5/6Hev 46 Bar Kokhba

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5/6Hev 46 Bar Kokhba is an ancient lease agreement eleven lines in length and written upon papyrus in Hebrew. It deals with plots of land in the En-gedi area (a small community along the southwestern shore of the Dead Sea) that were leased to Jacob son of Simeon bar Kosiba (also known as Bar Kokhba, leader of the so-called Second Jewish Revolt of A.D. 130–35) by Eleazar son of Eleazar ben Hitta and Eliezer son of Samuel.¹

This document is dated to “the second of Kislev, in the third year of Simeon ben Kosiba, Prince of Israel,”² and coincides with a second document (5/6Hev 45), written on the same day, that records a transaction between Eleazar son of Eleazar and Eliezer son of Samuel. According to the Western calendar, the date of these two documents corresponds to November of A.D. 134.

Among other things, various crops such as dates and fruits are mentioned in the agreement, for instance, “the ‘fine date’ and the Hasad [a type of date] in the village.”³ It is also noteworthy that the length of the lease is not for a specific amount of time like six months or one year, but rather is “until the termination of the season of crops of En-gedi, of the vegetables and of the trees.”⁴ Thus it is the completion of the growing season that regulates the length of the contract, a practice that would be characteristic of an agricultural society. The document also indicates arrangements for payment in settling the terms of the lease.

The document’s importance lies not so much in the fact that we learn that three men—Eleazar, Eliezer, and Jacob—conducted a business deal, but rather in what it tells us about how such agreements were entered into and what can be inferred from this and similar documents about the society and way of life of the people who lived then.

In this respect the language of 5/6Hev 46 that formalized the transaction is important. The lease was written in Mishnaic Hebrew, a form of Hebrew that is slightly different from the Hebrew of the Old Testament and was in use at the time of Bar Kokhba. Such documents have enabled scholars to understand better how Hebrew vocabulary grew and evolved. 5/6Hev 46 provides examples of Hebrew spelling practices and abbreviations and the usage and meaning of various legal terms.

Notes

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 256.