic visitors to Egypt (Genesis 43:32; 46:34), rather than the cordiality that surely would have been shown to them by Semitic rulers (see Archer 1985, 222; Garrett 2014, 79).

Collins’ need to synchronize Tall el-Hammam with Sodom necessitates that Joseph’s life is not in a period under native Egyptian control, but Hyksos. In a response to professor Eugene Merrill’s dating of the patriarchal period, Collins argued one of the reasons it was wrong is because:

...the story of Joseph is difficult to place earlier than the Hyksos Period (ca.1700–1540BCE) for the simple reason that the chariot was not used in Egypt until that time. The Hyksos introduced the chariot into Egypt. Genesis 41:43 has both Pharaoh and Joseph riding in chariots! (Collins 2013b, 12)

Although the Hyksos introduced the chariot to Egypt, it was the single-horse battle chariot. The chariot given to Joseph by Pharaoh in Genesis 41:43 was not for war. It would not be strange for Egyptian high officials to have chariots in the twelfth dynasty. In fact, the passage indicates that chariots were a rarity as the one given to Joseph is called Pharaoh’s “second chariot.” The implication is that chariots were not common in Egypt as the only other person who had one was Pharaoh who outranked Joseph (see Aling 2003, 12).

The purchase price of Joseph (20 shekels) is also used by Collins and Olson to argue for 18th/17th century BC date for the life of Joseph (Collins and Scott 2013, 133; Olson 2014, 12). Both men are reliant on the work of Kenneth Kitchen for these purchase prices, who himself recognizes that they vary greatly and are only averages (Kitchen 2003, 344–345). The problem with this argument is that it only focuses in one economic aspect of the price of a slave: long-term inflation. Garrett points out there are several other economic factors that could play a part in determining the price of an individual: “First, there is short-term inflation or deflation... Second, there is the quality of

the individual ‘merchandise’... Third, there are the individual circumstances of the buyer... Fourth, there are the circumstances of the seller” (Garret 2014, 87–88). The question is: “Which of these factors apply here [i.e., Joseph]? The short answer is that we do not know” (Garrett 2014, 88). The purchase price paid for Joseph is not necessarily helpful in determining the date for the setting of his life.

The presence of the people of Israel in Egypt, in Dynasty 12 (Petrovich 2016, 1–14), long before the Hyksos arrived, however, does mean that Collins’ patriarchal chronology (1750–1540 BC) is improbable.

Table 3. Egyptian Chronological Scheme.

Egyptian Chronological Scheme	
2700–2600BC?	Predynastic Period (thru 0)
2600–2500BC?	Early Dynastic Period (1–2)
2500–2170BC	Old Kingdoms (3–8)
2170–2025BC	First Intermediate Period
2025–1674BC	Middle Kingdom (11–13)
1668–1560BC	Second Intermediate Period
1560–1069BC	New Kingdom (18–20)
1069–633BC	Third Intermediate Kingdom
	Dynasties 21–25

When Jacob appeared before the Pharaoh (Sesostris III), in 1876BC, he was 130 years old (Genesis 47:9), and so Jacob was born in 2006BC.²¹ His father Isaac, was 60 years old at the time of his birth (Genesis 25:26), indicating Isaac was born in 2066BC. Since the destruction of Sodom takes place between the promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would have son within a year (Genesis 18:14) and the birth of Isaac (Genesis 21:2), this would place it around 2067BC at the end of the EB IV period (Merrill 2008, 57; Steinmann 2019, 197).²²

Collins would seemingly reject the patriarchal chronology that has been set forth in this paper because of a false assumption that there is not a single data-set from any scientific discipline that would endorse it (Collins 2013b 11).²³ Not only does this expose Collins’ philosophical bias,²⁴ but it is simply untrue, and shows a lack of serious interaction on his part with the scientific data.

²¹ Jacob died in 1859 BC; this is the same year that Sesostris III (Pharaoh of the famine) decided to put his son Amenemhat III on the throne as co-regent.

²² As far as I am aware, there are no EB IV archaeological sites that have been identified north of the Dead Sea. Although future discoveries could yet change that picture.

²³ In his response to professor Eugene Merrill’s chronological critique of Tall el-Hammam, Collins stated: “The fact of the matter is that there is not a single data-set from any scientific discipline that would endorse Ussher’s-or Merrill’s-patriarchal chronology” (Collins 2013b, 11).

²⁴ Collins made further challenges to professor Merrill’s chronology: “According to every conceivable geological and chronological indicator available to archaeologists, there was no global flood in the third millennium BCE” (Collins 2013b, 11). Collins’ bias reveals the ideological presuppositions that has impacted his thinking when it comes to evaluating geological evidence; in this case the presupposition of uniformitarianism has blinded him from seeing the geological evidence for the global flood (see Genesis 6–8; Luke 17:26–27; 2 Peter 3:3–6). The history of the earth that can be seen in the geological record provides a consistent testimony to the biblical account of the global flood; a sample of this is evidence: (1) the sedimentary rock layers and their fossils show evidence of having been rapidly deposited and buried respectively and (2) the sequence of the sedimentary rock layers show evidence of having been deposited in rapid succession (see Snelling 2009, 487–575).

There is sufficient evidence available to confirm this patriarchal chronology (2166–1806BC) from: geology (Snelling 2009), archaeology (Petrovich 2016), astronomy (Faulkner 2016), and genetics (Jeanson 2017).²⁵ Collins may dismiss this chronology, but it is important to keep in mind that in order for Tall el-Hammam to qualify chronologically as Sodom he has to: 1) revise the biblical date of the exodus, 2) embrace a short Israelite sojourn in Egypt, and 3) significantly reduce the lifespans of the patriarchs (see below). As has been shown, these reasons are not the result of careful biblical exegesis, but rather are the result of eisegesis and special pleading. More importantly, none of these reasons survive biblical scrutiny and therefore, it seems, they are embraced in order to accept a certain interpretive position.

The declaration of Scripture must be allowed to determine when the destruction of Sodom took place. Only then should we appeal to archaeological evidence to help give further understanding. The fact is biblical chronology destroys the idea that Tall el-Hammam is Sodom and that Sodom was destroyed between 1750–1650BC. This is more than 300–400 years later than the chronology of the Bible allows. No amount of chronological creativity from proponents of Tall el-Hammam will solve this.

Determining the Life Spans of the Patriarchs

In order to synchronize patriarchal history with the destruction of Tall el-Hammam, Collins argues that the lifespans of the patriarchs contain honorific/symbolic value (Collins and Scott 2013, 145–146; cf. Olson 2014, 11–12). This is another piece of the chronological puzzle that allows Collins to establish his chronology for Tall el-Hammam as it means that the “physical time frame from Abraham to Jacob and Jacob to Exodus can be shortened significantly, even dramatically” (Collins and Scott 2013, 250). Collins defends this interpretation by stating: “taking the patriarchal lifespan numbers as formulaic (as opposed to base-10 literal) does not...logically result in ‘a denial of the historical reality’ of the OT” (Collins 2013b, 10). If this is the case, then why not understand the lifespans of the patriarchs naturally (i.e., base-10)? Except for Sumerian based Akkadian, understanding the long lifespans in terms of base-10 numbers is normal for Semitic civilizations (Walton 2001, 281–282). The only reason not to take the lifespans naturally is if you already have a commitment to a particular theory. In this case, Collins needs to reduce the chronology of the patriarchs in order to synchronize biblical history with the destruction of Tall el-Hammam. Collins

gives the following reasons for taking the patriarchs’ ages as honorific:

I should also mention the incontrovertible fact that the lifespans of the patriarchs as literalistic numbers—Abraham, 175; Isaac, 180; Jacob, 147; and Joseph, 110—are entirely out of step with those of known individuals in the ancient Fertile Crescent. The lifespans of the kings of Egypt and Mesopotamia during the biblical patriarchal period, regardless of the chronology used, are *all* normal. The average lifespan across the ANE in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE was about 50–55 years. It is reasonable to suggest that the kings of Egypt would have lived longer than most, having access to the best food, water, medical care, and ease of life. Still, their lifespans were all within the normal range of ANE life-expectancy. Without a doubt, the contemporaries of Abraham were living into their 40s, 50s, and 60s, with a very small percentage of individuals living into their 70s, with octogenarians (and older) a rare phenomenon. (Collins 2013b, 17)

Using the honorific system, Collins postulates “that the 175 years of Abr(ah)am may be a combination of his actual age (perhaps 55? or 95?) plus two or three 40-year honorific supplements as a result of status-raising accomplishments within his tribal society” (Collins 2013b, 23). Based upon Psalm 90:10, Collins believes that a normal lifespan (70 or 80 years) for the patriarchal period corresponds well with ANE archaeology (Collins 2013b, 23).

The problem with this interpretation is that it does not explain, but tries to explain away, the specific long lifespans of the patriarchs. The fact of the matter is that Collins does not give a convincing honorific interpretation of the lifespans of the patriarchs. The specific ages of certain Old Testament persons agree with the lifespans and life events of the patriarchs. For example, after his restoration “Job lived 140 years, and saw his sons, and his sons’ sons, four generations.” (Job 42:16), in the time of the Israelite monarchy “Jehoiada grew old and full of days, and died. He was 130 years old at his death.” (2 Chronicles 24:15), and the apostle Paul even says of Abraham: “He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old).” (Romans 4:19).

There are several other problems with Collins’ line of reasoning. First, Collins follows a trend in modern biblical scholarship to prioritize ancient Near Eastern (ANE) evidence over the clear testimony of Scripture. To reject the long lifespans of the patriarchs because there are no ANE parallels is clearly a rejection of the supremacy of Scripture

²⁵ Geneticist Dr. Nathaniel Jeanson has shown that the biblical timeline of creation (6000+ years) correctly predicts the total number of genetic mutations that we have discovered in human mtDNA. The total number of genetic mutations that we have discovered in mtDNA is 80 (this matches the YEC timeframe). If humans have been around at least 200,000 years, as evolutionists claim, the number of mutations would be around 470 (see Jeanson 2017).

when it comes to interpreting the data. The known lifespans of individuals in the ANE do not determine the ages of the patriarchs. If our interpretation of Scripture is controlled by ANE culture, then it is being controlled by a higher authority. ANE culture may illuminate our understanding of the biblical text but it does not dictate its meaning. The only way to consistently maintain the inerrancy and supreme authority of Scripture, is by using Scripture to interpret Scripture.

Second, a number of rulers in the ANE are said to have reigned/lived for many years. The Akkadian emperor Sargon of Akkad is said to have reigned for 55 years (c. 2320–2265 BC).²⁶ Although Egyptologists generally see these ages as improbable, according to the Turin Canon the founder of the Second Dynasty of Egypt Hotepsekhemwy reigned for 95 years while the third Pharaoh of the Second Dynasty, Ninetjer, reigned for 96 years. The Sixth-Dynasty pharaoh of ancient Egypt Phiops II (also known as Pepi II or Neferkare) reign began c.2281 BC, when he was 6 years of age, and is believed to have lasted c.94 years. Rameses II, the third pharaoh of the Nineteenth Dynasty of Egypt, lived until he was 90 (1303–1213 BC). All of these rulers, except Rameses II, are roughly contemporary with the patriarchs. Furthermore, the Sumerian King List (SKL), with great exaggeration, lists the length of the reigns of the kings of Sumer for thousands of years before and after the global flood.²⁷ Unless one rejects these long ages a priori (i.e., SKL), then this longevity surely rests on some objective historical basis (cf. Genesis 5:1–32; 11:10–32).²⁸ The history of the lifespans of the patriarchs are presented to us truthfully in Scripture, but is unreliably echoed in history among other pagan ANE cultures (cf. 2 Peter 1:16, 20–21).

Third, the fact that Moses continuously highlights the specific years of the patriarchs at key events in their lives precludes taking them in an honorific sense. The long lifespans of the patriarchs are distributed throughout Genesis 12–50, not in chronological genealogies (i.e., Genesis 5:1–32; 11:10–32), and show that they should be understood as natural ages that are on the decline. Abraham was 75 years old when he left Haran to go to the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:4) and when he had lived there 10 years, because his wife Sarah was still barren, he and his Egyptian servant Hagar conceived Ishmael (Genesis 16:3–4). Fourteen years later, when he was 99 years old, God made a covenant of circumcision with Abraham (Genesis 17:1, 24). Abraham was

100 years old when his son Isaac was born (Genesis 21:5; cf. Romans 4:19). After Sarah's death, Abraham is described as being "old, well advanced in years" (Genesis 24:1; cf. Joshua 23:2), this was because God had blessed (*bārak*) him in all things (Genesis 24:1; cf. 27, 31, 35, 48, 60); old age was a sign of God's blessing (cf. Job 42:12). Abraham was 175 years old when he "died in a good old age, an old man and full of years" (Genesis 25:7–8). The description "old age" (*bēšēbâ ṭōbâ*) is used of God's promise to Abraham of long life (Genesis 15:15). Altogether Abraham lived in the land of Canaan for a hundred years and saw his grandchildren's fifteenth birthday (Genesis 12:4; 21:4; 25:20, 26).

Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah (Genesis 25:20), and was 60 years old when the twin boys Esau and Jacob were born (Genesis 25:26). When Isaac, at 136 years old, blesses Jacob his "his eyes were dim so that he could not see" (Genesis 27:1). Poor vision was a sign of old age (see Genesis 48:10).²⁹ Isaac is described as "old and full of days" when he died at 180 years old (Genesis 35:28–29). Isaac's son Jacob, after obtaining the "birth right" from his brother Esau, went and lived in Haran for 20 years, marrying two wives, obtaining two concubines and having eleven sons (Genesis 28:1–31:55).

When Joseph presented his father Jacob in front of Pharaoh, the Pharaoh said to Jacob:

"How many are the days of the years of your life?" And Jacob said to Pharaoh, "The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years. Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning." (Genesis 47:8–9)

Clearly Pharaoh did not see Jacob's age in an honorific sense, as his question only makes sense if he really was 130 years old. An Egyptian's "ideal age" was 110 years old, so to surpass that would be considered a divine blessing. Jacob's fathers were Abraham who lived 175 years (Genesis 25:7) and Isaac who lived 180 years (Genesis 35:28). Jacob would live another 17 years as he died at 147 years old (Genesis 47:28; cf. 49:33). Joseph was 17 when he was sold by his brothers and taken as a slave to Egypt (Genesis 37:2–28) and then at thirty he became the second most powerful ruler in the land of Egypt (Genesis 41:46). The specific chronological details regarding Joseph's age help establish the length of his time in Egypt, as Mathews notes:

The time period between the sale of Joseph (37:2a) and the family's final descent into Egypt (46:1–7)

²⁶ Sargon of Akkad matches the biographical, historical, archaeological, and epigraphic evidence of the biblical description of Nimrod in Genesis 10:8 (see Petrovich 2013).

²⁷ The shortest reign in the SKL is 18,600 years and the longest is 43,200 years. The SKL uses a sexagesimal system, which is a combination of a 10-base and 6-base system (see Walton 2001, 281).

²⁸ From a biblical perspective the history in the book of Genesis would explain the long lifespans of the postdiluvians.

²⁹ Moses whose eyes were undimmed when he died at 120 years old was the exception (Deuteronomy 34:7).

is twenty-two years (Joseph's thirteen yrs. in Egypt (37:2a; 41:46) + seven yrs. of plenty (41:46–49) + two yrs. of famine (45:6–7). Joseph's death at one hundred ten years (50:22, 26) meant he lived ninety-three years in Egypt. (Mathews 2005, 687 n.63)

Joseph would die at 110 years old (Genesis 50:22, 26; cf. Joshua 24:29), the ideal lifespan for the Egyptian people. But that does not mean Joseph's age at death was any the less literal (cf. Matthew 4:1–2; Deuteronomy 8:2–4).³⁰ In the blessing of old age of Joseph "saw the third generation of Ephraim's children" (Genesis 50:23), referring to his great grandchildren or possibly his great-great grandchildren.³¹ This would only be possible if Joseph's age at death is taken naturally. The reason the patriarchs lived such long lives was not only that they were especially blessed by God (Psalm 128:5–6; Job 42:12), but they were experiencing the outworking of God's previous judgment on mankind before the flood in reducing their lifespan (Genesis 6:3³²; cf. 11:10–32; Deuteronomy 34:7).³³

The detailed description of the patriarchs ages at crucial moments in their lives are meaningless if they are taken as honorific. There is no objective reason to reject the long lifespans of the patriarchs, the only reason for Collins to do is so that he can synchronize patriarchal history to fit with the destruction of Tall el-Hammam.

Collins gives two further supposed problems as to why the patriarchal lifespans should not be taken plainly (literally). The first is the so-called problem is a lack of intergenerational contact:

According to Ussher-style chronologies the following, rather odd scenarios exist: Noah's son Seth lived beyond the career of Abr(ah)am; Abr(ah)am was still

out-and-about well into the career of his grandson Jacob; and Isaac was still going strong through much of grandson Joseph's life, dying just 27 years before his son Jacob. With such multigenerational contact, Abraham would have a good deal of interaction and influence in the life of his grandson Jacob. Similarly, Isaac would have enjoyed the presence of his many grandsons, including Joseph, for decades preceding his death. But the fact is that there is not a single instance in the book of Genesis in which a grandfather—or grandmother, for that matter—interacts with a grandson, except one. The sole instance of grandfather-grandson contact is found in 48:8–14 when, in Jacob's extreme old age, Joseph placed his young sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, on their grandfather's knee to receive a blessing. (Collins 2013b, 17)

This is not a problem with the text, but is more to do with how modern scholars have been taught to think about the long lifespans of the patriarchs. Why is it rather odd that Shem and Abraham would be contemporaries?³⁴ There is no objective reason as to why this could not have been the case (Shem died in 2016BC, preceding Abraham by 25 years, 1991BC, Genesis 11:10–11; 25:7).³⁵ As well as being unnecessary to the author's purpose, there is a valid reason why we do not hear of intergenerational contact between the post-diluvian people (Shem, Eber; Genesis 10:21)³⁶ who overlapped with the patriarchs. Many of the patriarchs lived in different areas of the ancient world (Ur, Haran, Canaan, Paddan-aram, Egypt), therefore, making contact difficult, infrequent, and even unnecessary. But even if there had been contact, what would be the reason for Moses to record such an event? There is none. After Genesis

³⁰ Just because a number is used symbolically in some parts of the text does not mean it is not literal in other parts of the text. Jesus' 40 days and nights in the wilderness is parallel to Israel's 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

³¹ The MT reads great-great grandchildren whereas the variants in the LXX and SP read great grandchildren.

³² Mathews explains this understanding of Genesis 6:3: "The longer lifespans among postdiluvians can be attributed to a gracious delay in the same way that the penalty of death for Adam and Eve was not immediately executed (2:17; 3:16–19). This judicial restriction on human life nevertheless explains and anticipates the drastic decrease in life span among the patriarchs. Because of Moses, who lived 120 years (Deut 31:2; 34:7), this figure may have become enshrined as the ideal achievement — a benchmark for piety" (Mathews 1996, 335).

³³ Science also sheds some light on these long lifespans. Adam and Eve were created in a "very good" world (Genesis 1:31) with no genetic mutations; the antediluvian patriarchs in Genesis 5 would have only a few harmful mutations allowing them to live long lives. Because Noah had children at an older age (500, Genesis 5:32) he would have passed on more mutations to Shem whose lifespan was shortened as part of God's judgment in Genesis 6:3. There also would have been an exponential decay with the bottle neck after the global flood, leading to progressively shorter lifespans (see Jeanson and Tompkins 2016, 287–330).

³⁴ The LXX and SP and 100 years to the ages of patriarchs from Arpachshad to Serug at the firstborn's birth. This may have been done in order to distance Abraham from Shem.

³⁵ By adding up the numbers of the ages from Shem to Terah in the MT, when the first son was born, we can establish that Abraham was born 352 years after the flood (see Genesis 11:10–26). This takes into account that Abraham was born when Terah was 130 years old (not 70). This is can be seen from the fact that Abraham was 75 when he left Haran (Genesis 12:4), which took place after Terah had died (Acts 7:4) at the age of 205 (Genesis 11:32). Abraham is not Terah's first born son, but is mentioned first in Genesis 11:26 because he is most important in the narrative to follow (see Mathews 2005, 499n34). This is similar to the preceding chapter where Shem, Ham, and Japheth are listed (Genesis 10:1) in an order unrelated to their age (Ham was the youngest son of Noah, Genesis 9:24). Shem lived to 600 years, and he was 100 years old when he fathered Arpachshad (Genesis 11:10), Abraham was born 350 years after Arpachshad (= Shem 450 years), and Abraham died at 175 years; this means that Shem died 25 years before Abraham.

³⁶ Shem and Eber may be singled out in Genesis 10:21 possibly because they are the two oldest living ancestors of Abraham, who is known as a Hebrew (עִבְרִי; Genesis 14:13) the gentile form of Eber (עֵבֶר).

11, Moses does not need to refer to Shem as he is the one who connects the pre-flood history (Genesis 5:32; 11:11) with the patriarchal narrative (Genesis 12–50), which occupies the remainder of Genesis. Shem (*šēm*) whose name means “Name” looks forward to the man whom God would promise a “great name” (*āgaddēlā šēmekā*), Abraham. Abraham and his descendants are now the focus of God’s redemptive history in Genesis 12–50.

The second problem Collins gives as to why the patriarchal life spans should not be taken plainly is the conundrum of clan-head succession:

As long as the patriarch lives, he remains the epicenter of the tribal or clan society and the pivotal influence at the core of his family. In this light, Abr(ah)am would have remained the focal-patriarch for half of Isaac’s life and a good portion of Jacob’s as well. Correspondingly, Isaac would have continued to function in the role of patriarch through most of Jacob’s life, and about one-third of Joseph’s career. According to all known ethnographic rules of succession, Jacob’s stint as a Hebrew patriarch would have been very short, indeed—only the last 27 years of a 147-year lifespan! Yet, in the Genesis narratives, Abr(ah)am, Isaac, and Jacob all have full careers as Hebrew clan-head in their own right. (Collins 2013b, 17–18)

Again, the problem that Collins brings up is a result of imposing modern ethnographic rules of succession onto the text. Why is it a problem that Abraham remains the focal patriarch for half of Isaac’s life and some of Jacob’s? The ethnographic rules of succession do not take into account the long lifespans of the patriarchs. Modern scholars struggle with the long lifespans of the patriarchs, and the post/antediluvians, because of an assumption that people cannot live that long. It is true that people do not live as long today (cf. Psalm 90:10), but this does not mean that it has always been the way as the witness of Scripture testifies against this.

Collins’ honorific interpretation of the long lifespans of the patriarchs is a desperate attempt to synchronize Tall el-Hammam with Sodom. Moses presents the lifespans of the patriarchs as natural ages, as they were not only blessed by God but also experiencing the outworking of a reduction in their lifespan (cf. Genesis 6:3; 11:10–32). Taking the patriarchs’ lifespans naturally helps determine a date for the destruction of Sodom in 2067 BC.

Was Sodom Inhabited Again After Its Destruction?

The destruction of Sodom takes place in Genesis 19 after Lot, his wife,³⁷ and two daughters, with the help of the two angels, escape Sodom and flee to Zoar (Genesis 19:20–22). It was on their arrival at Zoar that God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah:

Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven. And he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. (Genesis 19:24–25)

Moses uses the language of the flood in Genesis 6–7 to describe the destruction of Sodom. Just as God sent the waters of the flood that “rained” (*mamfîr*, Genesis 7:4) down on the earth in the days of Noah so he “rained” (*himfîr*) down sulfur and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah in a fiery deluge. The fiery deluge “destroyed” (*šāhat*) Sodom, as the earth was destroyed by water at the time of the flood (Genesis 13:10; 19:29; cf. 6:13, 17).³⁸ The Hebrew word for “sulphur” (*goprît*) is related to an Akkadian word *kibritu/kubritu*, that has to do with sulphurous oil (see Genesis 14:10) (Wood 1999, 75). It is used elsewhere in the Old Testament of God’s judgment of the wicked (see Psalm 11:6; Isaiah 34:9; Ezekiel 38:22). The result of the destruction caused the smoke from Sodom to go up like, *kēqîṭōr hakkibšān*, “the smoke of a furnace” (Genesis 19:28). The *kibšān* is a kiln that requires intense heat for baking pottery (Exodus 9:8) and the word for smoke (*qîṭōr*) is not the word associated with an ordinary fire, but an intense thick smoke (i.e., clouds in a thunderstorm; Psalms 119:83; 148:8). In the New Testament Jude uses Sodom as an “example” of the punishment of the ungodly which is characterized as “eternal fire” (Jude 7).

Through the raining down of sulfur and fire, God “overthrew” (*hăpōk*) Sodom, the valley, all the inhabitants, and everything that grew on the ground. Everything was destroyed; it was a total catastrophe. The LXX translates the Hebrew word *hăpōk* as *katestrephen* which is the source for the word “catastrophe.” The apostle Peter’s description of Sodom’s “extinction” (*katastrophe*) fits well with the judgment brought upon the city that turned it to ashes (2 Peter 2:6).³⁹ In the end, that which attracted Lot to Sodom (the beautiful land, Genesis 13:10) was all gone. The extent of the catastrophe is made clear by the destruction of the “cities, and all the valley,

³⁷ Lot’s wife did not make it to Zoar as she disobeyed the angels’ warning and looked back to Sodom and was turned into a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26; cf. Luke 17:32).

³⁸ Wenham notes: לָחַץ “destroy”: this root, apart from 38:9, is used in Genesis only for the destruction of the flood and of these cities” (Wenham 1987, 297).

³⁹ Schreiner comments on whether the word *katastrophe* was original to the text: “I suspect that Metzger’s suggestion that some scribes overlooked the word *katastrophe* since the next word ‘condemned’ (*katekrinen*) begins with the same letters (*kat*) is correct. The inclusion of the word fits with Peter’s emphasis on the results of the judgment. Perhaps Peter alluded here to the Septuagint, for Gen 19:29 says that God sent Lot away from the middle of ‘the destruction’ (*tes katastrophes*)” (Schreiner 2003, 340).

and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.” The result of God’s judgment on Sodom was the whole land was burned out so that nothing could grow (Deuteronomy 29:23; cf. Ezekiel 47:11).

The description given of Sodom’s destruction in Genesis 19 is one of complete and utter catastrophe, so that the land was totally devastated. But how does this relate to why Tall el-Hammam should not be identified as Sodom? Later biblical prophets compare the judgment of Babylon, Edom, Moab, and Ammon to that of Sodom and Gomorrah (Isaiah 13:19–20; Jeremiah 49:17–18; 50:39–40; Zephaniah 2:9), in that no person would live there again.

The destruction of Tall el Hammam took place toward the end of the MB II period (c. 1750–1650 BC) and was later occupied again at the time of the Iron Age II (c. 1000 BC), at the beginning of the Israelite monarchy (Collins 2013a, 41; cf. Graves 2014, 6–7). Collins recognizes the claim that later biblical prophets used Sodom as an example that other nations would not be inhabited again, and offers brief responses to each verse (see below), but he reasons:

Insistence that the Kikkar was forever off-limits to resettlement after Genesis 19 is based on later poetic/prophetic passages and is hermeneutically weak. After all, in Ezekiel 16:53, Yahweh did declare, “I will restore the fortunes of Sodom.” (Collins and Scott 2013, 144)

Graves also appeals to Ezekiel 16:53 to argue that Tall el-Hammam can be identified as Sodom because of the promise of Sodom’s restoration (Graves 2014, 7). However, Ezekiel’s reference to Sodom’s restoration goes against the position that Tall el-Hammam is Sodom. Ezekiel is prophesying (c. 592 BC) over a thousand years after the destruction of Tall el-Hammam. If Sodom is still in need of restoration in Ezekiel’s day, then this would indicate that it had not been occupied after its initial destruction. Therefore, it contradicts the fact that Tall el-Hammam was occupied again at the beginning of the Israelite monarchy, around 400 years earlier. The restoration of Sodom that Ezekiel speaks about is future to him (cf. Ezekiel 47:3–12).

The prophet Isaiah, who ministered to the nations of Israel and Judah (740–690 BC) just under a thousand years after the destruction of Tall el-Hammam, prophesied about the future destruction of the nation of Babylon.

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendour and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there; no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there. (Isaiah 13:19–20)

Collins’ response to this is: “The simile here necessarily applies only to the overthrow of Babylon” (Collins

and Scott 2013, 154). But Collins does not explain why it only applies to the “overthrow of Babylon.” Isaiah clearly states that Babylon “will never (*nēšah*) be inhabited or lived in for all generations” (cf. Isaiah 34:10). God would “make people more rare than fine gold” (Isaiah 13:12). For the comparison of Babylon to have never been inhabited for all generations to work, it must mean that after Sodom was overthrown it was never inhabited again.

The prophet Jeremiah, who prophesied to the nations (627–582 BC; Jeremiah 1:5), issued a prophecy against the nation of Edom:

Edom shall become a horror. Everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its disasters. As when Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighboring cities were overthrown, says the LORD, no man shall dwell there, no man shall sojourn in her. (Jeremiah 49:17–18)

Collins’ response to this is: “The comparison is to what Sodom and Gomorrah were like at the time they were destroyed, not to the condition of the land in the long term” (Collins and Scott 2013, 154). Again, Collins seems to miss the point that is being made. The point of comparison that Jeremiah makes “is not the mode of destruction, but the extent of it” (Mackay 2004, 502). The “overthrow” of Sodom would be particularly relevant to Edom as it was just north of their territory. Moreover, in context, Jeremiah declared that the nations of Moab (Jeremiah 48:1–17) and Ammon (Jeremiah 49:1–6) would be judged by Babylon. Nevertheless, there is a message of hope of restoration for Ammon and Moab, for Ammon it is not stated when this will take place but Moab would be restored “in the latter days” (Jeremiah 48:47). Edom, however, would not be restored as she will be like Sodom, forfeiting her human habitation (Merrill 2008, 474). Like his prophecy against Edom, Jeremiah prophesies against Babylon:

Therefore wild beasts shall dwell with hyenas in Babylon, and ostriches shall dwell in her. She shall never again have people, nor be inhabited for all generations. As when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighboring cities, declares the LORD, so no man shall dwell there, and no son of man shall sojourn in her. (Jeremiah 50:39–40)

Collins’ response to this is: “Again, the same simile is here applied to Babylon, still as a symbol of destruction, not necessarily in every aspect” (Collins and Scott 2013, 154). Interestingly, in his book, Collins only quotes Jeremiah 50:40 and not verse 39, which says of Babylon, “She shall never again have people, nor be inhabited for all generations.” The point, just as above, is not the manner of destruction that is in view but the scope of it. Just like Sodom, Babylon would eventually disappear from the great cities of the world (Jeremiah 51:63–64).

Zephaniah, who prophesied before Jeremiah about the coming day of wrath to the nation of Judah (640–609BC), said that they would not be alone as Moab and Ammon would also fall:

“Therefore, as I live,” declares the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, “Moab shall become like Sodom, and the Ammonites like Gomorrah, a land possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a waste forever. The remnant of my people shall plunder them, and the survivors of my nation shall possess them.” (Zephaniah 2:9)

Collins’ response to this is: “In this passage it states that the lands of Moab and Ammon will become ‘a wasteland forever,’ yet in the very next sentence it states that ‘the survivors of my nation will inherit the land.’ But if the land is ‘a wasteland forever,’ how can it be reoccupied and lived in by God’s people, Israel? The literary reality is that when the symbolic analogy of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is used to depict the wrath of God against other nations, the meaning is clearly confirmed to the fact of destruction and does not extend to the manner of destruction or to the duration of the resultant damage.” (Collins and Scott 2013, 154).

Zephaniah’s prophecy that “Moab shall become like Sodom” indicates that the infamous city was still a wasteland in his own day (640–609BC; more than 350 years after Tall el-Hammam was occupied again at the beginning of the Israelite monarchy). This announcement would not be lost on Moab and Ammon who lived on the edge of the Dead Sea and would have still been able to see the effects of God’s judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah. Zephaniah uses imagery (“salt”) that symbolizes ruin or waste (Job 39:6; Jeremiah 17:6). Sowing the earth with salt was a sign of permanent judgment (cf. Judges 9:45). If the remnant of Judah will possess the land what about the fact that Zephaniah states that Sodom and Gomorrah were “a waste forever”? This may indicate a two-stage fulfilment of this prophetic announcement (cf. Isaiah 58:12; 61:4). Its final fulfilment will come in a future time when the nations turn to the Lord (Zephaniah 2:11; cf. Isaiah 2:2).

The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zephaniah are clear in their prophetic announcements against Babylon, Edom, Moab, and Ammon, that like Sodom they were never inhabited again. The fact that Sodom, in the days of the prophets, was still a waste land, rules out Tall el-Hammam as being Sodom as it was occupied again at the time of Israel’s monarchy (c. 1000BC). The biblical evidence suggests that after God destroyed Sodom, it no longer remained inhabited as a city. The only reason Collins can claim it is “hermeneutically weak” to refer to prophetic texts to argue that Sodom would never be inhabited

again, is that it contradicts his position that Tall el-Hammam is Sodom.

Furthermore, Tall el-Hammam’s occupation “...continued at a minimal (compared to its peak in the Middle Bronze Age) level into the Roman Period. The Romans even built a bath house near the hot spring that sits in the saddle between the upper and lower tells.” (Silvia 2014, 33). However, Jesus told the residence of Capernaum that if he had done the miracles, he did in that town in Sodom then it would have remained until his day (see Matthew 11:23). Jesus’ words imply Sodom hadn’t remained until the first century A.D. Tall el-Hammam’s occupational history is an insurmountable hurdle for it to be identified as Sodom. Tall el-Hammam’s occupational history contradicts the information found in Genesis, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zephaniah, Matthew, and 2 Peter.

Given the significant changes to the area where God judged Sodom (Genesis 13:10), it may be that there was nothing left of Sodom and the other cities after they were “destroyed” (*šāhat*) and “overthrown” (*hāpōk*). However, this may be shown to be wrong by future archaeological discovery. Therefore, further research into a possible location and identification of Sodom could still be merited.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The identity of the site of biblical Sodom has been and will continue to be debated. This paper has given several reasons why identifying Sodom at the north-eastern side of the Dead Sea at Tall el-Hammam is not an option for those who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture. The first two reasons show that there is a major chronological problem for identifying Tall el-Hammam as biblical Sodom, as its destruction dates around 1750–1650BC (MB II). The only way for proponents of Tall el-Hammam to synchronize it with biblical Sodom is to revise the biblical date of the exodus, embrace a short Israelite sojourn in Egypt, and significantly reduce the lifespans of the patriarchs. These views are not the result of careful biblical exegesis but rather are the result of eisegesis and special pleading. It seems they are embraced in order to accept the position that Tall el-Hammam is Sodom. As has been shown, the date of Tall el-Hammam’s final destruction is 300–400 years later than the biblical date (2067BC) allows for the destruction of Sodom. Finally, the fact that later biblical prophets (Isaiah 13:19–20; Jeremiah 49:17–18; 50:39–40; Zephaniah 2:9) used Sodom’s destruction as an example of the nations Babylon, Edom, Moab, and Ammon never being inhabited again rules out Tall el-Hammam as biblical Sodom as

⁴⁰ I understand that proponents of Bab edh-Dhra would disagree with this statement as they believe it to be a legitimate candidate for biblical Sodom. However, having read nearly all the papers published on Bab edh-Dhra, I am not persuaded it is biblical Sodom.

after its destruction, it was later occupied again at the time of the Iron Age II (c. 1000 BC), at the beginning of the Israelite monarchy. Biblical chronology and the witness of several biblical prophets strongly show that Tall el-Hammam is not biblical Sodom.

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