

Grain Equivalencies

(excerpted from Porten-Yardeni 2007a)

Grain is measured with great precision: 1 kor = 30 seahs, 1 seah = 6 qabs, and a qab may be divided into halves, quarters, and even eighths. One is reminded of the biblical injunction to “have completely honest weights and completely honest measures” (Deut 25:15). Our ancient sources—Josephus (*Ant.* IX.4.4, 62; XV.9.2, 314), the Talmud (*Eruv.* 4b, 83a), and Epiphanius¹—come together to show that there existed at the same time three different seah measures, known in the Talmud as the desert seah (8.1 liters), the Jerusalem seah (9.72 liters), and the Sepphoris seah (11.664 liters).² To determine modern equivalents, many scholars, following Josephus, have taken their lead from Greco-Roman sources and come up with equivalents in the range of the Sepphoris seah.³ Others have taken their lead from the Talmud and come up with equivalents in the range of the desert seah.⁴ And still others have adopted an archeological approach and arrived at an equivalent at the lowest end of the scale (7.3 liters).⁵ Because the Greek New Testament and the Peshitta (Matt 5:15; Mark 4:21; and Luke 11:23), as well as the Mishnah (*Kelim* 17:11), equate the seah with Italian *modius*, which we know lies in the range of 8 liters, we may assume that it was the desert measure that applied in Idumea of the 4th century B.C.E.⁶

1. J. E. Dean, *Epiphanius' Treatise on Weights and Measures: The Syriac Version* (Chicago, 1935) 40–41, 46. We are grateful to Shlomo Naeh for detailed discussion of these metrological problems.

2. Calculations on the basis of H. Lewy, “Assyro-Babylonian and Israelite Measures of Capacity and Rates of Seeding,” *JAOS* 64 (1944) 69 n. 34.

3. F. Hultsch, *Griechische und Römische Metrologie* (Berlin, 1882) 416, 447–56; W. Nowack, *Lehrbuch der Hebräischen Archäologie* (Leipzig, 1894) 202–6; I. Benzinger, *Hebräische Archäologie* (3rd ed.; Leipzig, 1927) 192–95; M. A. Powell, “Weights and Measures” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York, 1992) 6.904–5.

4. Y. Feliks, *Agriculture in Eretz-Israel in the Period of the Bible and the Talmud* (Hebrew; 2nd ed.; Jerusalem, 1990) 144–45; Lewy, “Assyro-Babylonian and Israelite Measures,” 65–73.

5. W. F. Albright et al., *The Excavation of Tell Beit Mirsim, Vol. III: The Iron Age* (AASOR 21–22; New Haven, 1943) 58–59; E. Stern, “Measures and Weights,” *Encyclopedia Mikraït* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1962) 4.852–55.

6. See Lewy, “Assyro-Babylonian and Israelite Measures,” 65–73.