VAYERA: Sodom and Gomorrah and the Bible as History

THE DISCOVERY OF THE CENTURY

As a teenager, I remember reading an exciting book called "*The Bible as History*" (I read it in Spanish "Y la Biblia tenia razón"), which first introduced me to the fascinating world of Biblical archaeology. The book, written by a German author who fought against the Nazis, Werner Keller (1908 -1980) was published in 1955. With the limited information available to him in those days, the author did an excellent service to Biblical studies since he first demonstrated that no archaeological discovery contradicts the Tora narrative. And secondly, despite the thousands of years that have passed, solid evidence of Biblical stories and accounts continues to appear. But Keller predicted something about two Biblical cities, and fortunately, he was wrong. I quote: "Today we can affirm, with complete certainty, that any search for Sodom and Gomorrah that is intended to be carried out in the future will be completely useless since the enigma of the ruin and disappearance of both cities cannot be clarified." (Page 47, Spanish edition).

Very recently, in 2018, a group of modern archaeologists discovered the remains of Sodom near the Dead Sea. Moreover, they have also been able to verify, in an extraordinary way, the nature of the catastrophic event that led to its destruction. The story is exciting, but I will need the reader's patience to explain it in detail.

THE WEALTH OF SEDOM

The Torah mentions Sedom (en English Sodom) in the Perashiyot that we have read these last weeks, Lekh-Lekh and Vayera. Abraham and Lot had a lot of cattle. So much so that both

shepherds fought over territory, to avoid escalating the conflict, Abraham proposed to Lot to separate from each other: Abraham would go east if Lot wanted to go the west, and vice versa. The Tora then describes what led Lot to decide where to move: “Genesis chapter 13: 10: “Then Lot looked up and saw the entire Jordan Valley, as far as Tzohar, which was a fertile land, like a garden [blessed by] God, like the land of Egypt. This is how [this area] was before God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah… Lot established himself in the plains and spread his tents as far as Sedom.” The first thing we learn from this text is that this area was very fertile, which is in complete contrast to the extreme aridity and salinity of the surroundings of the Dead Sea. The second reference says that Sedom was like Egypt. What is this referring to?

SEDOM AND THE NILE

Two particular points characterize Egypt. 1. First, unlike all the other countries in the Middle East, Egypt does not depend on rain; it depends on the Nile. And droughts, therefore, do not affect it. For this reason, Egypt was the favorite destination for those who fled other regions, escaping droughts and hunger. The Tora alludes to the migrations of our patriarchs to Egypt several times. 2. There is an area in the North of Egypt known as the Nile Delta. There, the Nile divides into channels, transforming the entire area into an extraordinary, fertile, prosperous natural garden. This is probably the Goshen area (archaeologists call this place Avaris), where the Jews lived when they came in the times of Yosef. Before the destruction of Sedom and its surroundings, the Jordan River might have had similar water channels that formed a delta around the city and fertilized the region. This area must have been prosperous and independent of rain on both sides of the Jordan River. And it is, therefore, logical to expect travelers, or refugees, to seek shelter in Sedom, as the Tora tells us that happened with the foreigners that Lot welcomed into his house.

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The Tora then relates the terrible habits of the inhabitants of the city of Sodom: 13:13: “The men of Sodom were wicked and committed grave sins against God.” These “sins against God,” as we see in the story of Lot, were more like “crimes against humanity,” the abuse of foreigners—murder, robbery, sexual violence, etc. – that it was “normalized” because, as the Tora says: everyone participated in attacking the foreigners to “from the young to the elderly .”On the one hand, the population was very prosperous. On the other hand, they were ruthless, selfish, and infamous for their immorality (hence the famous word “sodomy”). God punished Sedom and its surroundings with extinction. God destroyed the city, its surroundings, and “all the vegetation of the land” and disappeared. The question that has not yet been resolved is how God destroyed this city.

ARCHEOLOGY

For many years, archeologists believed that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were located south of the Dead Sea. And they supposed that the ruins of these civilizations were not found because the Dead Sea swallowed the cities. That’s why Keller said no one would ever discover these cities. He also assumed incorrectly that an earthquake had destroyed these civilizations. However, when describing the destruction of Sedom, the Tora mentions that “fire fell from heaven”, which does not happen as a consequence of an earthquake. Was then a meteorite that destroyed these cities? Well, a meteorite would have left an enormous crater. None was found. Another interesting fact is that Abraham saw the aftermath of the Sedom cataclysm from his place, Hebron. Abraham saw “smoke as from a furnace” rising from that area. Did Abraham see something similar to a mushroom cloud produced after a nuclear explosion? If so, what could have caused that?

So, where was the city of Sedom located, and what was the

nature of the cataclysm with which God punished these cities?