

??AMULETS



Let There Be Light

Over the ages, oil lamps have vividly reflected the customs and aspirations of diverse societies dwelling in the Land of Israel, as can be seen in an exhibition opening this Hanukka at the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem.

In the modern world, there is not a great deal of difference between day and night; darkness is merely a temporary nuisance, easily vanquished by touching a switch. In ancient times, however, darkness was not as easily overcome. Accordingly, the oil lamp was one of the most important household appliances in antiquity. For over three millennia, it lit the homes, temples, synagogues, and churches of the Holy Land.

According to Jewish tradition, it is one of the items that a husband is obliged to provide for his wife (Tosefta, Ketubot 5:8). An individual who lacked a lamp was in desperate straits: To be “in want of all things” meant “in want of lamp, of knife, and of table” (Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, version A, ch. 20).

The oil lamp’s light was a symbol of life, in both ancient and modern times. “The human soul is the lamp of the Lord,” says a biblical proverb (Prov. 20:27). “Lord, You are my lamp, my God lights up my darkness,” David declares (2 Sam. 22:29).

An exhibition of oil lamps used in the Land of Israel from the Bronze Age to the

late Islamic period, opening during Hanukka at the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem and continuing through the spring, is meant to give the public a greater understanding of these vessels and illuminate various aspects of life in the Holy Land. The oil lamps on display are from the collections of Ruth and Labor Court President Stephen Adler and Nira and Kenneth Abramowitz, and the exhibition was made possible through the support and assistance of the Abramowitzes, the Adlers, Genevieve and David Hendin, and Diane and Bill Stern.

“Let There Be Light,” as the exhibition is called, explores the lamp’s development and shows the historical intermingling of cultures, religions, and peoples in the Land of Israel. It also demonstrates that popular art is a powerful medium for conveying beliefs, hopes, and ideas.

Evolution of the Oil Lamp

The first known lamps from the Middle Bronze Age (2300-1800 BCE) are simple wheel-made bowls, with four slight pinches (tongues) at the top to hold four wicks.



Photographs courtesy of the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem

Above: A pear-shaped lamp made with a mold in the eighth or ninth century and a lantern from the Byzantine period (sixth century).

Left: The date palm appears on lamps from a variety of areas and cultures, including this North African Red Slip lamp dating back to the fourth or fifth century.

Right:

A Byzantine-period lamp with a cross-shaped handle. Such lamps were used in ceremonies at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.

Below: A mold-made "Darom" lamp decorated with an olive branch.

Lamps from the later Middle and Late Bronze Ages (2000-1200 BCE) and Iron Age (1200-560 BCE) have only one pinch for the wick. Only minor changes were introduced during the Canaanite and Israelite periods.

In the Hellenistic period (333-168 BCE), the Greeks introduced the closed oil lamp, which was distinguished by its two separate compartments: the oil reservoir, constituting the major part of the lamp, and the chamber into which the wick was inserted. The Hasmonean Jews' repudiation of all things Hellenistic included the rejection of the closed Hellenistic lamp. As a result, the "Hasmonean lamp" is based on the earlier open lamp, but the fold that forms the mouth is so pronounced that the two sides of the mouth come together. This lamp gives concrete expression to the Jewish opposition to Greek influence in private life as well as in the Temple.

This period also marks the beginning of the manufacture of mold-made decorated lamps in the Land of Israel. Mold-made lamps gradually replaced wheel-made bowl lamps. The simple but elegant Herodian lamps (37 BCE-70 CE) are the first type found mainly in Jewish settlements and are therefore thought to have been used primarily by Jews in the late Second Temple period. Another style, known as "Darom," refers to the type of lamp found in caves in the Judean Desert and the lowlands, a region called Darom in the Mishna and other



sources; such lamps have been dated to the period between the Jewish war against the Romans and the Bar Kochba Revolt (ca. 70-150 CE).

Other inhabitants of the Land of Israel used a variety of lamps. While the Nabatean lamps have mostly geometric decoration, the highly decorated Roman imperial lamps (100-300 CE) were quite prevalent. Roman oil-lamp manufacturers used molds as a method of mass production, lowering the price while still leaving plenty of free space on the surface of the lamp for ornamentation. Their popularity and abundance led not only to the widespread export of the lamps, but also inspired provincial manufacturers to establish their own local workshops, copying the Roman prototypes.

Samaritan-type oil lamps of the fourth through seventh centuries have been found in large numbers in Samaria-Sebaste and other areas where Samaritan communities were concentrated. They were sold with a sealed filling-hole (which was broken by the purchaser), possibly to ensure ritual purity.

Local Byzantine lamps, many with Christian symbols, began to appear in the fifth century. The most recent lamps on display at the Bible Lands Museum are Islamic lamps from the eighth through thirteenth centuries.

The Hanukka Lights

The kindling of lights on Hanukka is associated with the miracle of the jar of oil used to light the Temple *menorah*, which was composed of oil lamps. The *menorah* of the Tabernacle depicted in the Book of Exodus (25:31-40; 37:17-24) consisted of a central shaft from which three branches issued on either side, at three junctions called *kaftorim* ("calyxes"). Each branch ended in a *perah* ("flower"), in which an oil lamp rested. These, then, were separate lamps, and not a single lamp with multiple mouths; they also were distinct from the body of the *menorah* itself, and apparently were made of gold, as was the body of the *menorah*. ■

ERETZ thanks Dr. Joan Westenholz and Riki Morginstin of the Bible Lands Museum for their assistance with this article.

