

HANUKKAH

Objectives:

- To identify some of the main components of the celebration of Hanukkah.
- To gain an understanding of how this holiday was observed during the time of Christ.
- To gain an understanding of how this holiday applies to believers today.
- To explore some of the possible prophetic fulfillments of this holiday.

(Approach)

If you are like most Americans, you have probably assumed at one point or another that the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah was simply an adaptation of the Christian observance of Christmas. If so, you are partly correct but what most of us do not know is that the observance of Hanukkah preceded the observance of Christmas and that it has a wealth of spiritual nuggets for those willing to mine them. So take your pick and ax and let's begin digging!



I. THE HISTORY OF HANUKKAH

A. While **the holiday of Hanukkah is not one of the seven feasts that God ordained** in Lev. 23, it does have a Biblical basis and some important spiritual truths to impart.

1. "Hanukkah" is the Hebrew word for "dedication." It "is so named because it celebrates the rededication of the Temple to the Lord after it was desecrated by the Gentiles."¹ (Howard, p. 159)
2. Hanukkah is also called "The Feast of Dedication."
3. Another name for Hanukkah is "Festival of Lights." While some may feel that this name refers to the lights on the Hanukkah menorah, Josephus said that this holiday was called "Festival of

¹ Howard, p. 159.

Lights" because the right to serve God came to His people unexpectedly, like a sudden light."

B. Hanukkah is an eight-day feast that occurs in the ninth month on the Jewish calendar: the month of Kislev. Hanukkah observance begins on Kislev 25, which is roughly in the month of December on the Gregorian calendar.

C. To understand the meaning and miracles of Hanukkah, a short history lesson is required.

1. The history of Hanukkah occurred during the "four hundred silent years," the time between the close of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New.
2. During this time there were no words from the Lord, no prophets, no visions and no angelic visits and yet God's silence did not mean that He had forgotten His covenant people. The story of the miracles of Hanukkah is ample evidence of God's concern and watchfulness over His people.
3. After Alexander the Great's death, his kingdom was divided up by four of his generals. Israel's geographical location (a land-bridge between Syria and Egypt; between the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe) made her the center of a maelstrom. "For almost two centuries, she was tossed like a leaf in the wind between the expansionistic Seleucid (Syrian) and Ptolemaic (Egyptian) dynasties that sought to dominate the Middle East."²
4. Antiochus IV came to the Syrian throne in 171 B.C. He referred to himself as Antiochus Theos Epiphanes which means "Antiochus, the visible god". He was a tyrant, cruel and proud. He was anxious to unite his kingdom, which was comprised of countries with various languages, cultures and religions. To do this he decided to require assimilation into the Greek way of life or Hellenistic culture of all the countries in his empire. This assimilation would impact every area of life: language, the arts, and religion.
5. While this policy did not present a problem to most of the people under Antiochus' dominion, for the Jews it was catastrophic. Antiochus gave the Jews a choice: either assimilate or die. Any Jew who observed the Torah (by keeping the dietary laws, circumcising their sons, keeping Shabbat, reading the Torah, etc.) was put to death. Terrible atrocities were committed upon the Jewish people during this time (infants were hung around their mothers' necks, people were crucified upside down, etc.)
6. To further prove his point, Antiochus desecrated the Temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar and sprinkling its' blood in the holy of holies. He set up an idol in the Temple, an image to the Greek god

Zeus.

² Howard, p. 161.

7. In his anger at the resistance of the Jewish people, Antiochus ordered that Jerusalem be destroyed and that the Temple be vandalized. The golden vessels from the Temple were taken, the altar was torn down and the Temple was converted to a shrine to Zeus.

8. An aged priest named Mattathias (Hebrew for Matthew) led a revolt that overthrew the Syrian control of Israel. After Mattathias' death, his son, Judah, the Maccabee (hammer) continued the guerilla warfare against the Syrians. Against all odds, the Maccabees were successful in driving the Syrians out of Israel. This was a great miracle of Hanukkah.

9. They repaired the altar in the Temple, cleansed it and prepared to rededicate it. According to Jewish tradition, only one cruse of oil was found for the menorah in the Temple. The Maccabbeans lit the menorah and to their astonishment, the oil that was only sufficient for one day lasted eight days. This was one of the miracles of Hanukkah. The Maccabbeans rededicated the Temple three days to the day that Antiochus defiled it.



D. "According to the Talmud, **it took eight days to rebuild the altar and, therefore, Hanukkah is celebrated for eight days.** While the altar may or may not have taken eight days to rebuild (the earliest sources for Hanukkah do not say), a much more solid basis exists for the pattern of observance."³

1. "In scripture, an eight-day period was always the pattern of dedication. That is, the object to be dedicated was set aside (sanctified) for seven days, and then on the eighth day it was holy to the Lord."⁴

a. First-born animals that were to be consecrated to God were allowed to stay with their mothers for seven days and then were given to the Lord. Ex. 22:30

b. Hebrew baby boys were circumcised into the Covenant on the eighth day.

c. The original altar in the Temple was sanctified for seven days and then declared holy on the eighth day (see Ex.

³ Howard, p. 169.

⁴ Ibid.

29:37); the dedication of the rebuilt Temple after the Babylonian exile lasted for eight days (see Ezra 6:16-22) and the altar of the future millennial Temple will be dedicated on the eighth day (see Ezek. 43:26-27).

2. The observance of Hanukkah is patterned after that of the Feast of Tabernacles. It is often called a second "Tabernacles" and Tabernacles is celebrated for eight days.

II. THE OBSERVANCE OF HANUKKAH

A. **The modern observance of Hanukkah is focused around a nine-branch menorah.** While the menorah in the Temple had seven branches, the Hanukkah menorah has nine: eight to commemorate the miracle of the eight days and one to serve as the shammash or servant candle.



1. Each evening the Hanukkah candles are lit, using the center candle as the servant--the candle that brings light to all of the other candles.
2. Each night one additional candle is lit after the proscribed blessings are spoken. "By tradition, they are lit from left to right, and a special blessing is said before and after the lights are kindled thanking God for His deliverance."⁵
3. "Since the object of the lighting is to publicize the miracle, the candles are usually placed near windows: to remind others of the holiday and the redemption."⁶
4. In Israel, "on the eve of Hanukkah, marathon runners are sent to the village of Modin, the initial site of the ancient Maccabean revolt. Flaming freedom torches are lit from the Hanukkah

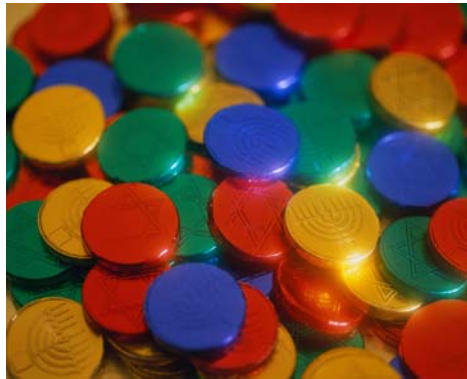
⁵ Howard, p. 167.

⁶ Scarlata, p. 387.

menorah there and are carried by the runners to Jerusalem where a procession is held at the Western Wall of the Temple to kindle the great menorah."⁷

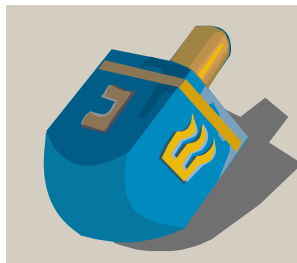
B. Hanukkah is a time of giving gifts and playing games.

1. Hanukkah gift-giving has been adopted due to the influence of Christian observance of Christmas. "An earlier tradition, preserved from Eastern Europe, involves the custom of giving Hanukkah gelt (Yiddish for 'money'). On the fifth night of Hanukkah, parents and grandparents gather the children and give them coins."⁸



2. Hanukkah is also a time for charitable giving. "Because the blind cannot enjoy lighting the Hanukkah lights, the major ceremony of the holiday, special contributions are often given to charities for the blind."⁹

3. Hanukkah is a time for families to play games. While adults may enjoy card games, the most popular Hanukkah children's game is the dreidel. "These wooden or plastic tops have different Hebrew letters on each of their four sides: Nun, Gimel, Hey, and Shin standing for the phrase Nes Gadol Hayah Sham ('A Great Miracle Happened There')."¹⁰



4. It is said that the Jewish children of Judea during the Maccabean period wanted to study Torah, but the anti-Semitic policies of the Syrians made this difficult. They came up with a creative answer: they would study the scrolls in the streets until a

⁷ Howard, p. 167.

⁸ Ibid, p. 167-168.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kasdan, p. 112.

foreign soldier came. Then they would quickly hide the scroll, bring out the dreidels, and pretend to be engrossed in a game of tops! When the soldier left, the Torah study would begin again."¹¹

C. Hanukkah is a time of special foods and singing.

1. It is customary to eat foods fried in oil during Hanukkah to remember the miracle of the cruse of oil. Potato pancakes, called latkes, as well as deep-fried doughnuts are favorites.



2. It is customary to sing the Hallel (Psalms 115-118) during the morning synagogue services throughout the eight days of Hanukkah. Another favorite song is Maoz Tzur or "Mighty Rock" ("Rock of Ages"). The poem, from which this song was taken was composed by a German poet in the 13th century. It is based on Isaiah 26:4 and pictures God as Israel's deliverer.

III. HANUKKAH IN THE BIBLE

A. The first mention of the events surrounding Hanukkah was a prophetic one.

1. Daniel 8 describes the rise of Alexander the Great, the division of his kingdom between four generals (the four smaller horns) and predicts the ascension of a little horn (Antiochus). Daniel 11:32-33 foresees the Syrian persecution of the people of God.
2. Daniel's vision is so graphic that liberal scholars have suggested that he wrote it after the fact and not prior to the events.

B. Jesus observed the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah) even though the Law did not require Him to do so. He used "Hanukkah" terminology in His discourse with Jews in the Temple during this feast.

1. "Most surprising . . . the most clear mention of Hanukkah in the Bible is in the New Testament."¹²

¹¹ Kasdan, p. 112.

¹² Ibid, p. 113.

2. John 10:22-39 records Jesus' conversation in the Temple during Hanukkah. *READ*

- a. **"Miracles"** this is the real theme of Hanukkah. Jesus' spoke of the miracles He performed (vss. 25, 38).
- b. **"Martyr"** The Jews were so enraged by what Jesus was saying that they picked up stones with which to stone Him. Hanukkah recalls the many martyrs who died because they would not assimilate into the idol-worshipping Greek culture.
- c. **"Madman"** Antiochus called himself "the Epiphanes" or "the visible God." "His detractors called him Epimanes or 'madman.'"¹³ Jesus angered the Jews because He dared to claim that He was God. (vs. 33)
- d. **"Maccabees"** This group of weary Judeans engaged the Syrians in guerrilla warfare. They succeeded against all odds, partly because of their knowledge of the land but mostly due to the divine intervention of God. The Jews once again tried to seize Jesus, but against all odds and due to divine intervention, He escaped their grasp.

C. The "Hall of Fame for Faith" includes the martyrs of Antiochus' reign of terror. Hebrews 11:35-39 fits many people who died because of their faith and it includes those who fled from the persecution of Antiochus and hid in the caves of the wilderness.

1. One such martyr was a woman named Hannah and her seven sons who were arrested and forced to eat pig's meat as a symbol of their identification with Antiochus.
2. "One by one the sons were tortured, and when they refused to yield, they were boiled alive in cauldrons. When one son was approached to apostatize or have his tongue and hands cut off, he courageously testified, 'These I had from heaven; and for his laws I despise them; and from him I hope to receive them again' (2 Maccabees 7:11). Another affirmed 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 pressed to deliver himself by apostatizing, his mother encouraged him with the [promise of the] resurrection. . . Finally, the mother was put to death. All steadfastly refused deliverance in hope of the resurrection."¹⁴

D. The final fulfillment of Hanukkah is yet to occur but Scripture has much to say concerning it. "Scripture teaches that the events of Hanukkah are merely a shadow of events at the end of this age."¹⁵

¹³ Howard, p. 161.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 164

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 173.

1. Daniel prophesied that Israel will again enter into a covenant with a Gentile ruler. "This wicked ruler is known as Armilus by Jewish theologians and Antichrist by Christians. The confirmation of the covenant will start the clock ticking for the seven-year period known as the Seventieth Week of Daniel."¹⁶ See Daniel 9:27 and Isaiah 28:15.
2. At mid-point during this 7 year period of time, Jerusalem will be captured by the Gentiles (see Luke 21:20; Rev. 11:2) The Antichrist will be revealed for who he is and declare himself to be God (2 Thess. 2:4; Rev. 13:12-15)
3. The Antichrist will defile the rebuilt Temple and desecrate it with his idolatrous image. He will demand that everyone worship him. Jesus referred to this in Matthew 24:15-16.
4. The faithful in Israel will flee to the mountains but Scripture teaches that one-third of the Jews will be killed by Antichrist. (Matt. 24:21-22, Rev. 12:13-17, Jere. 30:7; Dan. 12:1)
5. But, God will deliver His people. Jesus will return as the Messiah and set up a new Temple. (Zech. 6:12, Isaiah 4:5; Ezek. 43:1-6)

IV. HANUKKAH PERSONALIZED

A. Just as the Jews during Antiochus' reign of terror, **we must daily grapple with how we are to interact with our culture.**

1. Many Jews felt it was easier to assimilate into the Hellenistic culture. They adopted Greek names, began to dress as Greeks and enjoyed the benefits of being "politically correct."
2. "They saw only the economic and social advantages of appearing enlightened, civilized, and accepted by the advanced nations throughout the world which embraced Hellenism."¹⁷
3. Many "Christians" (term used loosely) have totally assimilated into the prevailing culture of our day. They dress, talk, and walk like everyone else around them. They do not want to appear to be "old-fashioned" or "politically incorrect" so they hide what little light they might have.
4. Another group of Christians have abandoned the culture. They desire to be totally unpolluted by the sin around them so they stay far away and insulate themselves and their children from the prevailing culture. They interpret verses such as 2 Cor. 6: 17 which says "Therefore come out from them and be separate," to mean "stay totally away from sin and those who commit sin--sinners!" Their light shines brightly but no one can see it because they have isolated themselves.

¹⁶ Howard, pp. 173-174.

¹⁷ Ibid, 161.

5. The balance, I believe, is to engage the culture. The day is coming when a line will be drawn in the sand and we will be forced to assimilate or be annihilated just as the Jews living during the time of Antiochus. But until that day, is it not within the spirit of the Great Commission to remain engaged in our prevailing culture? Can we not influence more people for the Kingdom if we are able to talk their language and identify with their concerns? Yes, we must remain pure and holy and there are definite things in our culture that are to be avoided at all costs. But until it is no longer possible, I believe we should engage our culture in an on-going dialogue and clearly be a "light to the nations."

B. Hanukkah teaches us that **we must not endanger the cleanliness of the "Temple of God"** (which is our bodies) by idolatry. It represents our struggle for spiritual continuity.

1. I Cor. 6:19-20 "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."
2. II Cor. 6:16 "What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.'"

C. Hanukkah reminds us to **continue to fight for religious freedom** and to pray for those who are suffering persecution and martyrdom for their faith in God. It also stands as a memorial of God's faithfulness to His people.

(conclusion)

The anthem "Maoz Tzur" is sung during Hanukkah celebrations as a declaration of God's faithfulness and His ability to deliver His people. I would like to quote the first verse of this song as a conclusion to today's study. Another name for the anthem is "Rock of Ages" which, of course, is the name of one of our best-loved hymns of the faith.

Rock of Ages let our song
Praise Thy saving power;
Thou amidst the raging foes
Wast our sheltering tower.
Furious they assailed us,
But Thine arm availed us,
And Thy word broke their sword
When our own strength failed us.
And Thy word broke their sword
When our own strength failed us.



Standing Stones in Israel

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