

Hanukkah – The Feast of Lights

Note: This year (2004) Hanukkah falls Dec. 7 - 15

Hanukkah is the Hebrew word for dedication. This holiday is celebrated to commemorate the rededication of the Temple after Antiochus IV desecrated it. The Hanukkah story is a remembrance of one Israel's greatest victories, which brought about their independence from Greco-Syrian rule in 165 BC.

Hanukkah is an eight-day feast that is celebrated at the beginning of winter. It begins 75 days after Yom Kippur on the 25th of Kislev. Hanukkah, as a holiday, is not described in Scripture. It is, however the most documented of all of the Jewish holidays. The earliest historical record of Hanukkah is found in 1st and 2nd Maccabees. They are two of the fourteen books of the Old Testament Apocrypha, a collection of non-inspired Jewish writings written from 200BC – 100 BC. Though most Jewish and Christian conservative scholars reject these books as part of the Bible, they are still a respected historical resource. They were written during the period known as the "Four hundred silent years". This was the time between Malachi and John the Baptist when there were no prophets, visions, angelic visits or other revelations from God to His chosen people. There were, however, many significant events for the Jewish people that occurred during this time. None of these were more significant than the events which led to the celebration of Hanukkah.

The Origin of Hanukkah

In 336 BC, Darius III came to the throne of Medo-Persia, which was at that time the most powerful nation in the world. That same year, a new king came to power in the Greek city-state of Macedonia. That king was Alexander, son of Philip II. The twenty year-old Alexander quickly demonstrated his military genius conquering and uniting the many Greek city-states. Just three years after he came to power he defeated the mighty and much larger forces of Darius III at Issus. By the age of thirty, Alexander had conquered all of the known world, from Europe to India to Egypt. He unified his empire through the force of Greek culture and religion known as Hellenism. His empire was short lived, though. At the age of thirty-three he died leaving no heirs. His empire was divided amongst his four generals. Seleucus ruled Syria and Eastern Asia Minor. Ptolemy ruled Egypt. Lysimachus ruled Thrace and western Asia Minor (Turkey) and Cassander ruled Greece.

Except for her location, Israel would probably have gone unnoticed and been left alone. Israel was at the crossroads of three continents, and as a result the hub of many of the most prominent trade routes. Because of this Israel was the key to dominance in the region. For almost two centuries Israel was the

center of conflict between the Seleucid dynasty of Syria and the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt. In 171 BC Antiochus IV came to power in Syria. He was a savagely cruel and harsh tyrant. He believed that he was god in the flesh and referred to himself as *Antiochus Theos Epiphanes* or Antiochus the visible god. Israel was under the rule of him at that time. Antiochus sought to Hellenize his kingdom to solidify his hold and control. He imposed Greek language, philosophy and religion on the people to further assimilate them.

Because of this two major political factions emerged in Israel. The first was the Orthodox party, which desired to be ruled by the Ptolemies of Egypt, which did not force Hellenism on their subjects. The second was the “progressive” Hellenist party, which sought to remain under Antiochus’ rule. They sought the economic and social advantages of appearing “enlightened and civilized” and as a result being more accepted by the more advanced nations of the world at that time. This group was willing to abandon or “apostasize” the Holy covenant.

Yohanan was the high priest at that time in Jerusalem, and he was hated by the Hellenists. His brother Jason was the leader of the Hellenist faction. Jason offered a huge bribe to Antiochus to obtain the office of high priest. He also promised to build a temple to the Greek god Phallus and to enroll the people of Jerusalem as citizens of Antioch the Syrian capital. Antiochus was overjoyed at this and gave his consent. Jason became the high priest and had his brother killed. The feud between the two factions rapidly escalated. Three years later Menelaus, a devoted Hellenist who was not even from the priestly line, offered Antiochus an even larger bribe to gain the office of high priest. Once in office he was quite disappointed to find out that the Temple treasury, that he was counting on to pay his bribe was too small to cover the bribe. He then stole the golden vessels from the temple to cover his debt.

In 168 BC Antiochus went to war with Egypt to try to reunite the Greek empire under his rule. The Roman Senate intervened and sent Popillus Laenas to prevent Antiochus from taking Egypt. When asked if he wanted peace or war with Rome, Antiochus stalled for time. Popillus then drew a circle in the sand around Antiochus and told him that he must decide before leaving the circle. Antiochus withdrew from Egypt in humiliation.

On his way back to Syria he stopped in Jerusalem. He heard that Jason had mounted a rebellion against Menelaus when he heard a rumor that Antiochus had died. Antiochus was already in poor humor and was frustrated with the constant and ongoing resistance in Israel. He flew into a rage and ordered his general to destroy Jerusalem. Houses were burned and the city walls were breached. Tens of thousands of Jews were killed or sold into slavery. Antiochus then turned his attention to the Temple mount. Syrian soldiers

smashed the porches and gates. They stripped the Temple of its golden vessels and treasures. On the 15th of Kislev 168 BC Antiochus erected an idol of Zeus on the Holy altar. On the birthday of Zeus, the 25th of December, Antiochus offered a pig on the altar. He then sprinkled its blood in the Holy of Holies. And poured its broth on the sacred scrolls before he cut them to pieces.

The Temple was converted to a shrine to Zeus, and only swine were permitted for sacrifice. A fortress was erected next to the Temple so that a garrison of Syrians could guard the shrine.

Antiochus then issued an edict forbidding the practice of Judaism on penalty of death. To enforce it houses were searched and if it was found that the Sabbath was being observed or if scrolls were found the whole family was put to death. Babies were hung from their mother's necks and women were thrown from the city walls.

A scribe named Eleazer, who was in his nineties, was brought before Antiochus and commanded to eat swine's flesh. He refused. The soldiers asked him to bring his own lawful meat and eat it as if it were pork. Eleazer refused giving an eloquent statement of faith. The soldiers then beat him to death.

A woman named Hannah and her seven sons were arrested and told to eat pork in an assent to the pagan sacrifice. They refused. The sons were then one by one tortured. When they still refused they were boiled alive in cauldrons. When one son was told that he must apostasize or have his tongue and hands cut off he testified: "These I had from heaven; and for His laws I despise them; and from Him I hope to receive them again" (2 Macc. 7:11). Another said before he died; "It is good, being put to death by men, to look for hope from God to be raised up again by Him" (2 Macc 7:14). As the last son was given the choice to deny the faith or die, his mother encouraged him; "But doubtless the Creator of the world, who formed man, and found out the beginning of all things, will also of His own mercy give you breath and life again...Fear not this tormentor, but, being worthy of your brothers take your death, that I may receive you again in mercy with your brothers." (2 Macc. 7:23, 29).

The mother was then put to death.

Mattathias

Antiochus continued his effort to eliminate Judaism. Soldiers were sent out throughout the country to carry out this effort. One band of soldiers came to the small town of Modin about 17 miles northwest of Jerusalem. They built

a pagan altar to Zeus. The towns-people were brought together. A gray haired priest named Mattathias was ordered to offer the sacrificial pig to Zeus in honor of Antiochus. He was the father of five sons. He defiantly answered “Never.” At that moment an apostate priest approached the altar and requested to offer the pig. The gathered people knew what was to come. After the sacrifice they would be commanded to eat the pigs flesh in identification with the offering.

Mattathias went into a rage. He ripped the sword from the hand of the Syrian officer and killed him. Then he ran forward and ran the sword through the apostate priest. As he was doing this, his sons attacked and killed the remaining soldiers. Mattathias and his sons then fled into the wilderness leaving all their possessions behind. The revolt had begun.

The Macabbees

Word of this act of defiance quickly spread. Mattathias’ followers grew steadily. They began engaging in guerilla warfare, attacking first small Syrian outposts and then larger groups as their numbers grew. The rebels destroyed pagan altars and shrines and confronted apostate sympathizers. Within the year Mattathias grew sick and died. On his deathbed he passed the leadership of the group over to his oldest son Judah. Judah quickly displayed a genius for military strategy. He was called the “*Macabee*” derived from the Hebrew word makkevet, meaning: “hammer”. They hid in caves in the wilderness and set ambushes for the enemy. For the next two years they escalated the attacks, frustrating and wearing down the Syrian forces. The rebels then engaged the Syrians in open battle and won decisive victories at Beth-horon and Emmaus, opening the road to Jerusalem.

When Judah’s forces entered Jerusalem they were surprised at what they found. The gates of the Temple had been burned and weeds and grass grew waist high in the courtyards. They tore their clothes and threw dust upon their heads and wept, as they viewed the desolation of the Temple with the Zeus idol overseeing the Temple mount. They immediately began to cleanse the sanctuary. They destroyed and removed the Greek idol. Because of the defilement, they pulled down the stones of the altar and stored them until a prophet would come to tell them what to do with them. They rebuilt the holy altar and on Kislev 25, 165 BC exactly three years after the defilement, they rededicated the altar to the Lord.

According to Jewish tradition in the Talmud, the Maccabees found only one small cruse of oil in the Temple, which still had the unbroken seal of the high priest. It was barely enough for one day’s supply of oil for the golden lamp stand. Miraculously, the lamp burned for eight days until a new supply could be consecrated. This explained why Hanukkah is celebrated for eight

days.

An alternate tradition says that upon entering the Temple, the Maccabees found eight iron spears. They stuck candles on the spears and lit them. In both cases the stories are dubious at best. There are no historical records of these two traditions until more than two hundred years after the events of the rededication. More likely these traditions grew out of an attempt by the Pharisees to redirect the attention of the holiday away from the Maccabean dynasty, which later became very corrupt. Also the Pharisees were at odds with the Sadducees who aligned themselves with the Maccabees.

This also may have come about for the sake of political expedience since these traditions came about during the time of the Roman occupation and celebrating rebellion may have created problems at that time. Josephus, the great Jewish historian of the first century knew the holiday as the “feast of lights”, well before the oil-cruse tradition was suggested.

Modern Observance

The Hanukkah ceremony has continued to develop over the last 2,000 years to commemorate the Lord’s deliverance through the Maccabees. The main ceremony of Hanukkah is the lighting of the candles each evening in the homes and the Synagogue. These candles are used only for the celebration. The menorah holds eight candles, one for each night of Hanukkah. An additional candle usually in the center and elevated above the rest is reserved for *shammash* or “servant” candle. It is used to light the other candles. The first night a single candle is lit. On each succeeding night an additional candle is lit until there are eight candles lit on the final night of Hanukkah. By tradition they are lit from left to right, and a special blessing is said before and after the candles are lit thanking God for His deliverance.

In Israel, marathon runners are sent to the village of Modin where the Maccabean revolt began. Flaming freedom torches are lit from the Hanukkah menorah and are carried back to Jerusalem where a procession is held at the Western Wall of the Temple to kindle the great menorah.

Hanukkah is also a time of gifts. This is especially true in America where this tradition has been greatly influenced by the closeness of the Christmas celebration. Traditional foods of Hanukkah are latkes, or potato pancakes and deep-fried doughnuts sprinkled with powdered sugar.

Although the legend of the oil cruse still exists today, it is probably not the reason that the holiday is celebrated for eight days. Even though Hanukkah is not mentioned in scripture, there is a scriptural pattern that sets the stage for the eight-day celebration. In Scripture, an eight-day period was always

the pattern for dedication. An object would be set aside for seven days and on the eighth day it was holy to the Lord. This was the case with first-born animals consecrated to God (**Ex. 22:30; Lev 22:27**). Hebrew males were circumcised on the eighth day (**Lev. 12:3**). The original altar in the Tabernacle was sanctified for seven days and on the eighth day it was holy (**Ex. 29:37**). The dedication of the rebuilt Temple was celebrated at Passover, which in conjunction with the Feast of Unleavened Bread lasted for eight days (**Ezra 6:16-22**). Further the future altar of the millennial Temple will be consecrated on the eighth day (**Ezek. 43: 26-27**).

An even closer parallel comes from Hezekiah. The wicked King Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, had desecrated the Temple with altars and sacrifices to Assyrian gods (**2 Kings 16: 10-18; 2 Chr. 28: 21-25**). Hezekiah cleansed the Temple and rededicated it to the Lord after eight days. (**2 Chr 29:16-17**) There is another reason why Hanukkah is celebrated for eight days. It is patterned directly after the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Tabernacles is celebrated for seven days followed by a Sabbath day. Concerning Hanukkah, the book of Maccabees 10:6-7 states:

“And they kept eight days with gladness, as in the feast of the tabernacles, remembering that not long before they had held feast of tabernacles, when they wandered in the mountains and dens like beasts. Therefore they bare branches and boughs, and also palms, and sang psalms to Him that has given them good success in cleansing His place”.

The parallel to Tabernacles is also seen in the emphasis on lights. When Solomon dedicated the first Temple, he did so during the Feast of Tabernacles (**2 Chr. 5:3**). That dedication was accompanied by the coming of the Shekinah glory to the Temple and the divine lighting of the sacrificial altar.

As mentioned before, the Old Testament Scriptures do not name Hanukkah since it was instituted after the last books of the Old Testament were already completed. The events of Hanukkah are prophesied hundreds of years before it's beginning in the book of **Daniel**. In chapter eight, Daniel saw a vision of a ram with two horns pushing so that no beast could stand before it. Then a goat appeared in the west and moved so quickly that its feet did not touch the ground. A very noticeable horn was between its eyes. The goat crashed into the ram with incredible fury and broke two horns from its head, all but killing it. Then amazingly a little horn came up from the four and became exceedingly powerful. It even cast down some of the stars and stamped on them. It even magnified itself to the Prince of the starry host, took away the sacrifices, and cast down His sanctuary.

Three chapters later, Daniel again prophesied about the coming Syrian persecution and the courage of God's people: *“But the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits. And the people who*

understand shall instruct many; yet for many days they shall fall by the sword and flame, by captivity and plundering” (Dan. 11:32-33)

Compare this with **Hebrews 11:35-39**. *“Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection...of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in the deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise”*

Jesus and Hanukkah

It was during Hanukkah, the celebration of freedom from foreign oppression, when thoughts of national political deliverance would have been high, that a group of Jewish inquirers approached Jesus while he was walking along Solomon’s colonade. They asked Him; *“How long do you keep us in doubt? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly” (Jn. 10:24)*. They of course, were looking for a military Messiah that would free them from the bondage of Rome rather than from the bondage sin. Jesus answered them in an attempt to broaden their understanding of who He was: *“I and the Father are one” (Jn. 10:30)*. Their reaction was to seek to stone him.