

**(sea) pool, large basin**

יָם

**1. Statistics**

Torah: 0. Nebiim: 8. Ketubim: 7. Total: 15.

In the meaning ‘sea, West’, the noun occurs ca. 390 times.

**2a. Literal Use**

According to 1 Kgs 7:23 par.; 2 Kgs 16:17; 25:13, 16; Jer. 52:17, and 1 Chron. 18:8 יָם denotes a bronze basin in the temple (יָם הַזֶּה; cf. Jer. 27:19, 52:20) which because of its enormous weight and dimensions had to be smashed in pieces by the Babylonians in order to transport the bronze to Babylon (Jer. 52:17). Its size is described in some detail: 10 cubits (ca. 4.4 m) across from brim to brim, perfectly round; it was 5 cubits (ca. 2.2 m) high, and its circumference was 30 cubits (ca. 13.3 m), while it rested on twelve oxen: three facing north, three facing west, three facing south, and three facing east, with the basin resting upon them; their hinder parts were all turned inward (1 Kgs 7:23-26; 2 Chron. 4:2-4, 10, 15). According to 1 Kgs 7:26 it contained 2000 bath of water (ca. 46,000 l, → בַּת), according to 2 Chron. 4:5, 3000 bath, possibly a scribal error, an exaggeration or a post-exilic smaller bath (cf. Noth 1968, 156; Busink, 328; Zuidhof 1982; Mulder 1987, 270-1). Hollenback 2000 proposes to apply Babylonian metrology to resolve the discrepancy. The brim was shaped like the petals of a lotus flower (1 Kgs 7:26).

No indication is given of the manner in which the ‘sea’ was filled. Perhaps rainwater from the roof of the temple was channelled into it. The water was distributed from the ‘sea’ with the help of waggons carrying smaller basins (‘lavers’), as described in vv. 27-39 (→ בַּיִר). According to 2 Chron. 4:6 the priests washed themselves in the ‘sea’ (hardly ‘from’, as Rudolph 1955 proposed). How they would have been able to descend into it without exposing themselves (cf. Exod. 20:26) remains unclear and the Chronicler’s account may be inaccurate. 2 Kgs 16:17 relates how king Ahaz took down the ‘sea’ from the bronze oxen, and put it upon a pediment of stones, possibly because he needed the bronze for his new altar (2 Kgs 16:10-15). Possibly the pediment had always been in place but had been hidden by the bronze oxen (cf.

Weippert 1988, 469).

## 2b. Figurative Use

The use of ‘sea’ in the sense of a large basin is itself a metaphor of course, but the bronze ‘sea’ is never used in a figurative sense.

## 3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested.

## 4. Cognates

The word *ym* ‘sea’ is well attested in West-Semitic languages, e.g. in Ugaritic (see Dahood 1965, 319), Phoenician, Hebrew and Aramaic. In Egyptian, Coptic, Akkadian and Arabic it is a loanword (cf. Von Soden, *AHW*, 514; Ringgren, *ThWAT*, Bd. 3, 646). Its use did not depend on the extent of its surface; it could designate lakes and rivers just as well.

## 5. Ancient Versions

The Versions provide literal translations:

Ⓞ and other Greek versions: 2 Kgs 25:13, Jer. 52:17 and 1 Chron. 18:8 τὴν θάλασσαν τὴν χαλκῆν ‘sea made of bronze’, elsewhere θάλασσα ‘sea’.

Ⓣ: 2 Kgs 25:13, Jer. 52:17 and 1 Chron. 18:8 יָם הַנְּחֹשֶׁת ‘sea of bronze’, elsewhere יָם ‘sea’.

Ⓢ: 2 Kgs 25:13; 1 Chron. 18:8; Jer. 52:17 *yammā danḥāšā* ‘sea of bronze’; 1 Kgs 7:24, 44 *yammā*.

Ⓥ: 2 Kgs 25:13 *mare aureum* ‘golden sea’, no doubt a corruption of *mare aeneum* ‘bronze sea’ which is found in 1 Chron. 18:8 and Jer. 52:17. In 1 Kgs 7:24, 44 simply *mare* ‘sea’.

## 6. Judaic Sources

In the Copper Scroll (3Q15, X.8,15; possibly also XI.12) יָם apparently denotes a reservoir of fresh water. This is especially obvious in 3Q15, X.15-16: בַּיִת הַמַּיִם שֶׁל רַחֵל תַּחַת הַשֶּׁקֶת ‘in the “sea” of the water-house of Rachel, beneath the watering trough’ (→ שֶׁקֶת). While יָם is not attested in combination with, or parallel to, either אָגַם or מְקוֹה in Ⓜ, it is used in combination with אֲשִׁיחַ

‘reservoir’, occurring four times here and once in Ben Sira 50:3 (here also parallel to יַבְיָב, ‘bath, pool’).

### 7. Illustrations

Reconstructions of the ‘sea of bronze’ have been attempted by several scholars. Such reconstructions are partly based on a large stone vessel from Amathonte in Cyprus. All these reconstructions are dubious (Busink, 326-36; Weippert 1988, 469-70).

### 8. Archaeological Remarks

[Will be added later on.]

### 9. Conclusion

In all the temples of the ancient world large amounts of water were needed to ensure ritual purity, especially in connection with slaughtering. Usually a large pond served this purpose, but a copper basin could be used too and could be so large that immersion was possible (cf. Haas 1994, 765). Also the postbiblical evidence (section 6) favours the idea of a large basin. In a Babylonian-Canaanite text from Emar several temples appear to have a ‘sea’ comparable to the ‘bronze sea’ of the Solomonic temple (Arnaud 1986, No. 452:32-3, 39-40, 46 [for different, but unconvincing opinions see Pentiuć, *WSEmar*, 21-5]; see for other Mesopotamian parallels, Frankena 1953, 32-3; Busink, 332-5; Bab. *apsû*, *CAD* A/2, 197). So there is no need to assume that the ‘sea of bronze’ had a symbolical meaning only (many authors, e.g. Mulder 1987, 271, but cf. Busink, 335-6).

The ‘sea of bronze’ was a large cultic basin in the First Temple, in the priestly precinct, which served the priests for washing. It was made of bronze, and contained water. Just as the pillars Jachin and Boaz in the Solomonic temple were relics of Israel’s roots in Canaan (1 Kgs 7:21; cf. De Moor 1995, esp. 16-7; 1997, 356-8; 1998, 200-1), so the cultic basin called ‘sea’ that is mentioned in the same context (1 Kgs 7:23) appears to have had parallels in the temples of Emar in northern Syria. Whether or not the Israelites still connected cosmological ideas with this basin (e.g. Albright 1946) cannot be established on the basis of the Hebrew tradition.

## 10. Bibliography

- Albright 1946 – W.F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, Baltimore <sup>2</sup>1946, 148-9 – *AncBD*, vol. 5, 1061-2 – *BDB*, 411: ‘great basin’ – Busink, 326-35 – Klein, *CEDHL*, 259: ‘large basin, reservoir’ – Dahood 1965: M. Dahood, ‘Hebrew–Ugaritic Lexicography III’, *Bib* 46 (1965), 311-32 – Alonso Schökel, *DBHE*, 294: ‘El deposito del Templo’ – *DCH*, vol. 4, 223-26: ‘sea; pool, basin, tank, vat’ – De Moor 1995: J.C. de Moor, ‘Standing Stones and Ancestor Worship’, *UF* 27 (1995), 1-20 – De Moor 1997: J.C. de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism: The Roots of Israelite Monotheism* (BETHL, 91B), Leuven 1997 – De Moor 1998: J.C. de Moor, ‘Seventy!’, in: M. Dietrich & I. Kottsieper (eds.), “*Und Mose schrieb dieses Lied auf*”: *Studien zum Alten Testament und zum Alten Orient* (Fs O. Loretz) (AOAT, 250), Münster 1998, 199-203 – *EM*, vol. 5, 338-46 – Frankena 1954: R. Frankena, *Tākkultu: De sacrale maaltijd in het Assyrische ritueel*, Leiden 1954, 32-3 – *GB*, 302: ‘Das eherne Meer, ein großes Bassin’ – Haas 1994: V. Haas, *Geschichte der hethitischen Religion* (HdO, 1/15), Leiden 1994, 626-7, 872 – *HAHAT*, 467: ‘das eherne Meer, ein bronzes Becken v. 2,5 m Höhe u. 5 m Durchmesser i. Hof des salomon. Tempels z. Jerusalem’ – *HALAT*, 395-96: ‘kultisch: d. eherne Meer’ – *HAWAT*, 151: ‘metaph.: grosses Wasserbassin’ – *HCHAT*, Bd. 1, 515: ‘von dem grossen ehernen Becken im Vorhofe des salom. Tempels’ – Hollenback 2000: G.M. Hollenback, ‘The Dimensions and Capacity of the “Molten Sea” in 1 Kings 7,23.26’, *Bibl* 81 (2000), 391-2 – *HWAT*, 257: ‘das eherne Meer des salom. Tempels’ – *IAT*, t. 2, 158 – *IDB*, vol. 4, 253 – *IDB.S*, 798 – *ISBE*, vol. 4, 367-8 – Kaddari, 430: כְּלִי מַכְלֵי מִקְדָּשׁ שְׁלֵמָה – *KBL*, 383-84: ‘künstliches Meer’ – CHECK AUT: Lawrence 2007: J. Lawrence, *Washing in the Water: Trajectories of Ritual Bathing in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature* (SBLAB), 2007 – *LHA*, 313: ‘grande vas aquarium templi Salomonis’ – Mulder 1987: M.J. Mulder, *Koningen*, dl. 1, Kampen 1987, 265-90 – *NIDOT*, vol. 2, 465 – Noth 1968: M. Noth, *Könige* (BK, 9/1), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1968, 155-62 – Rudolph 1955: W. Rudolph. *Chronikbücher* (HAT, 1/21), Tübingen 1955, CHECK AUT: PAGE – Gesenius & Roediger, *TPC*, 598: ‘mare aheneum appellatur magnum lavac-

rum in atrio interiore templi Salomonei' – *TWAT*, Bd. 3, 645-57 – Weippert 1988: H. Weippert, *Palästina in vorhellenistischer Zeit* (Handbuch der Archäologie: Vorderasien, 2/1), München 1988, 469-70 – Zuidhof 1982: A. Zuidhof, 'King Solomon's Molten Sea and (π)', *BA* 45 (1982), 179-84.

Last update: 18-05-2011

W.F. SMELIK

This article should be cited as:

W.F. Smelik, '𐤊𐤍 – (sea), pool, large basin', PDF downloaded from:

<http://www.otw-site.eu/KLY/kly.php>