



[Jerusalem Talmud Kil'ayim 9:4, 32c; Ketubbot 12:3, 35b](#)

Diocletian and the Sea of Emesa

Date: 360 CE to 400 CE

Place: Syria Palaestina

Language: Hebrew and Aramaic

Category: Jewish

Literary genre: Talmud

Title of work: Jerusalem Talmud

Reference: Kil'ayim 9:4, 32c; Ketubbot 12:3, 35b

Commentary:

This text discusses the seven seas and a lake that surround the land of Israel. It enumerates the seas that were created by God, as well as the lake of Emesa (in modern Hums, Syria), which was constructed under Diocletian (ruled 284-305 CE). Although we lack the details of this undertaking, Diocletian was known for initiating building projects throughout the empire (see examples in Greenfield, "An Aramaic Inscription," p. 450).

This tradition opens with a verse that describes God's creation: "[The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it;] for He has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers" (Psalms 24:1-2, based on NRSV). In Psalms, "earth" refers to dry land but, in our source, the term "the earth" (*ha-'aretz*) denotes the "land of Israel" that, according to this teaching, is surrounded by seven seas. Here "seas" (*yam*, pl. *yamim*) signifies both seas and lakes. Some of the seas in this list are in the land of Israel or along its borders, and the others are in Syria (on the borders of Israel in rabbinic texts, see Eyal Ben-Eliyahu, *Between Borders*). The Great Sea is the Mediterranean; the Sea of Tiberias is the Sea of Galilee; the Sea of Salt is the Dead Sea. These seas are well-known and located in Palestine. Let us now consider the others:

The Sea of Samkho appears in Tosefta Baba Kama 8:18 as the Sea of Sovkhi. In Sifre Deuteronomy 355 (Finkelstein edition, p. 419) its name is *sofani* or *tzefoni*, depending on the manuscript. Tosefta Bekhorot 7:4 describes a river that "goes fourth from the cave of Paneas (Caesarea Philippi, today Banias in the north of Israel) and passes through the Sea of Sofaniand into the Sea of Tiberias (the Sea of Galilee)." Thus, this Sea of Samkho is in contemporary northern Israel. Josephus mentions this body of water as Lake Semech?nitis (*J.W* 3.515) and according to his description, it refers to the current Lake Ha?ula. This name resembles another item on this list, the Sea of ?ulta. However, since the Sea of Sovkhi is understood to be Lake Ha?ula, the Sea of ?ulta presumably denotes another sea or lake. The identification of the Sea of Shilyyat is also unclear. Israel S. Horowitz has suggested that both the Sea of ?ulta and the Sea of Shilyyat are located in northern Syria (*Palestine and the Adjacent Countries*, p. 324-325). The Sea of 'Apamya is likely the Sea of Apamea on the Orontes River, today in Syria.

After listing these seas, this text mentions the Sea of ?ametz which refers to Emesa, today Hums, Syria. In contrast to the other seas, this one was constructed by Diocletian. In that context, it seems that this work is regarded positively, since Diocletian's project appears together with divine creations. Moreover, the tannaitic texts that mention seas and bodies of water in the land of Israel do not typically include seas and lakes in Syria. For example, Tosefta Baba Kama 8:18 mentions: the Sea of Tiberias (the Sea of Galilee), the Sea of Sovkhi, and the Great Sea (the Mediterranean Sea); Tosefta Sukkah 3:9, mentions the Sea of Sodom (the Dead Sea), the Sea of Tiberias, and the Great Sea. There are several possible explanations for this inclusion of water resources in Syria: First, the prior passage in the Talmud mentions the death of a famous sage, Rabbi Meir, which takes place in Syria, and his request that, after his death, his bed (with him) be placed on the seashore. In this tradition, Rabbi Meir also quotes Psalms 24:2; thus, that previous teaching links this verse to a sea in Syria. Second, the extension of this list (and, specifically, the inclusion of Syrian bodies of water) may have facilitated the addition of Diocletian's project, also located in Syria. Despite the identifications that remain unresolved, this text seems to display a fascination with this innovative venture by Diocletian.

Keywords in the original language:



- [??? ?????](#)
- [???????????](#)
- [??](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Apamea](#)
- [Dead Sea](#)
- [Diocletian](#)
- [Emesa](#)
- [Hahula Lake](#)
- [land of Israel](#)
- [Mediterranean](#)
- [sea](#)
- [Sea of Galilee](#)

Bibliographical references:

[Between Borders: The Boundaries of Eretz-Israel in the Consciousness of the Jewish People in the Time of the Second Temple and the Mishnah and the Talmud Period](#)

Ben-Eliyahu, Eyalbook*Between Borders: The Boundaries of Eretz-Israel in the Consciousness of the Jewish People in the Time of the Second Temple and the Mishnah and the Talmud Period* JerusalemYad Izhak Ben-Zvi2013

[“An Aramaic Inscription from Tyre from the Reign of Diocletian Preserved in the Palestinian Talmud”](#)

Greenfield, Jonas C.article-in-a-book‘Al Kanfei Yonah: Collected Studies of Jonas C. Greenfield on Semitic philology I Shalom M. Paul, Michael E. Stone , Avital Pinnick449-452“An Aramaic Inscription from Tyre from the reign of Diocletian Preserved in the Palestinian Talmud” LeidenBrill2001

[Palestine and the Adjacent Countries: A Geographical and Historical Encyclopedia of Palestine, Syria and the Sinai Peninsula](#)

Horowitz, Israel S.book*Palestine and the Adjacent Countries: A Geographical and Historical Encyclopedia of Palestine, Syria and the Sinai Peninsula* Vienna 1923

Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Jerusalem Talmud Berakhot 3:1, 6a; Nazir 7:1, 56a](#)

Emperor Diocletian and the sage who wanted to see him

- [Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Berakhot 3:1, 6a; Nazir 7:1, 56a](#)

Text

[Jerusalem Talmud Terumot 8:11; 46b-c](#)



How Diocletian the swineherd became Emperor Diocletian, and his attempt to avenge the Patriarch and the sages

- [Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Terumot 8:11; 46b-c](#)

Text

[Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 1:3, 39c](#)

Roman festivals

- [Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 1:3, 39c](#)

Text

[Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 1:4, 39d](#)

Diocletian and the fair in Tyre

- [Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 1:4, 39d](#)

Realized by:

[Yael Wilfand](#)



Source URL: <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/jerusalem-talmud-kil%E2%80%99ayim-94-32c-ketubbot-123-35b>