

The Lamps of Khirbet el-Maqatir

By Brian N. Peterson

“A lamp is called a lamp, and the soul of a man is called a lamp”
(Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 30b)

A Brief History of Ancient Oil Lamps

Whether we realize it or not, lamps can tell us a lot about ancient peoples. According to ancient Jewish tradition, lamps were the most important household “appliance.” The Mishnah (e.g., *Bava Metzia* 7:1; *Kelim* 3:2; *Shabbat* 2:4), Jerusalem Talmud (e.g., *Shabbat* 2:1), Babylonian Talmud (e.g., *Berakhot* 60b; *Shabbat* 23b, 29b, 30a), and Tosefta (*Ketubot* 5:8; *Shabbat* 1:13) are replete with sayings focused on the importance of the oil lamp in daily life and Torah study (Westenholz 2004: 8). For example, because daylight was so important for outside activities, most Torah study was done by lamp light after the sun went down. There can be little doubt that this importance placed upon lamps is what sparked biblical verses such as “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path” (Ps 119:105) and “No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a container” (Lk 8:16).¹

In ancient societies, the oil lamp was the most efficient form of light. Vegetable oils, bituminous oils such as petroleum, and olive oil (the most common for Israel) served as fuel. In the Mediterranean region, it was the latter that was the most sought after and used by the wealthiest individuals because of its purity (Israeli and Avida 1988: 9).² Wicks for lamps consisted of woven fibers, with the best wicks being made from flax.

Lamps also provided a symbiotic connection between

the living and the dead. They were used as light for digging tombs, and then were buried with the deceased in burial rites to light the way into the afterlife (Israeli and Avida 1988: 9; Westenholz 2004:15; Sussman 2007: 2–3, 43). As early as the LB I period, in pagan contexts, lamps were placed in foundation offerings usually with an infant sacrifice (Sussman 2007: 43).

During their earliest production, lamps were most often made of clay on a potter’s wheel, although metal (e.g., bronze and iron), glass, and stone lamps are also attested, though very rare (Rosenthal and Sivan 1978: 156–64; Hadad 137–41; Sussman 2009: 80–81; Xanthopoulou 2010: 1–316), as are terracotta-figurine lamps (Chrzanovski 2000: 15; Israeli and Avida 1988: 9; Westenholz 2004:11). Beginning as early as the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods lamps were flat and saucer shaped (Sussman 2007: 7–9, 176, 406). Along the edge of the shallow saucer, a slight pinch in the edge of the saucer lip would hold the wick. In some cases potters put multiple pinches in the rim of the saucer, thus allowing for multiple wicks (Sussman 2007: 412–18). The



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Fig. 1 - Hasmonean “pinched” saucer lamp (ca. 152–37 BC) found in a foundation trench inside of the south wall of the first-century house—summer 2013. Object #1115, dimensions 3.44 x 2.4 x 1 in (8.6 x 6.0 x 2.4 cm).

saucer design predominated from the third millennium into the late Hellenistic period of the first century BC. Over the centuries the saucer lamp design progressed to having both sides of the lamp being folded together until they touched (see fig. #1)—a feature most common during the Hellenistic period (Israeli and Avida 1988: 10; Sussman 2007: 7–93, 492–93). Later lamps of this design were much smaller than their counterparts, and were easily held in the palm of one’s hand.

During the transition between the Hellenistic and Roman eras molded lamps took the place of saucer lamps. This luminary innovation originated in Greece and Egypt as early as the third century BC and continued to the eighth century AD (Hayes 1980: 2; Szentleky 1969: 43–44). These lamps were often highly ornamented with floral, zoomorphic and geometric designs, and in many instances lamp designs reflected the user’s unique interests, such as food, hunting, fishing, combat, etc. (Sapouna 1998: 65–84 and Tables 1–51; Rosenthal and Sivan 1978: 83–89; Goethert-Polaschek 1985: Tables 16–73). Of course, for strict Torah-observant Jews in Judea and Jerusalem, the simple, unadorned wheel-made lamps remained the lamp of choice. At most, basic designs such as the menorah, Torah shrine, or palm branches were allowed (Westenholz 2004: 12). Interestingly, observant Jews were forbidden to use pagan-engraved lamps or from even lighting their lamps from them (Westenholz 2004: 12).

Molds were made of clay, stucco, or stone (the most common type in Israel), and consisted of an upper and lower half (Israeli and Avida 1988: 11, 164; Hayes 1980: 224). Once these molds were made, mass production of similar patterns and designs flooded the markets. Not surprisingly, after these highly decorative and prized designs were produced and sold, lamp makers would copy other’s work by making impressions of existing forms, which often included the original manufacturer’s name!³

The procedure for making molded lamps involved taking a consistent layer of moistened clay and pressing it into each of the two halves. Next, the upper and lower molds were pressed together until the clay air dried to a leather consistency. At this point the molds were removed and the wick and filling holes were cut out. Prior to being fired in a kiln, further shaping, the addition of handles (if not already part of the mold), and the smoothing of the seam where the molds joined was done (Israeli and Avida 1988: 11). Due to the delicate nature of making molded lamps, special workshops sprang up and special kilns



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Fig. 2 - Wheel-made Herodian lamp (ca. 37 BC–AD 68) found under the floor debris beside an underground silo inside the first-century house—summer 2013. Object #970, dimensions 3.6 x 2.8 x 0.56 in (9.0 x 7.0 x 1.4 cm).

were built to fire these and other delicate clay objects. These workshops have been found in Caesarea, Gerasa/Jerash, Beit Nattif and in Ramla (Israeli and Avida 1988: 12; see also Wood 1990: 33–44). By the Umayyad period in the eighth century AD, production of mold-made lamps moved from specialized workshops and again were produced side-by-side with larger pottery objects. Ironically, lamp designs came full circle in the Middle Ages, returning to the saucer shape. To this day some Mediterranean countries continue to produce saucer lamps for luminary purposes (Israeli and Avida 1988: 12; Hadad 2002: 117–19).

During the Roman era (first century BC–third century AD) and into the Byzantine period (third to seventh centuries AD), two competing lamp designs emerged. The first, often termed the “Herodian” or “Darom” (“lamps from the south”) style of lamp, dominated lamp designs in the first to second centuries AD.⁴ Its unique features included larger filling and wick holes with a nozzle extending from the main body of the lamp (see fig. #2). What makes these lamps distinct is a flared nozzle with an arched end, which formed points on each side (see examples in Israeli and Avida 1988: 13, 43; Loffreda 2001: 9).

The second design came into use during the latter end of the Roman period and into the Byzantine era (ca. third to fifth centuries AD). The design of the lamp changed into a more oval or pear shape, with the nozzle being incorporated into the body of the lamp (see fig. #3). This lamp design, often called the “slipper-lamp,” was dominant between the fifth and seventh centuries of the Byzantine period (for examples, see Rosenthal and Sivan 1978: 112–24). Unlike earlier periods, designs on these lamps lacked heavy ornamentation, were utilitarian,



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Fig. 3 - Mold-made “slipper” or “candlestick” lamp (ca. AD 485–750) found on bedrock next to the wall on the exterior of the Byzantine monastery—summer 2012. Object #833, dimensions 3.8 x 2.48 x 0.88 in (9.5 x 6.2 x 2.2 cm).

and mass-produced. A common lamp type of this period was the “candlestick” or “radiated” lamp, which had either a palm branch or a menorah on the nozzle (Wetzel 1997: 29; Rosenthal and Sivan 1978: 116–21; Magness 1993: 173–77 and Plates 7 and 8; see also fig. #3). During this same period and into the early Islamic era of the eighth century, Christian inscriptions in Greek began to appear on specialty candlestick lamps. Also known as “inscribed” lamps, common sayings were “The light of Christ shines beautifully for all”; “Christ’s light enlightens all”; or “Christ the Light” (Israeli and Avida 1988: 149; Loffreda 2001: 31; Magness 1993: 174). Interestingly, incoming ABR Director of Excavations, Scott Stripling, found lamps of this type at Tall el-Hammam and the Temple Mount Salvage Project with palindrome inscriptions⁵ reading, “The Light of the Savior.”

The final type of oil lamp, which also has been found at our site, is the early Islamic/Umayyad lamps of the seventh to ninth centuries AD. The Moslem conquest of Judea during the seventh century influenced the design of this lamp mainly through decorative motifs. Unique features of these lamps include the large knob-like or tongued-shaped handles bent forward, channels running from the filling hole to the wick hole, intricate floral designs within tendrils, and Arabic inscriptions and/or designs (Israeli and Avida 1988: 154). The lamp itself is very broad with a pointed nozzle, and the upper and lower halves of the molded body meet at a sharp angle. Molds for these lamps have been found in Samaria and Bet Shean (Hadad 2002: 94) and lamps of this type have been found in numerous sites throughout the Levant (Hadad 2002: 94–95).⁶ This lamp design marked the closing period of the mold-made types, when lamp production returned to the potter’s workshop. In this vein,

similar decoration and clay types begin to appear on both pottery vessels and lamps, such as those unearthed at Ramla (Israeli and Avida 1988: 154). As noted above, it was during this period that lamp design began to revert back to the saucer type.

This brief history is by no means meant to be exhaustive. Indeed, from their first appearance until today, the myriad lamp types makes it impossible even for the largest museums to have complete assemblages within their holdings. In fact, there is no existing private collection, museum assemblage, or written publication that “embraces more than a fraction of the known types and decorative motifs” (Hayes 1980: 1).

The Lamps of Khirbet el-Maqatir

Over the past two years, excavations at Khirbet el-Maqatir have unearthed four complete lamps (one after reconstruction) representing the last four periods of settlement at our site. Also, numerous fragments of saucer lamps from the LB I and Hasmonean periods have been found. Among these fragments, one partial saucer lamp from the LB I period was found in the summer of 1999 and one partial Hasmonean “pinched” lamp, similar to the one illustrated, was discovered in the first-century house in the summer of 2011. Unlike older saucer lamps, molded lamps from the later periods tend to survive intact due to their small size and the fact that this design tends to be very strong.

The oldest—and smallest—complete lamp (after reconstruction) found to date at Khirbet el-Maqatir is a Hasmonean “pinched” saucer lamp (see fig. #1). This design was in use in Judea from ca. 152 BC until the late first century BC (Sussman 2007: 90–93). These lamps have been found at numerous sites throughout the Levant, such as Tell Sailun, Khirbet Nisya (the site of earlier ABR excavations), Tell en-Nasbeh, and Jerusalem (Sussman 2007: 92). ABR volunteer Robert Byrns found the lamp in fragments during the summer of 2013. It was later reassembled into a complete lamp, with the exception of a small hole in the bottom. The lamp was discovered in a foundation trench inside the first-century house. This may point to an initial construction date for the house somewhere in the late Hellenistic period.

The second oldest lamp falls under the “Herodian” category and dates anywhere from 37 BC–AD 68 (see fig. #2). It consists of a wheel-made body with the nozzle being added later. The potter used a knife to mold the nozzle onto the body and flatten the wick hole. This technique of adding the nozzle later is why they are often called “knife-pared lamps” (Hadad 2002: 13).

This type of lamp has been found throughout Jewish sites of the Cisjordan, Nabatea, and northern Sinai and seems to have been the preferred lamp of Jewish people of this period (Rosenthal and Sivan 1978, 79–81; Hayes 1980, 13–14). These lamps are extremely fragile, as evinced by the discovery of numerous nozzles minus the lamp bodies. This has been the case at Maqatir since I joined the team in 2010. In this vein, of the 43 Herodian lamps found at Bet Shean, almost all of them were only nozzles (Hadad 2002: 13). Surprisingly, during the summer of 2013, ABR volunteer Dr. Bill Simmons from Lee University found this lamp intact with only a corner of the nozzle missing! It was buried in the hard-packed floor of the first-century house next to the opening to an underground silo. It was no doubt used by the owner of the house to find supplies in the silo. The coins that have been found *in situ* in the same room as the lamp suggest this room was used ca. 37 BC–AD 68.

The third lamp, which is mold-made, dates to the Byzantine era (ca. AD 485–750) and has been found extensively, with and without inscriptions, throughout the southern Levant (Westenholz 2004: 55). For example, at Bet Shean four complete lamps of this type were found along with 43 partial or near-complete exemplars (Hadad 2002: 66). This lamp, also called a “slipper lamp,” has what appears to be either a palm branch or a candlestick design next to the nozzle (see fig. #3). ABR volunteer David Lawless discovered this lamp in the summer of 2012 on the bedrock on the outside of the eastern wall of the monastery. The fact that it was at the lowest level next to the foundation seems to indicate that the monastery was built sometime between the fifth to sixth centuries. It is possible, based upon the numismatics discoveries, that the date may be closer to the late fourth century.

The last lamp is also mold-made and dates to the Islamic period of the eighth to ninth centuries AD (Westenholz 2004: 41). Although we cannot be certain, the lamp’s light grey-brown clay appears to have a burgundy slip on it (see fig. #4). Scholars tend to date these lamps to the Abbasid period, sometime after the earthquake of AD 749. This lamp was discovered by one of the local workers during the December 2012 excavations of the later additions on the western end of the monastery. These rooms were perhaps constructed after the devastating earthquake. Interestingly, this lamp matches those found at Khirbet el-Mefjer near Jericho in the Abbasid levels also dating to a period after the earthquake (Israeli and Avida 1988: 154).

The lamps of Khirbet el-Maqatir are among the few intact pieces of pottery discovered at

our site. Nevertheless, they paint a very clear picture of four of the later periods of settlement there. Long after Joshua’s Ai was destroyed, settlers moved back to the site, turning it into a thriving community from the Hasmonean period until it was abandoned in AD 68/69.⁷ Over three centuries later, the Byzantines moved back to the site and erected a church, no doubt to commemorate some great facet of Old Testament history. The church/monastery stood for over another 400 years,⁸ although based upon numismatic discoveries, it appears to have been in use for only about 150–175 years (ca. the late fourth century to the early/mid sixth century). Thankfully, the lamps these people left behind are still shedding “light” to help us date these thriving periods of Khirbet el-Maqatir’s history.

Notes

¹ See also 1 Sm 3:3; 2 Sm 22:29; 1 Kgs 11:36; Jb 29:3; Ps 18:28; Prv 6:23; 13:9; 20:20; 24:20; Jer 25:10; Mt 5:15; Mk 4:21; Lk 8:16; 11:33, 36; 15:8; Jn 5:35; 2 Pt 1:19; Rv 18:23; 21:23; 22:5

² Jewish people preferred olive oil because of its use in the temple.

³ As can be imagined, this has caused a lot of difficulty in dating lamps and their origins.

⁴ The “Darom” style gets its name from the lowland and desert region of Daroma in Judea. They were found predominantly in caves in the Judean desert and date between the two Jewish wars (70–135 CE). Apparently displaced skilled stoneworkers, who retreated to this region after the first Jewish revolt, began making these lamps in stone molds.

⁵ These types of inscriptions read the same frontwards and backwards.

⁶ Well over 250 full or partial lamps of this type were found at Bet Shean alone (Hadad 2002: 95).

⁷ Four coins found in the first-century house date to the third year of the first Jewish revolt (ca. April AD 68 to May AD 69).

⁸ Dr. Scott Stripling’s working theory is that sometime after the early-to-mid



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Fig. 4 - Mold-made Islamic-era lamp (ca. AD 749–890s) found in the western addition of the Byzantine monastery—December 2012. Object #862, dimensions 3.76 x 2.64 x 1.28 in (9.4 x 6.8 x 3.2 cm).



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Dr. Bill Simmons (Professor of New Testament at Lee University) holds the Herodian lamp moments after he discovered it buried in the floor of the first-century house.

sixth century the monastery was destroyed (perhaps in the Samaritan revolts) and later rebuilt until its final destruction during the great earthquake of AD 749. To date, no active presence on the site of the monastery appears after this date.⁹ Sometime after the early-to-mid sixth century the monastery may have been destroyed and later rebuilt in some form until the great earthquake of AD 749.

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