

Ancient Oil Lamps 2200 BC - 900 AD



Samples of authentic oil lamps produced and used from 2200 BC-900 AD.



An oil lamp from 100 BC-100 AD filled with olive oil, and using a piece of cotton rope fiber for a wick, burns to give light in 2021 on Galyn's deck in Iowa, USA.



The earliest oil lamps were shaped like a flat saucer with the rim pinched in a single location to hold the wick. Before this design, it is likely the wick floated in a shallow saucer of oil or hung against the edge. This style of lamp would have been in use during the life of Shem and Abraham's father, Terah (2200 BC).



During the Canaanite period 2200-2000 an oil lamp with four pinches developed. Abraham and Melchizedek would have been familiar with this design (2200-2000 BC).



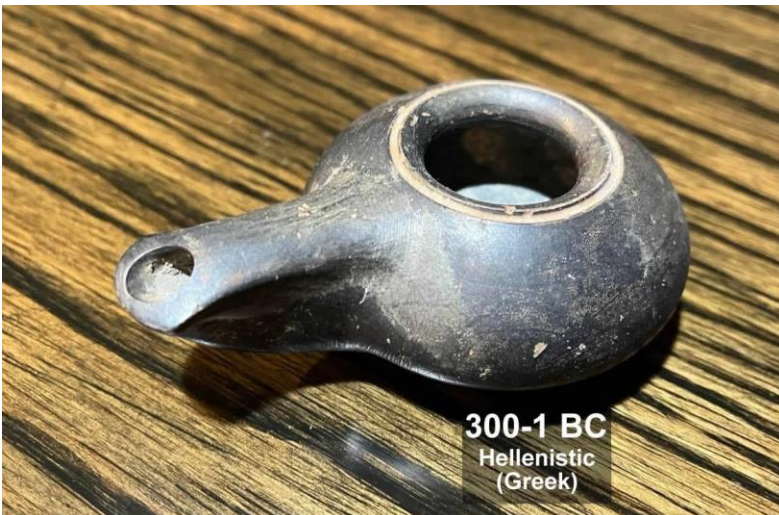
Around the time of the Exodus, the rim of the oil lamp and the pinch that held the wick gradually became more defined. This lamp design (1500-1200 BC) was in use in the land of Canaan during Moses' life. Joshua would have used this type of lamp, as would the people in the book of Judges.



The trend of a defined rim, deeper oil bowl and an emphasized pinch for the wick continued through the Old Testament times. These saucer lamps were not carried, but were set on shelves or in niches in walls. The kings of Judah and the prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and others would recognize this lamp (930-330 BC).



By the time the Greeks arrived in the land of Israel the pinch in the saucer lamp had made contact and closed the top leaving an opening for the wick. The oil lamp designed as a saucer disappeared and gave way to these smaller oil lamps. Also, a flat base was added to stabilize the oil lamp when it was set on a stand or a shelf.



With the rise of the Greek Empire in the east, Israel began importing the popular round Hellenistic lamps that were covered and glazed with a black/brown to reddish slip. This lamp was imported into Israel sometime between the Old and New Testament (300-50 BC).



This typical Roman lamp swept through the Roman Empire in 100 BC-200 AD. These oil lamps were round and set higher with a larger bowl to hold more oil. The nozzle for the wick was short. The center was closed with a circular lid that was molded with a scene from Roman life. The bowls were made with a mold by craftsmen in workshops. In the closed center circle would be a small hole to fill the lamp with oil. These lamps, along with other designs, were used in the days of the Gospels and throughout the New Testament period into the time of the early church. Paul would have used lamps designed like this one in Israel and in his travels throughout the Roman Empire.



The scene on the molded center of this lamp is of a husband and wife embracing. The rim encircles the Roman lamp with a woven leaf pattern. Also, notice a handle has been added. These lamps were carried around with people, as we read about in Jesus' parable in Matthew 25:

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.”



This is an example of a Herodian oil lamp from the time of Jesus and a Hellenistic juglet that was used to carry oil or wine. The juglet could be used to carry extra oil for the lamp.

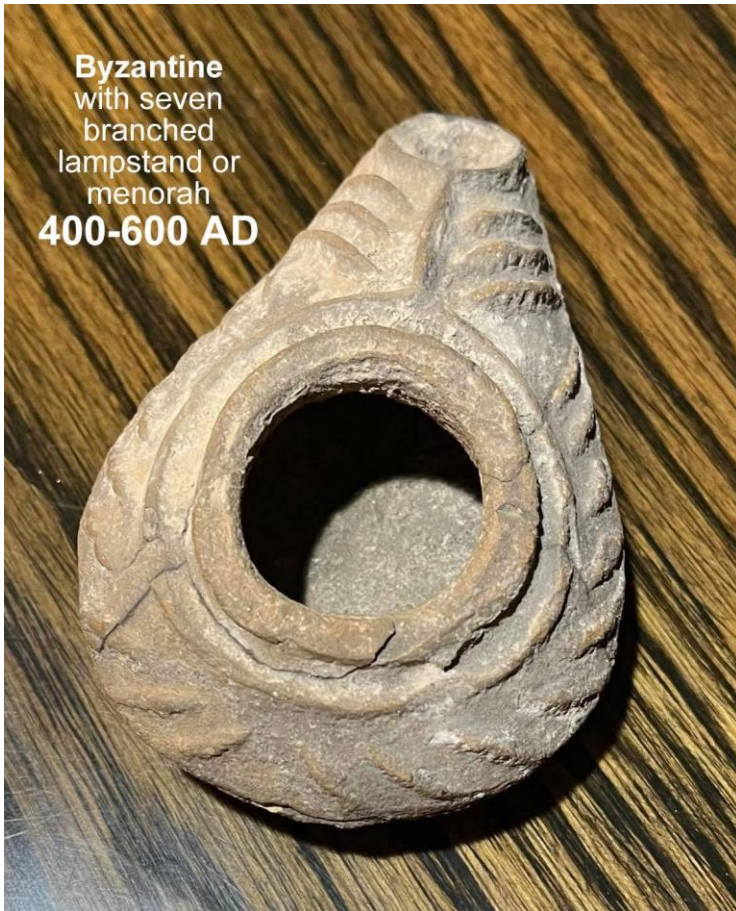


The Herodian period lamp in Israel (63 BC-200 AD) was a simple design with a plain circular bowl shaped on a pottery wheel. The bare simplicity of the design may have been for religious reasons, since during the Herodian period people undoubtedly had the time, resources, and skill to produce something more elegant. A nozzle was attached to the bowl by hand and a blade was used to scrape the clay smooth where the nozzle connected to the bowl. This style is, therefore, called the “scraped lamp”. The lamp pictured here has the common design of this style with a round shoulder and a large fill hole encircled with a ledge to help the oil drain into the bowl. The nozzles on the Herodian lamps broaden out to an open end that was arched or curved where the wick was set.



With the Roman Wars of 66-70 AD and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the shops and production of artists and craftsmen came to a halt. People fled, and the urban centers collapsed, and a distinct new oil lamp design developed from the agricultural population. The lamp design that emerged is called the Darom oil lamp from the Hebrew word *darom*, which means “south”, and indicates a scattered people moving south into the rural agricultural areas. The designs on these lamps focus on floral images, vines, and grains common in Israel. Some show instead common farming equipment and household items. The design includes a handle and a clear circular base for stability.





When viewed from the top, the Byzantine oil lamp fits into the shape of an elongated triangle with the corners of the triangle base rounded. It is interesting that the Christian Byzantines overwhelmingly used the Jewish menorah to decorate these lamps. One theory for this tendency is to consider that these Byzantine Christians were Jews. Some researchers identify the menorah image as a palm branch. Of course, since the menorah is also a lamp, it is logical that its image would be used on an oil lamp. Crosses and floral designs, among other patterns also appear, but the menorah is a dominant feature on Byzantine oil lamps between the years 400-600 AD.





Galyn lights a first century Herodian oil lamp for the first time in 2,000 years while three of his grandchildren (and two of editor, Tim Vaniman's) watch.

Final Comments

From the very beginning Jerusalem has survived countless conquests and been home to many peoples. Now today, when we visit Jerusalem we stand at the crossroads of both history past and eternity future. The revelation of God's plan for Jerusalem began in the book of Genesis as it appeared in Abraham's life. Then, during the reign of David, the Lord began to use Jerusalem as his base of operations on earth. The Lord continued to use the city of Jerusalem, the people of Israel, and the Temple Mount on Mount Moriah throughout the days of the kings of Judah. Later, the Jews were removed from Jerusalem when God judged Israel by the Babylonian Empire, but he later restored them again to the city through Cyrus, king of Persia. Jerusalem was the setting for much of

Christ's ministry, and more importantly, Jerusalem was the site of Jesus' death, burial, resurrection and ascension.

In days to come, Jerusalem will be the center of other great battles and will become the seat of the government of the coming Kingdom of God. The same scriptures that record Jerusalem's past also describe its glorious future when the Lord returns to redeem his people, restore the earth, and establish his kingdom. To stand in Jerusalem is to stand in the middle of history and gaze into the future.

