

This is a very fine story to illustrate the selfishness of Lot and the unselfishness of Abram, so long as it is told in a region that is far removed from Palestine. Unfortunately, if you go to Palestine as I did in the Summer of 1950, and stand on the hill country between Bethel and Ai, and try to imagine the scene that is described here, the story just doesn't fit the circumstances. You look at the hill country around you. You may see shepherds walking along, blowing on their little pipes, and their sheep or goats following behind them. It presents an attractive pastoral scene. Then you look off to the east and there, far below, you see the Jordan Valley, desolate and brown, seemingly devoid of vegetation. As you look at that desert region, and think of Lot's selection, you wonder why on earth he made such a poor choice. The story hardly fits the situation in Palestine today, and it did not fit it any better in the days of the later Israelite kingdom, when this document was written, according to the theories of the divisive school of Biblical Criticism.

It is extremely difficult to see how anyone could have invented such a story in Palestine today, or at the time when this document is alleged to have been written. The story says that the situation was different before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Until recently few scholars imagined that such might have been the case. About twenty-five years ago, Professor Eduard Meyer, one of the greatest of German authorities on ancient history, made the statement that the Jordan River was never harnessed to irrigate the soil as was done with the Nile under similar circumstances. Aside from the statement in this chapter, this doubtless was the opinion of those who lived in Palestine in the days of the later Israelite kingdom. As you stand there today, it is hard to imagine such a situation as is described here.

Yet today the opinion of all who are familiar with the facts of archeology is very different, because as far back as 1924 striking new facts about the Jordan Valley began to come to light. In 1929, when I participated in an expedition of the American School of Oriental Research through a portion of the Jordan Valley, these discoveries were carried further, and it was ascertained that in the Jordan Valley there are between forty and fifty hills which when examined prove not to be natural hills, but "tells." This word "tell" is used as a technical term for an artificial hill which covers the remains of an ancient city. You cannot have forty cities in a valley like that unless there is plenty of irrigation, with large crops growing and a fertile area to support the towns. Examining the material from these towns it is found that they all flourished before the time of Abram, but almost every one of them was entirely deserted in later periods. I well remember noticing the remains of an ancient city which runs for over half a mile along the southern end of the Sea of Galilee. The debris there shows that the city began its history about 3000 B.C., but that it was deserted from around 1800 B.C. on. Except for a small Roman fortification on top of the hill, there is no sign of human life there after the time of Abram. At the time of the later Israelite kingdom it looked much as it does today, just a deserted hill with nothing to suggest that people had ever lived there.

The evidence indicates that at the time of the entrance of the Israelites into Canaan under the leadership of Joshua the Jordan Valley was almost deserted. In subsequent periods people could hardly have imagined that this was such an attractive section that Lot would choose it in preference to the hill country where Abram remained. The account in Genesis 13 exactly fits the situation at the time of Abram. It is hard to see how it could have been invented centuries later.

We have time for one more instance where archeological evidence illuminates the background of a Biblical narrative in such a way as to suggest strongly that it could hardly have been written a long time after the event occurred. This instance relates to Genesis 31.

All through the ages interpreters of the Book of Genesis have puzzled over the great importance attached by Laban and Rachel to the household gods which she stole. Why should Laban have been so excited about the loss of these "teraphim" that he would think it worth while to gather an expedition and pursue Jacob many days in order to attempt to get them back? His expedition had to be very large, for Jacob had a great number of herdmen with him and could have protected himself from ordinary attack. Some medieval commentators have suggested that the reason was that the household gods were made of gold. This explanation is not satisfactory, since we learn that when Jacob allowed Laban to search his entire establishment he did not find them because Rachel was hiding them underneath her as she sat in her tent. (Gen. 31:34,35). The amount of gold that could thus be hidden would not be sufficient to pay the cost of Laban's expedition in pursuit of Jacob. Until recent years the problem remained an insoluble mystery.