

Genesis 14:10 **The Valley of Siddim Tarpits**

Now the Valley of Siddim was full of bitumen pits, and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them, and the rest fled to the hill country. ¹

In context, we see five kingdoms led by the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah making war with King Chedorlaomer of Elam and his three allies in the Valley of Siddim. These five kingdoms had been subject to King Chedorlaomer for 12 years. In the 13th year, they rebelled. Now, in the 14th year, the two sides meet for battle in the Valley of Siddim. This valley is only mentioned in Genesis 14, but it is associated with the Dead Sea according to BDB (see Gen. 14:3). This valley is most likely located on the southern end of the Dead Sea.

The text here says that the rebel kings and their armies fled from King Chedorlaomer. As they did, some fell into the many bitumen pits that were located in the valley. The Hebrew phrase is *beeroth beeroth chemar* (lit. pits pits of bitumen) or “full of bitumen pits”. The word “*beeroth*” is repeated to show the abundance of the pits. The word *chemar* is used two other times in the OT. In Genesis 11:3 it is the mortar between the bricks of the Tower of Babel. In Exodus 2:3 it is the waterproof lining of the basket in which Moses was placed by his mother to avoid being killed by Pharaoh. In the latter passage, *chemar* is used along side of *zepheth* (pitch). Yet another similar word used in the OT is the *kopher* (pitch) that was used to seal Noah’s ark (Gen. 6:14). So what exactly do these words mean?

Interestingly the LXX uses *asphaltos* (asphalt) in Gen. 6:14; 11:3 and here in 14:10. *Pissasphaltos* (tar and pitch) is used in Ex. 2:3. The Latin Vulgate translates these words consistently as *bitumine*. It appears from the translations that the words are fairly interchangeable and denote some form of secondary petroleum product. Geologically, asphalt occurs naturally where oil has been biodegraded at or near the surface. There are 305 naturally occurring bitumen deposits around the world at the surface with an estimated 5.5 billion barrels of in-place reserves according to the USGS. The largest deposit of naturally occurring asphalt is located in Pitch Lake in southwestern Trinidad. This asphalt was used to caulk ships during the time of the explorers in the 16th Century. The La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles, California are actually asphalt lakes. They are famous for their preservation of Ice Age fossils such as mastodons. Tar and pitch can be used somewhat interchangeably although pitch is more solid and tar is more liquid in nature. Both of these can form from plant material or petroleum. Pitch that is derived from plant material is called resin, while pitch associated with petroleum is called bitumen.

The text says some of the men fell into these bitumen pits as they fled. Generally, it would seem that human beings would be intelligent enough to avoid the pits, but there was something about these particular pits that made them unavoidable. We do not find

¹ *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

human fossils in any of the tar pits encountered to date. We do, however, find assemblages of creatures that would be expected to have cohabitated together. We find fossils of mammoths, saber-toothed tigers and smaller rodents, along with snakes, turtles, birds and insects. Most of the occurrences of these tar pits in the geologic record preserve the community of their inhabitants intact. We never find sharks and dinosaurs with these communities, or any other counter-intuitive mixture of fossils, as the Global Flood model would seem to suggest.

When we consider the biblical occurrences of bitumen along with the geologic occurrences, we can begin to see how the two perfectly agree. The Bible speaks of petroleum products before the Flood (Gen. 6:14). This “pitch” would have been the byproduct of creatures that died and were buried by sediments. Therefore, these fossils could not have been the result of the Flood. Since there was plenty of “pitch” in Noah’s day before the Flood, and similar products at Babel and in Abraham’s day it would stand that God had provided this substance for His people, and therefore should be considered part of His “very good” Creation (Gen. 1:31) even though it is brought about by death. Petroleum is certainly not the result of the curse, as some would require, it is part of our Creator’s wonderful and all-sufficient provision.

Dan Leiphart, 2010