



# Discovering the City of Sodom: The Fascinating, True Account of the Discovery of the Old Testament's Most Infamous City

*By Steven Collins, Latayne C. Scott*

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**The fascinating, true account of the quest for one of the Old Testament's most infamous cities.**

Like many Christians today in the academic world, Dr. Steven Collins felt pulled in different directions when it came to apparent conflicts between the Bible and scholarly research and theory—an intellectual crisis that inspired him to lay it all on the line as he set off to locate the lost city of Sodom.

Recounting Dr. Collins's quest for Sodom in absorbing detail, this adventure-cum-memoir reflects the tensions that define biblical archaeology as it narrates a tale of discovery. Readers follow “Dr. C” as he tracks down biblical, archaeological, and geographical clues to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, narrowing the list of possible sites as he weighs evidence and battles skeptics. Finally, he arrives at a single location that looms as the only option: a massive ancient ruin called Tall el-Hammam in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Many scholars who were initially opposed to Dr. Collins's theory now concede that history books may need to be rewritten in light of his groundbreaking discovery. It—along with several other recent finds—is challenging the assumptions of academics and asserting a new voice in the controversy of biblical archaeology and the dispute over using the Bible as a credible historical source.

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From respected archaeologist Dr. Steven Collins and award-winning author Dr. Latayne C. Scott comes the fascinating, true account of the frustrating search and exciting excavation of the city the Bible calls Sodom, which scholars and others had “misplaced” for hundreds of years.

Like many modern-day Christians, Dr. Collins struggled with what seemed to be a clash between his heritage of belief in the Bible and the research regarding ancient history and human evolution. This crisis of faith led him to embark on a quest to put both his archaeological education and the Bible to the test by seeking out the lost ancient city, an expedition that has led to one of the most exciting finds in recent archaeology.

Challenging the assumptions of academics around the world, *Discovering the City of Sodom* may well inspire a revision of the history books. Dr. Collins has become a new voice in the controversy over using the Bible as a credible source of understanding the past—and opened a new chapter in the struggle over the soul of biblical archaeology.

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### **Editorial Review**

#### Review

“Welcome to Sodom’ signs are absent—so has Steven Collins found the place? Latayne Scott imaginatively tells how Collins concludes it is Tall el-Hammam, east of the Jordan river, arguing vigorously from biblical texts, geography and his discoveries at this large site. Archaeology’s slow processes come to life in this vivid narrative.” (Alan Millard, Emeritus Rankin Professor of Hebrew & Ancient Semitic Languages, The University of Liverpool )

#### **Praise for Dr. Steven Collins:**

"[Steve] is one of the most dynamic archaeologists I have ever met and his energy level would wear out the Energizer Bunny. . . . I consider Tall el-Hammam to be one of the most significant excavations—if not the most significant—in Biblical Archaeology that is now taking place in the Middle East; it is even more significant than Hazor and Gezer." (Dr. Clyde Billington of Northwestern College, article for Artifax )

"T. Hammam, an immense site, cries out for excavation. It is surely at least as significant as Bab Edh-Dhra, but probably more so. . . . Dr. Collins and his team have the deep experience and broad background to be ideal excavators of this wonderful site. His academic background is impeccable and his field experience is up to date in every regard." (William J. Fulco, S.J., NEH Professor of Ancient Mediterranean Studies, Loyola Marymount University )

“Dr. Collins is a meticulous archaeologist with an extraordinary team of specialized scholars who are not afraid to challenge the traditional assumptions about the location and fate of the Bible’s most mysterious city—Sodom. His findings are scholarly, fascinating, educational, and extremely convincing to anyone who needs hard facts to support their conclusions regarding this famous city. The massive accumulation of the archaeological and geographical data from Tall el-Hammam, and its surrounding territory, leaves little doubt in my mind that Dr. Collins has emerged as the authority on the identification of Sodom. This riveting account of Dr. Collins’ fascinating journey and discovery has contributed a unique body of knowledge that surpasses anything published on the subject. I don’t know of a more convincing case for Sodom’s long-awaited identification.” (Joseph M. Holden, Ph.D., President of Veritas Evangelical Seminary and co-author *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible*)

“This lively volume provides the compelling story of the (re)discovery and excavation of an important biblical-period site, combining personal experiences, archaeological evidence, and discussion of biblical texts. Even if one does not see eye-to-eye with the authors’ interpretations on the identity of the site and relationship to specific parts of the biblical narrative, the enthusiastic description of the story of the study of this site and related issues makes it a great read!” (Prof. Aren Maeir, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel director of the Tell es-Safi/Gath Archaeological Project)

“Dr. Steven Collins writes an intriguing account of his excavations at Tell el-Hammam in the Jordan Valley, a site which he identifies with Sodom of the Bible. In this book, Collins provides the most complete discussion to date of all of the relevant biblical texts. The most compelling part of the book is Dr. Collins’ argument for locating Sodom northeast of the Dead Sea, rather than further to the south as many have assumed. This book will engender a great deal of interest among the general public, but it is likely to be received with less enthusiasm by many specialists in the field. Even so, it is clear that Dr. Collins has thought

very deeply about the relationship between his site and the biblical narrative. Much of the skepticism about the historicity of Sodom over the years has been conducted in an archaeological vacuum. Now, with the excavations of Tell el-Hammam and Dr. Collins' extensive presentation of the historical, geographical and archaeological data, we now have a better material basis for further discussion. For those who do not believe that Tell el-Hammam could be Sodom, Dr. Collins still has an interesting and extremely important site that will produce valuable information about the cultural history of the Dead Sea basin during the Early Bronze Age, the Middle Bronze Age, and the Iron Age.” (Robert A. Mullins, Ph.D., Professor of Archaeology and Old Testament, Azusa Pacific University )

“*Discovering the City of Sodom* is sure to create discussion, conversation, controversy, and enjoyment among lay and scholarly communities alike. Collins' carries the reader on a journey through the Bible's ancestral tales of sacred obedience, decadent lust, and apocalyptic destruction, uncovering impressive archaeological remains of a sprawling metropolis possibly used by the biblical writers as their geographic setting. A book not to be missed in the debate over the Bible's role in archaeological studies.” (David C. Maltzberger, Professor of Religion, Wayland Baptist University )

“Dr. Steven Collins and Dr. Latayne C. Scott have produced a long-awaited report of the excavations that have taken place over the last ten years at Tall-al-Hammam in Jordan. As a seminary professor, I highly recommend this book as a classic example for our students of how sound biblical scholarship is conducted using the most sophisticated scientific tools to elucidate the biblical text. The authors have produced a highly readable account of the hard work of archaeology and have provided a pedagogically sound description of their case for the identification of biblical Sodom. Any teacher of the Bible or archaeology will find in this volume an ideal resource for students to enhance their knowledge of either field.” (Dr. Steve Lowe, Professor of Education, Erskine Theological Seminary, Erskine, SC )

“The intrigue and biblical/historical detective work in this book thoroughly captivated me.” (Chris Fabry, author of ECPA Best Fiction winner *Almost Heaven* )

"Scripture and science meet in a pop-archaeological text." (Kirkus Reviews)

About the Author

**Dr. Steven Collins** is Executive Curator of the Museum of Archaeology and Biblical History, Dean of the College of Archaeology and Biblical History at Trinity Southwest University, and Visiting Professor of Archaeology at Veritas Evangelical Seminary.

**Latayne Scott's** previous books include *The Mormon Mirage*.

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Discovering the City of Sodom

## ONE

### **Down from the Jordan's Source: The Setting for Sodom**

To understand the role of the once-great city-state of Sodom, you must visualize where it is in relation to the rest of the history of the Semitic people in whose land it lies. Though the recent discovery of Sodom seemed to come out of nowhere, it has been in the same place for thousands of years. It must take its proper place on both maps and timelines of Bible events.

It often surprises those who love the Bible when they learn that most of that book's events took place in a footprint smaller than the state of New Jersey. Excepting the sojourns of biblical people in Egypt and captivity in Babylon (and of course the travels of the apostles after the time of Jesus), practically everything biblical happened in an eight-thousand-square-mile skinny rectangle that transects the so-called Fertile Crescent, which stretches from the Arabian gulf to the borders of the Nile River in Egypt.

Once a year, Albuquerque, New Mexico-based Trinity Southwest University conducts an archaeological study tour of the Holy Land, crossing back and forth over the fortified but nonetheless amicable borders between Jordan and Israel to see the most significant sites. The grand prize of the tour is a look at Tall el-Hammam—biblical Sodom—over the last days of the tour, of course. But all of Holy Land history, all of the Holy Land itself, is as knitted together as the souls of David and Jonathan. And the lifeblood of the Hebrew people's history is the river in its heart, and the logic of its story follows the great Jordan River south to the Dead Sea. To understand biblical history you must follow the Jordan—whose very name means “descent”—as it makes its way through the geography of biblical history.

The narrow rectangle of the Holy Land is split, quite literally, right down the middle by the profound valley of the Jordan River. Unlike the upside-down Nile, the Jordan runs north to south through an area called the Great Rift. This long, deep fissure, formed in antiquity by the shifting of adjacent tectonic plates, stretches from Turkey all the way to the Serengeti Plain in Africa. Its once-suboceanic past is revealed by its mountaintops, which are here and there crusted with fossils that even today crunch underfoot.

In the Holy Land, this Rift's northern border is defined by the Lebanon Mountains and the iconic Mount Hermon, the “grey-haired mountain” whose summit marks the border of modern Israel. Its fifty-foot drifts of snow have inspired psalms, such as the one that compares fellowship to “the dew of Mount Hermon.” The same snow provides one source of the Jordan River's headwaters and is perhaps the site of the Transfiguration of Jesus, where he communed with Moses and Elijah (Mark 9:2–5).

(How did the apostles know the identity of those two long-dead men when they saw them with Jesus? a guide asks, and then allows guesses until the right answers appear: Moses by the great light coming from his face—Exodus 34:35—and Elijah by his bald head and excessively hairy body—2 Kings 1:8.)

Northern Israel is a thin, vulnerable place, a bruised and bloodied fist that jabs toward its menacing neighbors. Even if there weren't fortified fences, anyone could see the borders of Israel: just as Egypt is the gift of the Nile, Israel is the gift of drip irrigation. Just across Israel's barbed-wire borders, where the green ends and the brown begins, lie both Lebanon and Syria and the reasons for bomb shelters in every kibbutz; the signs on the roadside tell you not to walk past the shoulder because there are mine-fields there.

Visitors try to digest the reality of still-active land mines in a civilized country. They ponder the irony of mosques in Israel and the contradiction of its population of 12 percent of Muslims, whose Quran-reading children take part in the Israeli army's compulsory service for all its young citizens.

This is a place millions have dreamed of visiting since they heard the Bible stories of childhood. Proportionally, more come here from non-English-speaking countries than not. The popular tourist sites are a Babel—or perhaps, a Pentecost—of groups, huddled in semicircles as they listen to discourses in their native tongues by hoarse and earnest tour guides with waving arms.

American groups contain all types of people. On one extreme are people like the middle-aged Arkansas farmer who tries to figure out how to anchor on his head the little yarmulke with the blue Star of David that he's just bought from a vendor (and whether or not he should rock back and forth as he prays, as he sees the

black-coated Hasidic Jews do). On the other side of the scale is the chattering group of schoolgirls who have been sent here with the hope that old sacrednesses will rub off on them and stick to their clothing when they return to the malls and MP3s of their lives. Somewhere in the middle are the pious families and the young couples who haul their unwitting children from site to site and try to take notes and photographs and videos of every important thing.

And in Israel, every site is an important thing. There is no other place on earth about which so many uncounted libraries have been written. It's surely the most documented eight thousand square miles on earth.

Some tourists are lured by the churches and mosques built over most of the familiar places: the Temple, the Nativity, the Holy Sepulcher, and the holies of other assorted holies. But a tour specializing in Israel's archaeology disdains everything Byzantine and newer ("Second century AD, huh? Move on!") and takes the pilgrim first to the fount of every blessing, the bubbling-up emergence of the Jordan River's pristine waters from the very ground at a place called Tel Dan. Here is a lush habitat for birds and salamanders and fish that climb waterfalls, a place where dew and moss drip from everything.

Under excavation and deteriorating in the sopping air at Laish (Tel Dan) down the road is a mudbrick gateway, with perhaps the oldest arch in existence—through which Abraham may have passed on his route from Haran to his inheritance in Canaan (Genesis 12:4–5). Literally a few steps away are the stone foundations of a gateway where kings of his Israelite descendants sat centuries later, arbitrating disputes among the people. Gateways such as this do not always endure, but their stone foundations usually do. Perhaps that is why the idea of a gateway and heaven have become tied together in people's minds.

Adjacent to it is Caesarea Philippi, the place where Jesus pointed up to a gaping mouth of a cave into which pagans threw human sacrifices to Pan—perhaps subdued by hallucinogens still discernible in excavated ancient drinking vessels. Here Jesus brought his disciples on a six-day journey out of their way, to this place of decision. Here he told his disciples that what he would build, the open heart of a church, would not be a matter of flesh and blood, would not be overcome by such things as this gate into hell (Matthew 16:13–20).

The river falls precipitously a few miles downstream into the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias, as it's also named in the Bible). Tourists ride in loaded barges across it and eat basketfuls of the grilled St. Peter's tilapia (named after that apostle's famous eureka of a coin in the jaws of one of these mouth-breeding fish, as recorded in Matthew 17:24–27). Later, everyone gawks at the recently found "Jesus boat," a wooden fishing vessel from the first century improbably preserved in Galilean mud until its discovery and restoration just a few years ago.

It isn't Jesus's sailing ship, though, because he didn't own anything. In modern terms, he would have gone to Hertz Rent-a-Boat when he needed one.

On the northwest shore of the lake is Capernaum, one of three cities cursed by Jesus. Yet that same city was extraordinarily blessed when he healed a servant of the man who built its synagogue. This man, a Roman centurion, possessed and immortalized what Jesus called "astonishing" faith (Luke 7:1–10).

A Christian guide points out the exact middle of the tiled floor. All ancient synagogues are perfect squares, he tells visitors, like God spreading himself over the four corners of the earth. Look here, he says, this is where Jesus would have stood to read. This synagogue floor is much more modern than in Jesus's day, but the floor from his time lies beneath this one. People go and stand next to that spot, wanting proximity, fearing usurpation lest they crowd out his memory.



The archaeological tour doesn't go to Nazareth, for there is little ancient to see there. Instead, the visitors look out at what Jesus would have seen from there: a breathtaking landscape that would have been his history book. There everyone could see Mount Tabor's unmistakable mammary profile, the fitting setting of the story of the extraordinary heroine Deborah when she and Barak conquered the king of Hazor (Judges 4). The sight of Mount Carmel, across the valley, evokes the telling of the fire from heaven that ignited Elijah's waterlogged firewood and sent the pagan priests running in terror, history's first cutters, still dripping blood from their self-inflicted skin-slicing (1 Kings 18).

Then the guide points out Sepphoris, a neighboring city not mentioned in biblical texts but that was a bustling building project during the teenage and young adult years of Jesus. His father Joseph, the guide explains, was a tekton, a word whose meaning can include the concept of a carpenter but more probably meant a builder or artisan, perhaps even a stonemason. How many times, as the guide points out, did Jesus speak of stonework, of cornerstones, capstones, foundations, towers? (See Matthew 24:27 and elsewhere.)

Then he tells of a recent discovery in close-by Nazareth, under what is called "the trench of St. Joseph," of a mikva or ritual bath found only in the homes of wealthy Jews. The question arises: Were Joseph and Son successful regional construction experts? Did Jesus give up a successful career and comfortable lifestyle to become a hounded itinerant rabbi?

No archaeological tour of the Holy Land is complete without several days in Jerusalem. No matter from which direction you come to that city, you always come up, because it's a mountain in a valley-bowl surrounded by hills. Though situated in the world's most overdocumented country, this is the most disputed real estate on the planet, its very soil in a constant and intractable tug-of-war between Muslims and Jews and Christians.

It's as if all of history is distilled and concentrated here so potently that no one wants to share it. Everywhere are ruins and buildings under excavation. The Israeli government's commitment to archaeology is more than just a scientific endeavor; it's the Jewish nation's attempt to confirm an entire history that a Muslim world would deny ever existed.

The repatriation of Jerusalem by non-Arabs, the Arabs say, is just a repeat of the Crusades.

Remembrance is the key to salvation, Jews say; forgetfulness leads to exile.

### **The Witnesses**

The old City of David excavations bear witness to a Jewish past: Gihon Spring, David's water shaft, Hezekiah's Tunnel, and Warren's Shaft, the Siloam Pool.

People emerge with the story on their shoulders and heads, green with moss, from the newly excavated sewers through which the rich people of Jerusalem attempted to escape the Romans in 70 CE.

The uncovering and restoration of the house of the high priest, in whose courtyard the prisoner Jesus stood, verifies.

The Garden of Gethsemane, the once-smoldering Hinnom Valley, Herod's palace, the Mount of Olives, all testify.

And of course the retaining walls of the temple, with massive stones of over a hundred tons each, thirty feet

long, unmoved for more than two millennia from the place where Herod's workers placed them and today without even a razor's width between them, mutely communicate an implacable story.

On the archaeological tour, a bearded man with close-cropped gray hair points up to where he has discovered features hidden for millennia. This is Dr. Leen Ritmeyer and the Temple Mount is his adopted homeland, his real estate, and he is the unquestioned expert on this site of all sites. In fact, many of the reconstruction drawings in Jerusalem's museums and drawings on government-sponsored tour signs in the city are by Ritmeyer. He is a recorder of archaeological data, the extrapolator of it, interpreter of new discoveries such as the famous trumpeting sign on the Temple Mount. He is legend to non-Arab archaeologists and at the same time a persona non grata, banned from the Muslim Dome of the Rock and its surrounding precinct.

The modern city of Jerusalem is a jumble. Viewed from the outside, its very topography exemplifies and illustrates the contradictions of Israel. It is peaks and valleys, inclusions and exclusions, history and future, one side moistened by the Mediterranean and heavily wooded, the other cracked, dry desert.

The desert. The Hebrew word for desert is the same as the word for hearing. Throughout its history, people went to the desert to listen: Jesus "shoved" by the Holy Spirit (as the koine Greek of Mark 1:12 describes it) into desolate places to hear the voice of Satan, the apostle Paul then tutored by Jesus whispering in the winds of the Arabian dunes (Galatians 1:12-17). Both were heirs of the legacy of Old Testament prophets sent into sandy exile, where they too heard voices from beyond this world.

There is little of archaeology in the desert places of Israel, but its few sites are stark and memorable.

Qumran, of course, is the essence of the speaking of the desert itself, which divulged in 1947 the long-silent Dead Sea Scrolls. These famous documents were written (it is supposed) by Essenes who built their desert community in homage to parchment and what could be immortalized on it, intentionally facing library and scriptorium east, to get rid of moisture. Ritmeyer concurs, saying that he can't begin any of his architectural drawings in the Holy Land until the sun comes up and dries the paper.

He taps with his foot the crust of the unique sandy soil that closes itself up and sheds water. No wonder the scrolls survived the ages in their clay jars. Could there be more of them? Perhaps the desert might still have muted voices waiting to speak.

Near the southwestern shore of the Dead Sea towers its most iconic desert symbol of Jewish nationalism, Masada, the fortress/palace city of Herod. Still visible from its breath-catching heights are the outlines of the camps of an entire legion of Roman soldiers who over a six-month period built a huge siege ramp up to the captured fortress to try to kill more than 900 occupying Jewish men, women, and children.

Rations alone for the legion would have totaled more than \$36 million in modern currency. What was the great threat? Was it to Roman pride, losing a garrison because its guards, who thought it impregnable, were careless?

Centuries before the Romans, King David once ascended and secreted himself on the heights of Masada, as 1 Samuel 23:14 indicates when it speaks of his hiding in a "stronghold" in the Judean desert. But his favorite desert hideout from the wrath of King Saul (1 Samuel 24:1) was the lush slit in the Judean hills, the lovely and surprising En-Gedi. At its summit is a concave of caves, with a dagger of light and water into its heart, its legendary spring. It's a wonder that David would leave that place of peace and beauty to try to rule over a contentious nation that, after his son's death, would never again be united.

## Secrets of the Waters

But the desert is far from the heart of Israel, because its lifeblood is in the Jordan. This river meanders so much that if it were straightened out, it would be twenty miles longer. Its fords and falls cache some of the best stories in the Bible. The patriarch Jacob crossed over it and its tributary (Genesis 32:22); an entire nation in exile walked dry-shod over its damp and dammed-up riverbed to claim its inheritance beyond the ruins of the walls of Jericho (Joshua 3:14–17). It delineated the border between some of the tribes and their brothers. Here Jephthah killed the Ephraimites (Judges 5:12–6), Gideon lay in wait for the Midianites (Judges 7:24), and Solomon’s foundries of brass seethed (1 Kings 7:46). Atop its waves two prophets walked (2 Kings 2:8, 14); at its banks Elijah performed two miracles (2 Kings 5:14, 6:6). The river isn’t just source and border, it’s cleansing too: in its depths Jesus himself submitted to baptism (Mark 1:9). From that point on, he crisscrossed its shores during his entire teaching ministry.

The river is the distillation of a nation’s history; it is life. But like all earthly life, it begins to slow and amass the ills of earth, until it reaches its own death in the Great Salt Sea.

On the western shore of the Dead Sea, Israeli ingenuity has recently made fruit trees grow in the pebbly and boulderous lime-caked sand, little outposts of green vigor in this lifeless place. Nearby, the desiccated cliffs seem so imposing, yet so fragile that they would crumble under the fingernail of God.

The Great Salt Sea lies in its own crusted coffin, seeming to have pushed its heels up against an impassible barrier on its south side. It reaches the lowest point on earth—thirteen hundred feet below sea level—as the Jordan ceases to erode, becomes muddy and morbid and turgid, and is finally trapped in its own dead-end rut.

But its depths hold secrets: at its lake bottom, it’s another twelve hundred feet below its own surface.

It is incredibly salty, not because it has no outlet (many other lakes have no outlet and yet have fresh and sparkling water), but because its surrounding rock strata are laden with anhydrous chloride salts that leach into the water until its molecules can absorb no more. Then, until more seasonal water flows from the river into the lake, the laden water waits patiently to capture more salt.

Its many names reflect people’s theories about it. Jews of Jesus’s day called it Lake Asphaltitus because it had for centuries spit up little black chunks of asphalt from deep deposits. But earlier in Genesis it was called the Salt Sea, or the Sea of the Arabah, or the Eastern Sea (which makes perfect sense if you lived between it and the Mediterranean). But to most people, it’s best known as the Dead Sea.

Do you want to know the level of that body of water in antiquity? It fluctuated. During the Bronze Age (around the time of Abraham and his descendants, before they went to Egypt), and during the Roman period, and then during the Byzantine period and the Middle Ages, it looked almost exactly as it does today in the twenty-first century.

The level of the lake has never been lower than it is now, not since humans have lived here. Therefore, there isn’t the remotest possibility that there are hidden cities beneath its brackish surface. Sodom and Gomorrah aren’t there. Not now, not before. Not ever.

The waters have secrets to divulge, perhaps. But if you’re going to look for the famous Cities of the Plain, the site of Sodom, its sister city Gomorrah, and the others, you’ll have to look somewhere else.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Katie Doll:**

The book *Discovering the City of Sodom: The Fascinating, True Account of the Discovery of the Old Testament's Most Infamous City* make one feel enjoy for your spare time. You can use to make your capable considerably more increase. Book can to be your best friend when you getting anxiety or having big problem with your subject. If you can make reading a book *Discovering the City of Sodom: The Fascinating, True Account of the Discovery of the Old Testament's Most Infamous City* to get your habit, you can get considerably more advantages, like add your current capable, increase your knowledge about some or all subjects. You can know everything if you like open up and read a e-book *Discovering the City of Sodom: The Fascinating, True Account of the Discovery of the Old Testament's Most Infamous City*. Kinds of book are several. It means that, science publication or encyclopedia or other people. So , how do you think about this publication?

#### **Delores Nault:**

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