

The History of Hanukkah

John 10:22

The "Festival of Lights." This is the popular name for this eight-day festival that begins on the 25th day of Kislev (December). The feast of Hanukkah is not in the Old Testament, but it is in the Talmud. It is one of the best known Jewish holidays because of its association with Christmas. Many Gentiles even refer to it "Jewish Christmas," because lights and decorations and gift giving are now part of Jewish tradition. But Hanukkah is so much more. Hanukkah is rooted in revolution.

The revolution took place over 2,300 years ago in the land of Judea. Under the reign of Alexander the Great many Jews assimilated into Greek culture. They adopted Greek language, customs, and style. In 175 BC, about 100 years after Alexander, a ruler named Antiochus came to power and he severely oppressed the Jews. He put his own priest in the Temple and prohibited the practice of the Jewish religion. When the Jews rebelled in Jerusalem, he massacred them and desecrated the Temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar. Then he committed the ultimate abomination: He placed a statue of Zeus in the Temple.

The family of Mattathias refused to submit to Antiochus. In 167 BC he and his son, Judas the Maccabee formed a small band of pious Jews and led guerrilla attacks against the Syrian army. Judas took the name Maccabee because it meant "hammer"—The Hammer of God. Antiochus committed thousands of well-armed troops to crush this rebellious band, but the Maccabees held out and, after three years of fighting, they drove the army of Antiochus from Judea. The army of the Maccabees (an Army of "Hammers") entered Jerusalem in December 164 BC. The Holy Temple was in shambles; defiled, disgraced and desecrated by the soldiers of Antiochus.

The Maccabees cleansed the Temple and rededicated it to the Lord on Kislev 25. Everything was ready to start the normal daily worship. It was time to relight the Menorah in the Holy Place. To their dismay, only one small jar of oil was found, enough to light the Menorah for one day. They would have to wait eight days before there would be enough new oil. They prayed to the Lord and decided to light the Menorah with the oil they had. Then, according to rabbinic tradition, the oil miraculously burned for eight days.

From 164 BC until now, Jews observe this holiday every year in December. First of all, they remember that it was the power of the Lord in the army of Maccabees that brought about a historic victory. Secondly, they celebrate "the miracle of the oil". The main feature of Hanukkah observance is the lighting of a special eight branch menorah which has the "helper" candle in the center. It is the center "shammas" candle that lights one candle each night for eight days. We, as Christians, ought not to forget this historic time. The Maccabees were faithful men fighting for the destiny of Israel and the honor of the Temple. They restored the very Temple where Jesus came to teach and minister on that Hanukkah night in 32 AD. Jesus said this Temple was "His Father's House" and a "place of prayer for all the nations." That Temple, of course, is gone—destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

Many Jews look for a new Temple, as do we. But we know that it is Jesus who is going to return. He will be the Lord of His Glorious Temple in the Millennial Kingdom.

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**The American Secularization
of Christmas and Hanukkah**
The View of a Jewish Christian Scholar

Victor Buksbazen

In secular America both Christmas and Hanukkah become distorted. Christmas turns into a commercial extravaganza, thereby expressing the "American civil religion" of pious platitudes and meaningless customs, such as trees, Santa Claus, reindeer, and obligatory exchanges of cards and presents. At best it becomes a time for family togetherness, although a byproduct is that the suicide rate is highest then, for that is when people who miss their families or have none become most despairing, but little thought is given to God or Jesus.

Likewise Hanukkah has become a Jewish refuge and defense against absorption into and assimilation by the Gentile majority: "We don't celebrate Christmas; we celebrate Hanukkah, because we're Jewish." Gift-giving at Hanukkah, one gift each night, is a relatively modern Jewish tradition, obviously developed in response to the older tradition of gift giving at Christmas. Messianic Jews use Hanukkah as an occasion for re-dedication to God and his Messiah.

Hanukkah is celebrated using a special Hanukkah *menorah* with nine lights. One uses a match to light the *shammash* ("servant"), and it is then employed to light one candle the first night, two the second, and so on until on the eighth night all eight lights and the *shammash* are burning brightly. For Messianic Jews the imagery is rich: Jesus, the "light of the world" (Jn 8:12), came as a servant (*shammash*) to give light to everyone, so that we might be lights to others (Mat 5:14).

Neither Christmas or Hanukkah are biblical holidays. If we celebrate them at all, we should see them as a celebration of the coming of the Jewish Messiah into the world, by whom all may have the light of life!

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