

# Archaeological Proof and the Holidays of Purim, Passover and Shavuot

1. Purim
2. Passover
3. Shavuot

## Celebrating Purim in the First Century

Based on the writings of Josephus (37-100 CE), we learn that the festival of Purim was celebrated in Jerusalem in the year 94 CE. He states in Antiquities of the Jews:

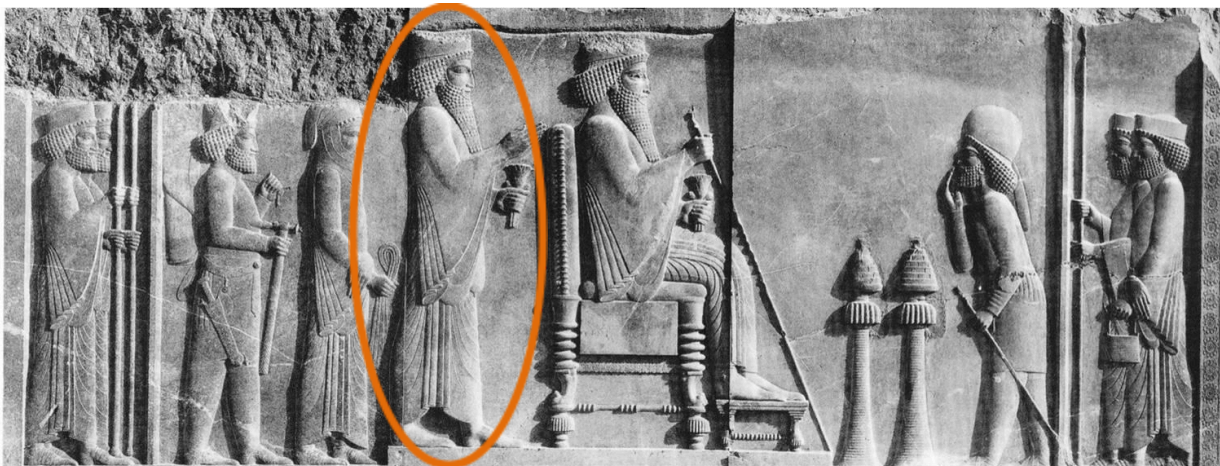
*“Mordecai also wrote to the Jews...to observe these days, and celebrate them as festivals; ... the Jews still keep the aforementioned days, and call them days of Purim” (6.6.13).*

The Festival of Purim is the celebration of God’s intervention to save the Jews of Persia from the evil Haman in 479 BCE, during the reign of Xerxes, (Ahasuerus).

Ahasuerus is Xerxes, the Persian king who fought the Spartans at Thermopylae in 480 BCE (The movie “300”). As stated in the Book of Esther, King Xerxes was approached by Haman, who said:

*“If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them (the Jews), and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king’s administrators for the royal treasury.” (Esther 3:9)*

Some observe that Xerxes accepted Haman’s offer because the king’s treasury was depleted by his battles against the Spartans.



**Crown Prince Xerxes (Ahasuerus) stands behind his enthroned father, Darius I (the Great). Carved stone relief from the Palace of Xerxes, at Shushan. 465 BCE. The Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.**

*“In those days King Xerxes sat on his royal throne in the citadel of Susa.” –Esther 1:2*



**Aerial picture of modern Shushan. In the foreground is a modern “palace,” built during the French archaeological expedition to Shushan (1897-1912), which is nearby to the ruins of Xerxes’ palace.**



**Persian warriors from King Xerxes' (Ahasuerus) Palace in Susa, i.e. Shushan, Louvre Museum**



**Esther is Introduced to Ahasuerus, Rembrandt, The Louvre**

*“She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal palace in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. (i.e., 479 BCE)” Esther 2:16*



**The Triumph of Mordecai, Rembrandt, Collection of George Blumenthal**

*“So Haman took the garb and the horse and arrayed Mordecai and paraded him through the city square; and he proclaimed before him: This is what is done for the man whom the king desires to honor!”* ” Esther 6:11



**Haman and Ahasuerus visit Esther, Rembrandt, Pushkin State Museum, Moscow**

*“So the king and Haman came to feast with Queen Esther. On the second day, the king again asked Esther at the wine feast, ‘What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you...’”* Esther 7:1-2



### **Haman Recognizes His Fate, Rembrandt, Heritage Museum**

*“Then King Xerxes spoke up and asked Queen Esther, ‘Who is this, and where is the one who would devise such a scheme?’ Esther replied, ‘The adversary and enemy is this wicked man—Haman!’ And Haman stood in terror before the king and queen.”*  
Esther 7:5-6

## **Purim: The Casting of Lots**

As we know from the Book of Esther, the casting of lots – known as ‘Pur’ - was used by Haman to establish the date on which he intended to attack and murder the Jews of Shushan. Purim is a plural of that term. Scholars note that the date of Purim falls during a Persian festival. As such, apparently wishing to coincide the attack with Persian rejoicing, Haman had lots cast repeatedly (multiple Pur – or Purim) until the result called for a date during that time frame:

In the Book of Esther 3:7 we read:

*“In the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, in the first month, i.e., the month Nissan, one cast the pur (i.e. the lot) in the presence of Haman, day by day and month by month (until it fell on the fourteenth day of ) the twelfth month, i.e., the month of Adar.” Later in the same book (9:26) we read: “Therefore they called these days Purim, after the word (or: on account of the) pur.”*

The technique of casting lots was equally well known in the Bible. The Bible records many different uses for the casting of lots, ranging from the division of the Promised Land among the twelve tribes by Joshua, to the finding of the culprit in the tale of Jonah,

and to the gambling for the garment of the condemned man in Psalm 22—an image subsequently used by the Gospels in connection with the crucifixion.

Remarkably, the casting of lots was confirmed by the discovery of the Black Obelisk in 1845. The Black Obelisk is a monument that details the military campaigns of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (859-824 BCE), including the conquest of the Kingdom of Israel in 841 BCE. It provided the first extra-biblical proof of the biblical stories, and also contains a reference to the use of lots (puru) for royal decision making. In 9<sup>th</sup> Century BCE Assyria, the order in which the individual ministers and governors succeeded each other was determined by lot. Shalmaneser III, in the thirtieth year of his reign, having run through the roster of his assistants, he started over again, as recorded on the Black Obelisk. The inscription reads:

*“In my thirty-first year (i.e., 828 BCE), I cast the lot for the second time in front of the gods Ashur and Adad.”*

One of Shalmaneser’s minister’s lots has survived and is now housed in the Yale Babylonian Collection. The “lot”, shown below, is a simple little cube inscribed on four sides, similar to modern dice, although with more detail inscribed on each side. The Assyrian word for lot is puru. It appears twice on the inscribed cube.



The translation reads:

*“Oh Assur the great lord, oh Adad the great lord, the lot of lahali the grand vizier of Shalmaneser king of Assyria, governor-of-the-land (for) the city of Kibshuni (in) the land of Qumeni, the land of Mehrani, Uqu and the Cedar Mountain, and minister of trad—in his year assigned to him by lot may the harvest of the land of Assyria prosper and thrive, in front of the gods Assur and Adad may his lot fall.”*

Not only does the Black Obelisk mention the casting of lots, it also depicts Jehu, the King of Israel, kissing the feet of Shalmaneser. The Obelisk describes the major events in 31 military campaigns conducted by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III. The reliefs in the second panel from the top on each face of the obelisk, according to the inscription below the picture, depict “The tribute of Jehu, son of Omri,” an event dated to about 841 B.C.



**The Black Obelisk, British Museum** “ *And Jehu struck down all that were left of the House of Ahab in Jezreel—and all his notables, intimates, and priests—till e left him no survivor.*” 2 Kings 10:11

# The Celebration of Passover

Most historians believe that the Exodus from Egypt happened 3,200 years ago. The Celebration of Passover is the escape of the Jewish people from slavery to freedom. We do know that Passover was celebrated 2,400 years ago in Egypt.

## Celebrating Passover in Jerusalem and Elephantine, Egypt in 419 BCE

Exodus 12:17-18:

*“You shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your ranks out of the land of Egypt; you shall observe this day, throughout the ages as an institution for all time. In the first month (Nisan), from the 14th day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the 21st day of the month at evening.”*

In 419 BCE, the Persian Emperor Darius II (423–404 BCE) sent Hananyah, a Jewish man who was a representative of the Persian government, to Jerusalem to receive the priestly regulations regarding the feast of the Unleavened Bread. He then sent in a letter that was discovered in Elephantine, Egypt, the instructions for celebrating Passover to the Jewish community of Elephantine.

External address: *To my brothers Jedaniah and his colleagues the Jewish Troop, your brother Hananiah, son of PN.*

Instructions: *And now, this year, year 5 of Darius (II) the king, from the king it has been sent to Arsames.*

*Now, you, thus count fourteen days of Nisan and **on the 14<sup>th</sup> at twilight the Passover observe and from day 15 until day 21 of Nisan the Festival of Unleavened Bread observe.** Seven days unleavened bread eat.*

Restored translation from Porten, Bezael, et al., *The Elephantine Papyri in English*, Society of Biblical Literature: 1996.





*Passover Letter, Pergamon Museum, Berlin*

The Jewish community served as mercenaries for the Persians on the Island of Elephantine, then called Yeb, which is located near the Aswan Dam in Egypt. 175 documents dating to 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE were found at Elephantine. The Elephantine Temple Papyrus dates the Jewish presence in Elephantine:

***“The temple of the God of heaven that was built at Fort Elephantine long ago, before the time of Cambyses [530-522 BCE], which ‘that criminal Vidranga’ razed in the fourteenth year of King Darius [410 BCE].”***



**Elephantine Temple Papyrus, Berlin State Museums**

## **Einstein and Passover**

In 1933, Einstein had emigrated to America to escape the rising tide of Nazism in Germany. While at Princeton, Einstein took part in seders with the local community.

Dr. Harry Polachek writes in an article titled “Einstein and Religion” published in the Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences in 1979:

On Passover eve, Einstein would sometimes gather the [neighborhood] children in his house for a Passover mini-Seder. Einstein was a lover of freedom and Passover is the holiday of freedom, which commemorates the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery to freedom. Einstein would talk to the children about freedom, and would point out to them that freedom cannot be won once (as in the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt), but must be regained over and over again by every generation.

## **The Israelites Enter Egypt**

**Joseph Is Taken to Egypt, c. 1500 BCE**

Genesis 37:28:

*“When Midianite traders passed by, they (his brothers) pulled Joseph out of the pit. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt.”*



*Joseph Is Sold by His Brothers by Rembrandt*

### **The Sons of Jacob in Egypt**

Genesis 45:25-28:

*“They went up from Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. And they told him, “Joseph is still alive; yes, he is ruler over the whole land of Egypt.” His heart went numb, for he did not believe them.*

*But when they recounted all that Joseph had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to transport him, the spirit of their father Jacob*

revived. 'Enough!' said Israel. 'My son Joseph is still alive! I must go and see him before I die.'



***Jacob Hears that Joseph Is Alive by Rembrandt***

Exodus 1:1-7:

*“These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household:*

*Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin;  
Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.*

*The total number of persons that were of Jacob’s issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt.*

*Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.”*

## Pharaoh Ramesses II, “The Great,” 1279-1213 BCE

Exodus 1:8-9:

*“A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us.”*

A consensus of archaeologists suggest that the Pharaoh of the Exodus was Ramesses The Great. Scientists at Liverpool John Moores University have revealed the face of Ramesses the Great using CT scans and facial reconstruction software.



*FaceLab, Liverpool John Moores University, via YouTube*

## Slavery in Egypt

Exodus 2:11:

*“He (Moses) saw an Egyptian breathing a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen.”*



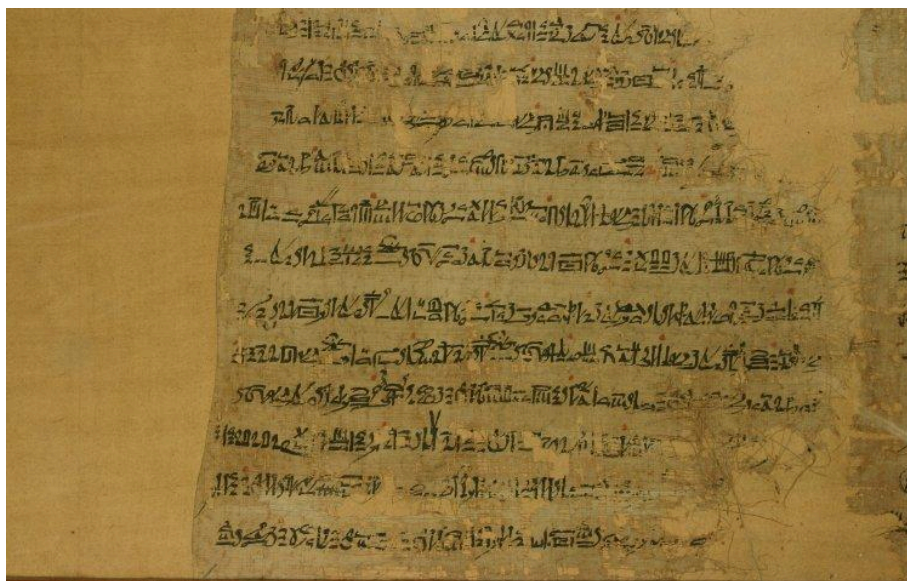
**Wall Painting from the Tomb of Menna, Thebes, Egypt**

Exodus 5:18:

(Pharaoh:) *“Be off now to your work! No straw shall be issued to you, but you must produce your quota of bricks!”*

Papyrus Anastasi IV, 1250 BCE:

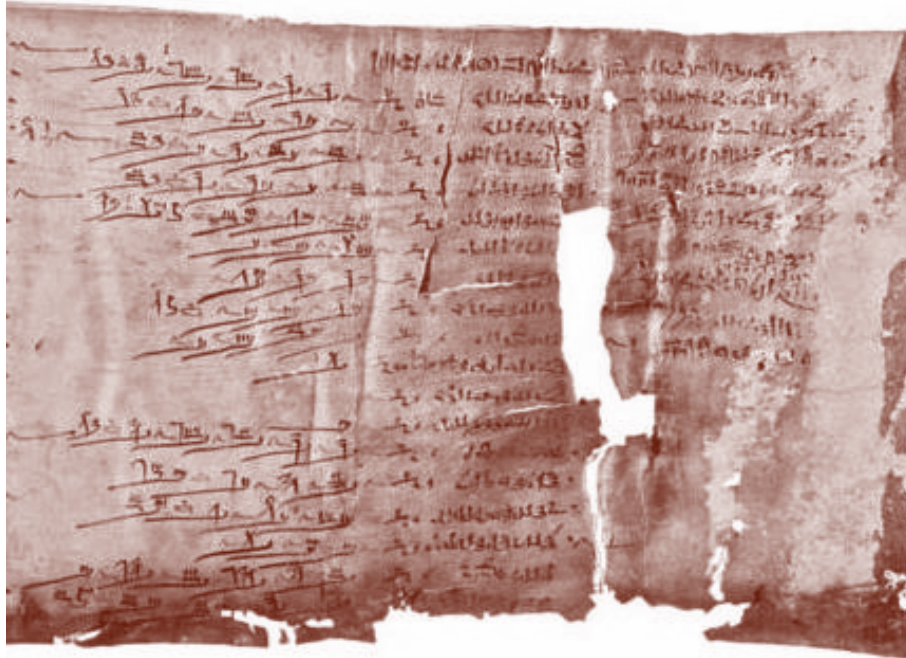
*“ . . . and there are neither men to make bricks nor straw.”*



**British Museum**

The Leather Scroll, 1274 BCE:

*“Yupa, son of Urhiya, (quota of ) 2000 bricks --1630 arrived, deficit 370”*



**The Louvre**

Exodus 10:3:

*“So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me?*

*Let My people go, so that they may worship Me.’”*



*Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh by Rembrandt*

## **The Israelites are in Canaan, c. 1207 BCE**

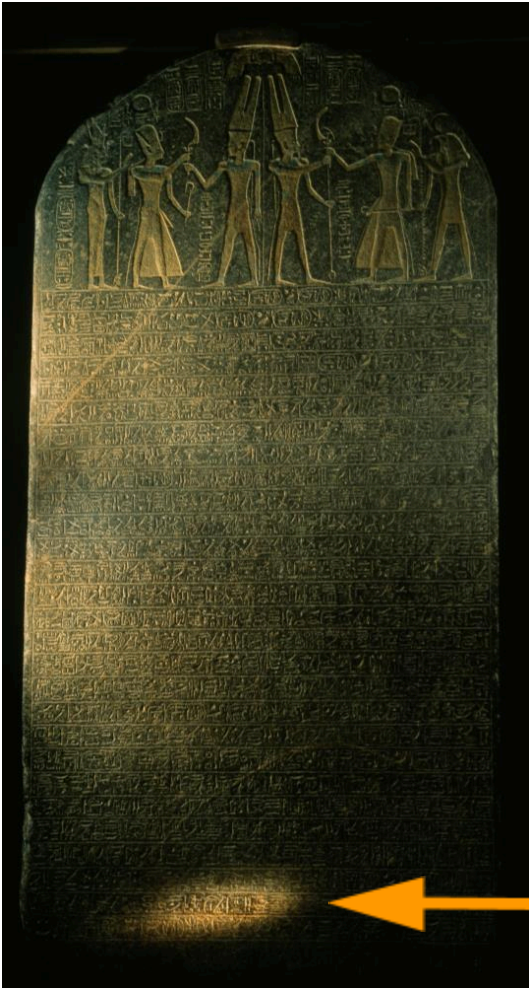
The first extra-biblical evidence of Israelites being in the land of Canaan exists on the enormous victory stele of the Egyptian king Merneptah.

The Pharaoh Merneptah, son of Ramesses II, The Great, writes (Reading from right to left):

*“Canaan is plundered with every evil way. Ashkelon is conquered and brought away captive, Gezer seized...**Israel is laid waste, his seed is not.**”*

Israel is a diminutive; it is a people, not a place. There is no mention of the Philistines who later conquered Ashkelon.





*"Israel" on the Merneptah Stele, discovered in 1896*

## After the Destruction of the First Temple, Citizens of Judea Fled to Egypt

Jeremiah 43:5-7:

*“Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers took the entire remnant of Judah—those who had returned from all the countries to which they had been scattered and had sojourned in the land of Judah, men, women, and children; and the daughters of the king and all the people whom Nebuzaradan the chief of the guards had left with Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan, as well as the prophet Jeremiah and Baruch son of Neriah— and they went to Egypt.”*

There are numerous synagogues in Egypt, dating to the 3rd Century BCE.



Locations of Synagogues in Ancient Egypt

## **An Eyewitness Account of Passover in Jerusalem in 66 CE**

Exodus 12:15:

*“Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread...”*

The Jewish Rebellion against the Romans began in 66 CE when Florus, Procurator of Judea attempted to raid the treasury of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Jewish-Roman historian Titus Flavius Josephus who was as a commander of Jewish forces in the Galilee but defected to the Romans in 67 CE, wrote in his book *The Jewish War* (2.14.3):

*“When Cestius [Gallus, governor of Syria,] came to Jerusalem at the **time of the Feast of Unleavened Bread**, (April, 66 CE) the people came out to him... They pleaded with him to alleviate the miseries of their nation and cried out against Florus, Procurator of Judea, as the bane of their country.”*

## **The Oldest Surviving Haggadahs, c. 1000 CE**

Haggadahs found in the Cairo Genizah, the storeroom of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat, Egypt are considered to be the oldest surviving Haggadahs. One is housed at the University of Pennsylvania and another at the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.



*University of Pennsylvania*

### **The Sarajevo Haggadah, c. 1350 CE**

The Sarajevo Haggadah is an illuminated manuscript that contains the illustrated traditional text of the Passover Haggadah which accompanies the Passover Seder. It is one of the oldest Sephardic Haggadahs in the world, originating in Barcelona around 1350.



**National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo**

## **Epilogue: Discussions of Passover, 1100-1500 CE**

*“For centuries, textual interpreters have been struggling with the order, the number and the meaning of the plagues. As early as the Medieval period, Jewish commentators noticed certain patterns in the narrative that reflected a highly organized literary structure. In the 12th Century, a rabbi known as the Rashbam (Rabbi Samuel ben Meir), who lived in northern France, recognized that only certain plagues were introduced by warnings to Pharaoh, while others were not. To appreciate the pattern, divide the first nine plagues into three groups each; in the first two of each group, Pharaoh is warned that if he does not let the Israelites go, the plague will be visited on the Egyptians; in the third plague of each group, the plague strikes without warning.*

*In the 13th Century, Bahya ben Asher, and in the 15th Century, Don Isaac Abravane noted a certain repetitive pattern in who brought on the plagues. The first three plagues are brought on by Moses’ brother Aaron, who holds out his staff as the effective instrument (Exodus 7:19, 8:1, 8:12). In the next group of*

*three, the first two are brought on by God and the third by Moses (Exodus 8:20, 9:6. 9:10). In the last group of three, the plagues are brought on by Moses' holding out his arm with his staff (Exodus 9:22-23, 10:12-13, 10:21).*

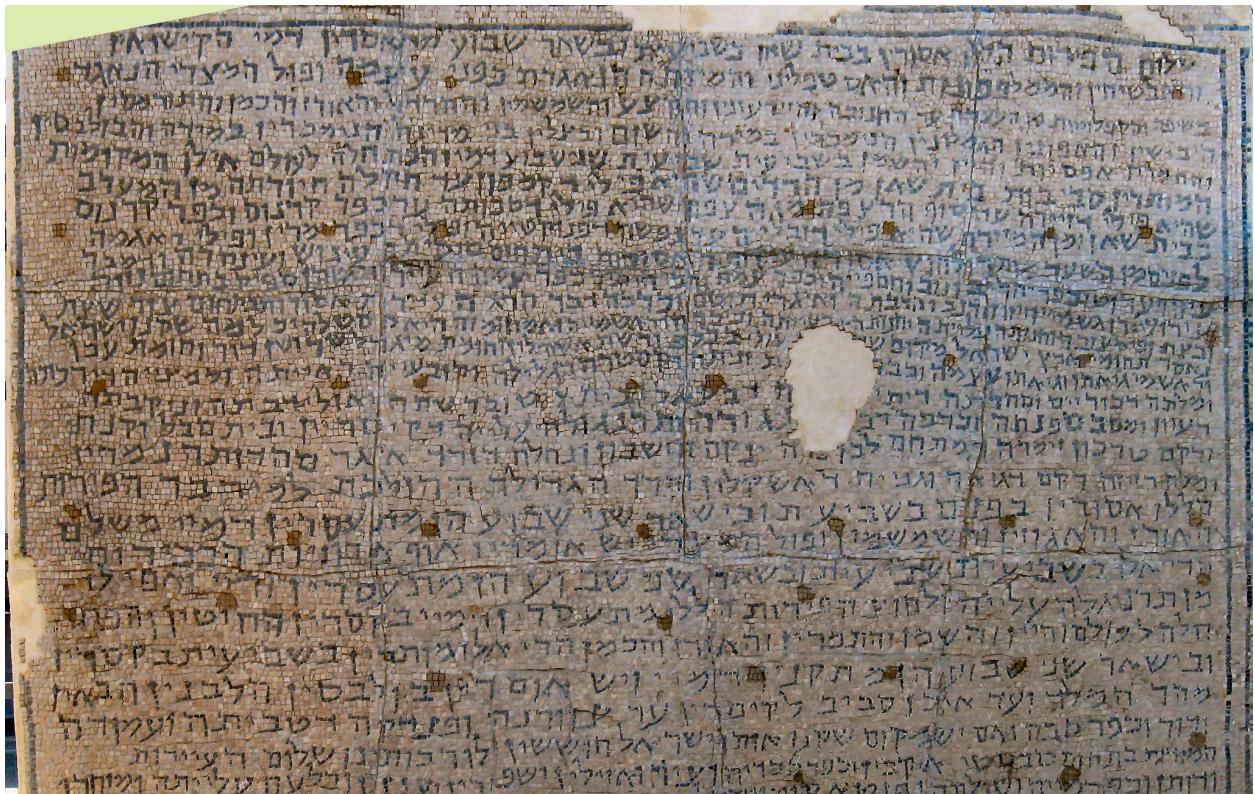
*These patterns indicate that the plague narrative is a conscientiously articulated and tightly wrought composition."*

Ziony Zevit, Biblical Archaeology Society, March 30, 2023

# The 6th Century Celebration of Shavuot, Hanukkah and Shmita

## The Rehov Synagogue Floor The oldest known Talmudic inscription

*"Shalom. These fruits are forbidden in Beit She'an (northern Israel) during the **Seventh Year** (Shmita), but during other years of the seven-year cycle they are tithed as demai-produce: cucumbers, watermelons, muskmelons, parsnip (carrots), mint that is bound by itself, the Egyptian broad beans that are bound with reed grass, wild leeks between **Shavuot** and **Hanukkah**..."*



Israel Museum / Israel Antiquities Authority  
Photo by Daniel Ventura via Wikipedia

## The Festival of Shavuot

The Festival of Shavuot forms part of the three annual festivals on which every male had to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem as was commanded by the Torah.

### **Deuteronomy/Devarim 16:16:**

*Three times in a year all your males will appear before the L-RD your G-d in the place which He shall choose (Jerusalem); on the feast of unleavened bread (Pesach), and on the feast of weeks (Shavuot), and on the feast of tabernacles (Sukkot); and they shall not appear before the L-RD empty handed.*

The Pilgrimage Festivals outlined in the Torah are directly connected to the agricultural cycles in the Land of Israel. Shavuot falls in the middle of the three. The first, Pesach or Passover, starts at the beginning of spring, commemorating the exodus from Egypt. On the second day of Pesach, the counting of the Omer commences, which consists of a bundle of barley being presented in the Temple. Barley is the first grain to ripen in the fields.

The Omer is counted for seven weeks or 49 days – see Leviticus/Vayikra 23:15-16.

On the 50<sup>th</sup> day, a new offering of wheat is presented, as wheat ripens later than barley and is considered superior. The Omer count therefore represents personal character improvement and spiritual maturing.

As Shavuot is connected to the 7-week Omer count it is referred to in the Bible as The Feast of Weeks. The word “shavua” in Hebrew means “week”.

It was also 49 days after the Exodus from Egypt that Israel stood before G-d at Mount Sinai and received the Torah. **While Passover celebrates the initial liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, Shavuot marks the culmination of this process of liberation**, when the Jewish People became an autonomous community with their own laws and standards.

Shavuot furthermore marks the beginning of the “bringing of the first fruits” or Bikkurim to the Temple also commanded in the Torah. This period culminates during the festival of Sukkot which is the last of the three festivals. Sukkot or the Feast of Tabernacles, falls at the end of the summer after the crops have been harvested.

**The birth and death of King David is also commemorated on Shavuot.**



## Shmita -- The Sabbath Year

Shmita, the Sabbath Year, is the seventh year of the agricultural cycle. During Shmita, the land is left to lie fallow and rest. All agricultural activity such as plowing, planting, pruning and harvesting is forbidden by Jewish Law.

Leviticus 25:1-5 states:

*The Lord said to Moses at Mount Sinai, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the Lord. For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the Lord. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards. Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest.'*

The Book of Leviticus goes on to promise bountiful harvests to those who observe Shmita, and describes its observance as a test of religious faith.

Isaiah in Chapter 37 verse 30 states:

*"This year you will eat what grows by itself,  
and the second year what springs from that.  
But in the third year sow and reap,  
plant vineyards and eat their fruit."*