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Cities of the Sea: In Search of אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּם אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּם

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CITIES OF THE SEA: IN SEARCH OF כְּרָכֵי הַיָּם*

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In this essay, I attempt to inscribe the mysterious location known as “the cities of the sea” (כְּרָכֵי הַיָּם) onto the map of rabbinic scholarship. Classical rabbinic authors look toward this mythic locale for three reasons: (1) to discuss tales of sin (and sometimes salvation); (2) to offer definitions and clarifications of obscure words; and (3) to explain halakhic exceptions. Through an examination of כְּרָכֵי הַיָּם in the classical rabbinic corpus, I argue that “the cities of the sea” should be understood as a locus of rabbinic pedagogy and not necessarily viewed as an actual, mappable location.

A handful of rabbinic texts make reference to a mysterious location known as “the cities of the sea” (כְּרָכֵי הַיָּם). Rabbinic authors look toward this locale for three reasons: (1) to discuss tales of sin (and sometimes salvation); (2) to offer definitions and clarifications of obscure words; and (3) to explain halakic exceptions. Since, to my knowledge, no author has discussed the function of “the cities of the sea” as a rabbinic trope, in this essay I attempt to inscribe this mythic location on the map of rabbinic scholarship. I argue that the cities of the sea should be understood as a locus of rabbinic pedagogy, and not necessarily viewed as an actual, mappable location.

1. SIN

The only *in situ* tannaitic mention of the phrase כְּרָכֵי הַיָּם also happens to be its most well-known appearance. *Sifre Numbers* 115¹ recounts the story of a rabbinical student who, while concerned about the biblical commandment to place fringes on the corners of four-cornered garments, is considerably more lax in some of his other practices:²

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¹ H. S. Horowitz, ed. *Siphre to Numbers with Textual Variants and Notes* (Leipzig: 1917; reprint, Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1966), pp. 128–129.

² Many scholars have written about this tale, including: S. J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 162–164

ר' נתן אומר אין לך כל מצוה ומצוה שבתורה שאין מתן שכרה בצדה צא ולמד ממצות ציצית, מעשה באדם אחד שהיה זהיר במצות ציצית שמע שיש זונה בכרכי הים והיתה נוטלת ארבע מאות זהובים בשכרה שיגר לה ארבע מאות זהובים וקבעה לו זמן כיון שהגיע זמנו בא וישב לו על פתח ביתה נכנסה שפחתה ואמרה לה אותו האיש שקבעתה לו זמן הרי הוא יושב על פתח הבית אמרה לה יכנס כיון שנכנס הציעה לו שבע מטות של כסף ואחת של זהב והיא היתה בעליונה ובין כל אחת ואחת ספסלין של כסף ועליון של זהב כיון שהגיעו לאותו מעשה באו ארבע ציציותיו ונדמו לו כארבעה עדים וטפחו לו על פניו מיד נשמט וישב לו על גבי קרקע אף היא נשמטה וישבה על גבי קרקע אמרה לו גפה של רומי איני מניחתך עד שתאמר מה מום ראית בי אמר לה העבודה לא ראיתי בך מום שאין כיפיך בכל העולם אלא מצוה קלה צונו ה' אלהינו וכתב בה אני ה' אלהיכם אני ה' אלהיכם שתי פעמים. אני ה' אלהיכם אני עתיד לשלם שכר, אני ה' אלהיכם עתיד ליפרע. אמרה לו העבודה איני מניחתך עד שתכתוב לי שםך ושם עירך ושם מדרשך שאתה למד בו תורה וכתב לה שמו ושם עירו ושם רבו ושם מדרשו שלמד בו תורה עמדה ובזבזה את כל ממונה שליש למלכות שליש לעניים ושליש נטלה עמה ובאתה ועמדה בבית מדרשו של ר' חייא. אמרה לו רבי גיירני אמר לה שמא ענייך נתת באחד מן התלמידים הוציאה לו כתב שכידה אמר לו עמוד זכה במקחך אותן המצעות שהציעה לך באיסור תציע לך בהיתר זה מתן שכרה בעולם הזה ובעולם הבא איני יודע כמה

Rabbi Nathan says: There is no commandment in the Torah that does not give its reward alongside. Go and learn from the commandment of the fringes [ציצית].

Once there was a man who was fastidious regarding the commandment of the fringes. He heard that there was a prostitute in the cities of the sea [בכרכי הים] who would collect 400 *zuz* of gold as a fee. He sent her 400 *zuz* of gold and she set a time for him. When his time came, he went and was seated on the threshold of her house. Her female slave came and said to her: "That man with whom you made an appointment is now sitting on the threshold of the house." She said to her: "Let him enter."

When he entered, she spread out for him seven beds of silver and one of gold and she was on the highest one, and between each [bed] were step-stools of silver and the highest of gold. When they arrived³ to do the deed, his four fringes came and appeared as four witnesses for him and slapped him across his face. Immediately, he slipped away and sat on the ground. She, too, slipped away and sat on the ground. She said to him: "By the *gappah* of Rome,⁴ I will not leave you alone until you tell me what blemish you saw in

(with additional references on p. 174 n. 80); A. Goshen-Gottstein, "The Commandment of *Tzitzit*, the Prostitute, and the Exegetical Story," in *Mahshevet Hazal* (ed. T. Groner and M. Hirschman; Haifa: University of Haifa, 1990), pp. 45–58 (in Hebrew); W. Harvey, "The Pupil, the Harlot, and the Fringe Benefits," *Prooftexts* 6 (1986): 259–271; and M. L. Satlow, *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality* (BJS 303; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1995), pp. 164–166.

³ This phrase could either refer to arriving at the temporal moment or to arriving at the physical location (i.e., they were both on the highest bed).

⁴ The meaning of this phrase is uncertain. While it is clearly an oath, some render it as "Capitol of Rome," and others as "Love of Rome," and still others as "Love Goddess of Rome." Saul Lieberman argues that the phrase *גפה של רומי* is an oath to Isis, although I do not find his evidence compelling enough to settle the argument. See S. Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Life and Manners of Jewish Palestine in the II-IV Centuries C.E.* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1942), pp. 139–141.

me!” He said to her: “By the [Temple] service, I did not see in you a blemish! For, in the whole world there is none as beautiful as you. But Yhwh, our God, commanded us an easy commandment; and He wrote in it [i.e., the Torah]: ‘I am Yhwh, your God,’ ‘I am Yhwh your God’ two times.⁵ ‘I am Yhwh your God’: I will give you a reward; ‘I am Yhwh your God’: I will punish you.”

She said to him: “By the [Temple] service, I will not leave you alone until you write for me your name and the name of your city and the name of your study-house in which you learn Torah!” He wrote for her his name, and the name of his city, and the name of his teacher, and the name of the study-house in which he learned Torah. She arose and liquidated all her property:⁶ [she gave] a third to the government, a third to the poor, and a third she took with her and came and stood at the study-house of Rabbi Hiyya.⁷ She said to him: “Rabbi, convert me!” He said to her: “Perhaps you are attracted to one of the students?” She brought forth the writing that was in her hand. He said to him [i.e., the student]: “Stand. You merit your acquisition. Those beds that she laid out for you in prohibition, she will spread them out for you in permissibility. If this is the reward given in this world, then in the World-to-Come I do not know how much!”⁸

One need not possess a dirty mind in order to pick up on the myriad of sexual innuendos that pervade this text. Even some rather innocuous sounding details can, in fact, be read as further sexualizing this narrative. For example, when the rabbinical student goes to meet the prostitute, he is described as sitting “on the threshold of her house.” With respect to women in rabbinic literature, the term “house” sometimes refers to female genitalia, an allusion that is probably in operation in this text.⁹

I highlight the sexual nature of this story because I believe that it is an integral part of this trope. In search of sin—explicitly sexual transgression—the rabbinical student looks towards the cities of the sea. There, he finds what he is looking for and, in the process, he hits the proverbial rock bottom. However, the cities of the sea also contain the solution to his problem, as it

⁵ Numbers 15:41, at the conclusion of a discussion concerning the commandment of the fringes (Num 15:37–41), states: “I am Yhwh, your God, who has removed you from the land of Egypt to be a God unto you; I am Yhwh, your God” (אני יהוה אלהיכם אשר הוצאתי אתכם מארץ מצרים להיות לכם לאלהים אני יהוה אלהיכם).

⁶ I take this felicitous translation from S. J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings*, p. 163.

⁷ Some manuscripts read “Rabbi Meir.”

⁸ My division of this pericope into paragraphs follows M. L. Satlow, *Tasting*, p. 165. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Hebrew and Aramaic are my own.

⁹ On the association between women and “house” in rabbinic literature, see C. M. Baker, *Rebuilding the House of Israel: Architecture of Gender in Jewish Antiquity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 34–76.

is here that he returns to the “proper” path, one that ultimately leads to the World-to-Come.¹⁰

The parallel and variant versions of this tale are even more explicit. In *b. Menahot* 44a, a parallel text, the rabbinical student and the prostitute are both naked when they encounter one another on the uppermost bed. Comically, while the rabbinical student is explicitly described as being naked (ערום), he does not remove his fringed garment! In the variant text, *b. Avodah Zarah* 17a, Elazar ben Durdia is not depicted as wearing a fringed garment. Thus, it is the prostitute who, *in flagrante delicto*, warns Elazar of the repercussions (vis-à-vis rabbinic Judaism!) for his actions. Upset, Elazar walks away and “sits between two mountains and hills.” This geographical allusion to *décolletage* serves as a metaphor for the location, both literal and figurative, of Elazar’s transgressions.

In two other instances in which the location כרכי הים appears, non-sexual sin is encountered, but salvation is not. For example, *b. Sanhedrin* 39a recounts the following interaction:

א"ל כופר לרבן גמליאל ידענא אלהייכו מאי קא עביד (והיכן יתיב) איתנגד ואיתנח א"ל
מאי האי א"ל בן אחד יש לי בכרכי הים ויש לי גיעגועים עליו בעינא דמחויית ליה ניהלי
אמר מי ידענא היכא ניהו א"ל דאיכא בארעא לא ידעת דאיכא בשמיא ידעת

A disbeliever [כופר]¹¹ said to Rabban Gamaliel: “I know what your God is doing (and where He is sitting).” [Rabban Gamaliel] became faint and sighed. [The disbeliever] said to him: “What is this?” [Rabban Gamaliel] said to him: “I have a son in the cities of the sea, and I have a yearning [to see] him. I want you to show him to me.” [The disbeliever] said: “Do I know where he is?” [Rabban Gamaliel] said to him: “That which is on earth you do not know, [yet] that which is in heaven you do know?!”

In this case, כרכי הים serves as the location where Rabban Gamaliel finds “proof” to invalidate the disbeliever’s heresy. While no sin occurs on location at the cities of the sea, I would argue that its appearance in this context is an allusion meant to reinforce the heretical statement made by the disbeliever. Further, the fact that the disbeliever is unaware of daily events in the

¹⁰ The World-to-Come also appears in the midst of a discussion of a linguistic definition (in general, see below). However, in *b. Sanhedrin* 110b, the World-to-Come only serves as part of a comment that requires exegesis, which is how כרכי הים comes to be used in this instance of linguistic definition.

The “proper” path involves self-restraint, a uniquely male trait in rabbinic literature. See M. L. Satlow, “‘Try to Be A Man’: The Rabbinic Construction of Masculinity,” *HTR* 89.1 (1996): 19–40.

¹¹ Some manuscripts read קיסר (Caesar/Roman emperor) here.

cities of the sea introduces a (perhaps unintentional) irony: a man is proven to be a sinner by lacking knowledge about a location of sin!¹²

The connection between sin and כרכי הים is reinforced in the second example of a non-sexual, non-salvation related sin. In *Genesis Rabbah* 28:5,¹³ several wicked generations from the Hebrew Bible are compared to one another, culminating in the following statement:

אמר ר' חנן נעשה בכרכי הים מה שלא נעשה בדור המבול הוי יושבי חבל הים גוי כריתים
(צפניה ב ה) שהוא ראוי כרת

R. Hanan said: “Things were done by the cities of the sea that were not done by the generation of the Flood. [As Scripture states:] ‘Woe, inhabitants of the seacoast [חבל הים], the nation of the Cherethites!’¹⁴ [which indicates] that they were suitable for extirpation [i.e., since the root consonants for Cherethites and the Hebrew word for extirpation—both כרת—are the same].”¹⁵

According to R. Hanan, the inhabitants of the cities of the sea did things that the generation of the Flood did not. This is a strong statement, especially when one considers the fact that the generation of the Flood was deemed sufficiently sinful so as to be wiped off the face of the earth by a flood! In order to “prove” the base nature of כרכי הים, R. Hanan cites Zeph 2:5, connecting the inhabitants of the cities of the sea with the Cherethites, whose very name is considered an eponym for extirpation.

R. Hanan’s association concretizes the perceived intrinsic connection between כרכי הים and sin. For, it is in this location that certain rabbis go to great lengths to find the best prostitutes and then, having found them, end up returning home with a reward far greater than a one-night stand; it is in this location that the disbeliever cannot locate Rabban Gamaliel’s son and, thus, “proves” his own heresy; and it is in this location that the inhabitants sin in ways unprecedented even by the notoriously-wicked generation of the Flood.

¹² On the common usage of irony in rabbinic literature, see J. L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative, Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 247–248.

¹³ Theodor and Albeck, eds. *Genesis Rabbah* (Jerusalem: 1965), 1:264.

¹⁴ Zephaniah 2:5. The nation of Cherethites refers to the people of Crete. In Ezek 25:16, they are associated with Philistines, as well as the survivors of the seacoast (חוף הים). Clearly, here, the location of the Cherethites at חבל הים allows for a connection with כרכי הים.

¹⁵ Parallel: *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1. A reviewer suggested that there is a word play between כרת and כרכי. However, I am not convinced that this is intentional.

2. LINGUISTIC DEFINITION

Another, perhaps comparatively more mundane, trope utilizing כרכי הים is one of linguistic definition. In this trope, which is by far the most common, “cities of the sea” is invoked in order to explicate or clarify a difficult term. For example, the question arises what is meant in Gen 2:22 by the phrase “Yhwh God built [ויבן] the rib [that he had taken from the man into a wife; and He brought her to the man].” Why does Scripture use the verb “built” in this context? The answer is found in כרכי הים.

דדרש ר"ש בן מנסיא מאי דכתיב ויבן ה' את הצלע מלמד שקלעה הקב"ה לחוה והביאה לאדם הראשון שכן בכרכי הים קורין לקליעתא בנייתא

For R. Shimon ben Menasia expounded: “Why is it written ‘Yhwh God built a rib’? [Scripture] teaches that the Holy-One-Blessed-be-He adorned¹⁶ Eve and brought her to the first man [i.e., Adam]. For in the cities of the sea they call ‘adorning’ [קליעתא] ‘building’ [בנייתא].”¹⁷

Turning towards the cities of the sea, we now encounter a linguistic definition, rather than a sin. The semantic range for the Semitic root for the verb “build” (בנה) is said to expand in the cities of the sea, so as to encompass the concept of adornment. A seemingly difficult word choice in Genesis is thus elucidated by traveling to כרכי הים.

This example offers both commonalities and exceptions to the other instances in which the כרכי הים trope functions in this manner. First of all, this tradition is attributed to R. Shimon ben Menasia, a Palestinian tanna. In general, most כרכי הים traditions—regardless of trope—are attributed to Palestinian authorities (or to a נחותא, a Babylonian who traveled to, and brought traditions back from, Palestine), most of whom are Tannaim. However, exceptions to this rule do exist, so it should not be considered a *sine qua non*.¹⁸ Unfortunately, no definitive pattern as to date (Tannaitic or amoraic?) or provenance (Palestinian or Babylonian?) can be established for כרכי

¹⁶ The verb קלע can mean either to plait hair, to adorn, or to dress. See M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1996 [1903]), p. 1380 s.v. קלע. I have chosen to render the verb “adorn” in English, as I believe this translation encapsulates the other two definitions. In context, the precise meaning is uncertain.

¹⁷ *B. Berakhot* 61a (= *b. Shabbat* 95a; *b. Eruvin* 18a; *b. Niddah* 45b; *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7; cf. *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* A4:12-13). While there are other later parallels (e.g., *Kallah Rabbati* 1:2), I will confine my sources throughout this article to works from the Classical Rabbinic period.

¹⁸ Palestinian: e.g., *b. Sotah* 13a; *b. Rosh Hashanah* 26a. Babylonian: e.g., *b. Berakhot* 6b (also, Rav Dimi is an amora; *b. Shabbat* 21a attributes this tradition to Shmuel, a Babylonian transitional amora); *b. Shabbat* 54b.

traditions. Second, the text switches from Hebrew to Aramaic when talking about כרכי הים. While it is tempting to conclude that Aramaic is the language spoken in the cities of the sea, our evidence does not support this conclusion, as some are written in Hebrew throughout, or switch from Aramaic to Hebrew when discussing כרכי הים.¹⁹ Thus, linguistic shifts do not provide any concrete or stable evidence for the cities of the sea. Third, *b. Berakhot* 61a and parallels utilize the phrase שכן...קורין. This formula appears in many, though not all, instances in which the cities of the sea trope functions as a linguistic definition.²⁰ Once again, this is a common feature, but by no means a necessary one for the trope to function as such.

The trope of linguistic definition operates in a similar fashion, whatever the topic being defined. I will offer one more example of how this trope functions and then summarize the various terms defined via the cities of the sea. In *b. Berakhot* 6b,²¹ a strange term for a bird is elucidated:

שנאמר כרום זלות לבני אדם מאי כרום כי אתא רב דימי אמר עוף אחד יש בכרכי הים וכרום שמו וכיון שחמה זורחת מתהפך לכמה גוונין

as it is said: “When the כרום is reviled among the sons of men.”²² What is [the meaning of] כרום? When R. Dimi came [from Palestine], he said: “There is a bird in the cities of the sea whose name is כרום, and when the sun shines upon it, it changes into many colors.”

Here כרכי הים contains the answer to a crux in Ps 12:9. כרום, often translated “vileness” or “baseness,” is said to be a name for a photosensitive bird.²³

Elsewhere, we learn that in cities of the sea: חנון means a type of wood that induces sneezing so as to remove worms from a woman’s head;²⁴ דרה means a precious stone;²⁵ כירה (dig) means מכירה (sale);²⁶ a נדה (menstruant

¹⁹ To offer a few examples, only Hebrew appears in *b. Sotah* 42a (cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 31:12 [this line appears only in some manuscripts]) and *Exodus Rabbah* 19, while Aramaic shifting to Hebrew appears in *b. Berakhot* 6b (= *b. Shabbat* 21a) and *b. Rosh Hashanah* 26a (cf. *b. Sotah* 13a).

²⁰ In addition to the examples already mentioned, it appears in *b. Rosh Hashanah* 26a (lacking שכן; cp. *b. Sotah* 13a); *b. Sotah* 42a (cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 31 [this line appears only in some manuscripts]); *b. Sanhedrin* 110b; *Exodus Rabbah* 19; and *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7. However, it does not appear in *b. Berakhot* 6b (= *b. Shabbat* 21a); *b. Shabbat* 54b; and *b. Megillah* 12a.

²¹ = *b. Shabbat* 21a.

²² Psalm 12:9.

²³ Based upon *b. Berakhot* 6b, Lewysohn identifies the כרום as a Bird of Paradise (*Paradiesvogel*). See L. Lewysohn, *Die Zoologie des Talmuds: Eine umfassende Darstellung der rabbinischen Zoologie, unter steter Vergleichung der Forschungen älterer und neuerer Schriftsteller* (Frankfurt am Main: In Commission bei J. Baer, 1858), pp. 183–184.

²⁴ *B. Shabbat* 54b. Instead of clarifying a word from the Hebrew Bible, here a word from the Mishnah (*m. Shabbat* 5:4; חנונות) is elucidated.

²⁵ *B. Megillah* 12a.

woman) is called a גלמודה;²⁷ a child is called a פתיה;²⁸ and שוטים (fools) are מורים (rebellious ones).²⁹ In each instance, the cities of the sea provide a linguistic definition for a difficult term. As in the case of the trope concerning sin, the trope of linguistic definition utilizes the cities of the sea as a locus of pedagogy. Whether the subject is sin or semantics, those who travel to כרכי הים therein encounter useful information.

3. HALAKIC EXCEPTION

Appearing in only a handful of texts, the third, and final, trope utilizes “the cities of the sea” to offer explanations for halakic exceptions. While rabbinic literature is replete with such explanations, on rare occasions these accounts turn towards כרכי הים for answers. For example, according to *b. Shabbat* 134a:³⁰

דתניא א"ר נתן פעם אחת הלכתי לכרכי הים ובאת אשה לפני שמלה בנה ראשון ומת שני ומת שלישי הביאתו לפני ראיתיו שהוא אדום אמרתי לה המתניני לו עד שיבלע בו דמו המתינה לו עד שנבלע בו דמו ומלה אותו וחיה והיו קורין אותו נתן הבבלי על שמי

It is taught [in a *baraita*]: R. Natan said: “Once I went to the cities of the sea and a woman came before me who had circumcised her first son and he had died [and she had circumcised her] second [son] and he had died. She brought [her] third [son] before me. Seeing that he was [too] red, I said to her: ‘Wait until the blood is absorbed.’ She waited until his blood was absorbed and [then] circumcised him and he lived. And they called him Nathan the Babylonian after my name.”

This *baraita* explicates an earlier statement by Abaye that, according to his mother,³¹ one must wait to circumcise a “red” baby because his blood has not yet absorbed and a “green” baby because he is deficient in blood. In this case, כרכי הים appears in the midst of a discussion of a halakic exception, as,

²⁶ *B. Rosh Hashanah* 26a (cf. *b. Sotah* 13a).

²⁷ *B. Sotah* 42a (cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 31:12 [this line appears only in some manuscripts]). *B. Rosh Hashanah* 26a attributes this tradition to R. Aqiba, not R. Elazar and, more importantly, to Gallia (גליא) and not to כרכי הים. For a comparison of *b. Sotah* 42a and *b. Rosh Hashanah* 26a, see C. E. Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 18–19, 224 n. 19. Further, according to *y. Berakhot* 9:2 (13c) (this appears in some printed editions as 9:1; I follow: ed. Schäfer and Becker, 1/1–2:230), R. Levi attributes this tradition to Africa.

²⁸ *B. Sanhedrin* 110b.

²⁹ *Numbers Rabbah* 19:9.

³⁰ = *b. Hullin* 47b.

³¹ *B. Hullin* 47b attributes this tradition neither to Abaye nor to his mother.

in general, a Jewish boy must be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth.³²

Immediately following the story occurring in the cities of the sea, R. Natan also mentions a similar incident that occurred in Cappadocia, involving a “green” baby.³³ I am unsure how to interpret the fact that one tale occurs in an explicit locale—Cappadocia (a land-locked, ascetic location)—and another one occurs in the cities of the sea (a water-front property associated with sin). While one could argue that this lends credence to כרכי הים being an actual place, I find that line of reasoning unconvincing. Rather, it seems to me that the cities of the sea functions as a pedagogical site. Perhaps there was a tradition attributed to R. Natan about “red” and “green” babies and the location of only one of these tales—Cappadocia—was known to the authors, transmitters, and/or redactors of this passage. They therefore set the first tradition in a known locus of pedagogy and halakic explanation: the cities of the sea. Or, perhaps since the “red” tradition was attributed to the cities of the sea, then the “green” tradition required a different location. I prefer the latter suggestion, since it mirrors the text’s order. The first story is set in the cities of the sea and the second story is set in Cappadocia. Regardless, I see no reason to conclude that this passage points toward an actual, mappable location for כרכי הים.

Another halakic exception found in כרכי הים is encountered in the midst of a convoluted discussion about whether a male convert to rabbinic Judaism may marry the wife of his deceased maternal brother. While the Torah mandates levirate marriage,³⁴ the question that the rabbis ask is whether this law only applies to a native-born Israelite, and not to a convert. By providing a different scenario, the cities of the sea offer an answer:

ת”ש דאמר בן יאסיין כשהלכתי לכרכי הים מצאתי גר אחד שנשא את אחיו מאמו
אמרתי לו בני מי הרשך אמר לי הרי אשה ושבעה בניה

Come and hear. As Ben Yasyan said: “Once I went to the cities of the sea. I found a certain convert who had married the wife of his maternal brother. I

³² One could argue that this is a halakic explanation without precedent, as earlier traditions (see the next note) only discuss the case of a “green,” and not “red,” baby. On rabbinic allowances for the delay or omission of circumcision, see S. J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised: Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 22–24.

³³ The “green” baby account appears in *t. Shabbat* 15(16):8 (and parallels).

³⁴ For example, Deut 25:5–10. On levirate marriage in rabbinic literature, see M. L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 186–189.

said to him, ‘My son, who permitted you [this marriage]?’ He said to me, ‘Behold, the woman and her seven children [who were converts].’³⁵

The text goes on to offer support for the male convert’s actions by no less of an authority than R. Akiva himself. Once again, the cities of the sea offer a halakic exception.³⁶ It appears that כרכי הים is a locus of difference—whether linguistic or halakic.

A final example of the cities of the sea and halakic exception is encountered during a discussion about the permissibility of using a dried-up *lulav* (לולב or date palm frond, one of the four species—along with myrtle, willow, and citron—necessary for the observance of the festival of Sukkot), which *m. Sukkah* 3:1³⁷ explicitly does not allow. According to *y. Sukkah* 3:1 (53c):³⁸

תני בשם רבי יודה היבש עצמו כשר. אמר להן רבי יהודה והלא בכרכי הים מורישין לולביהן לבניהן. אמרו לו אין למידין משעת הדוחק.

It is taught [in a *baraita*] in the name of R. Judah: A dried up one [i.e., a *lulav*] itself is valid.³⁹ R. Yehudah said to them: “And is it not [the case] in the cities of the sea⁴⁰ [that] they bequeath their *lulavs* to their children?” They said to him: “One does not learn [i.e., derive law] from a time of emergency.”⁴¹

Once again, an halakic exception is cited as occurring in the cities of the sea.⁴² In this case, R. Yehudah attempts to resolve two competing Tannaitic traditions by appealing to the cities of the sea.

³⁵ *B. Yevamot* 98a. Rashi’s suggestion that the woman and her seven children were converts makes contextual sense.

³⁶ Further, as in the previous example, this text begins with the first-person singular perfect of the verb הלך. Since it is absent from the next example, I do not consider this to be a necessary part of the trope. While one could argue that this is a similarity present only in the Babylonian Talmud (since the other example, as we shall see, is from the Palestinian Talmud), I am inclined to disagree for two reasons: (1) the small sample size; and (2) the same verbal form introduces a linguistic definition in *b. Rosh Hashanah* 26a.

³⁷ Albeck edition, 2:266.

³⁸ Schäfer and Becker edition, II/6:169; = *t. Sukkah* 2:9.

³⁹ In *t. Sukkah* 2:9 (Lieberman edition, 2:264), which is the tannaitic source for this *baraita*, this sentence is written in the plural. There, as Lieberman notes, it refers to all of the four species.

⁴⁰ Instead of the “cities of the sea,” *t. Sukkah* 2:9 (Lieberman edition, 2:264) begins R. Yehudah’s statement thusly: “It once occurred to the men of the cities (באנשי כרכין) that they bequeathed.” Stuart Miller has noted that the phrase “*anshei X*” is often used by both tannaitic and amoraic Palestinian sources to refer to common people. See S. S. Miller, *Sages and Commoners in Late Antique 'Erez Israel: A Philological Inquiry into Local Traditions in Talmud Yerushalmi* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), pp. 163–178.

⁴¹ The inadmissibility of evidence found during a time of emergency (בשעת הדחק) is also discussed in *b. Niddah* 9b.

⁴² Interestingly, we learn here that כרכי הים is considered as being in “a time of emergency.” The precise meaning of this phrase is uncertain. Is there a severe *lulav* shortage in the cities of the sea (thus requiring the usage of a dried *lulav*)? Is life difficult there for some reason? Is its climate unsuitable for growing *lulavs*?

On the surface, this trope may seem completely different than the other two. However, the connection between all three tropes is that כרכי הים offers pedagogically useful data. Whether the lesson is moral, linguistic, or halakic, the cities of the sea provides relevant information.

4. CONCLUSION

Scholars have suggested various locations for כרכי הים, including Caesarea⁴³ and Cyprus.⁴⁴ However, when one examines all of the contexts in which the cities of the sea appear, it becomes apparent that כרכי הים is not necessarily a location to be charted on a map. Rather, I would suggest that כרכי הים is a locus to which rabbis⁴⁵ sometimes turn when looking to narrate tales of sin (and, in some instances, salvation); to define difficult and obscure terms; and to explain exceptions to halakah.⁴⁶ Of course, this is not to dismiss completely the possibility that, at least in some instances, rabbinic authors might have been referring to some actual location. In this manner, the cities of the sea may be considered analogous to depictions of the Indian Ocean in the medieval West, in which the boundaries between the real and the imaginary are often blurred.⁴⁷

It is now time to leave the cities of the sea. On our brief tour of כרכי הים, we have encountered some of the most rich and the most mundane texts in classical rabbinic literature, from a rabbi who visits a prostitute, to the meaning of obscure words for birds and rocks. Although no text explicitly acknowledges this fact, the cities of the sea clearly functions as a discursive site for pedagogical purposes. It is meant to be turned toward for instruction, and not necessarily to be located on Google Earth.

⁴³ For example, S. Lieberman, *Greek*, p. 140.

⁴⁴ For example, M. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, p. 482 s.v. חנן.

⁴⁵ As stated earlier, although most כרכי הים traditions are attributed to a Palestinian (or to a נחומא, a Babylonian who traveled to, and brought traditions back from, Palestine) tanna, this was not consistent.

⁴⁶ There appears another rabbinic phrase that, at first glance, might seem comparable to כרכי הים: מדינת הים (the “city/province/country of the sea”). In the majority of instances where it appears, מדינת הים is used to explore the effect that overseas travel has on halakah, notably on marriage, divorce, and inheritance law (e.g., *m. Yevamot* 15:1, 6, 8–10; 16:1; *t. Yevamot* 14:3; *b. Yevamot* 25a; 87b; 92a–b; 94b). While this term on rare occasions seems to serve as a locus of linguistic definition (e.g., *b. Shabbat* 114a) and salvation (*Leviticus Rabbah* 37:2), the phrase מדינת הים appears to be deployed mainly in a concrete—and not literary—manner. Namely, מדינת הים is used to discuss an actual person who, for whatever practical reason (usually business), must travel a distance from home. If he were to die en route, this creates very real problems vis-à-vis rabbinic law. As such, halakic exceptions feature prominently in these discussions. However, these are concrete conversations about the effect of travel on law, and not literary appeals to a locus of pedagogy. It is for this reason that I do not dedicate an extended discussion to mapping מדינת הים.

⁴⁷ See J. Le Goff, “The Medieval West and the Indian Ocean: An Oneiric Horizon,” in *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages* (trans. A. Goldhammer; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 189–200.