

Hanukkah – its History, Rationale and Prophecies

Introduction

This year, the festival of **Hanukkah** begins on the evening of December 16, after sundown. The events surrounding Hanukkah are quite inspiring; as they describe believers being delivered from oppression. In addition to that, some of the traditions about that festival are incredibly prophetic – especially about Jesus.

As a result, it appears useful to provide some background information about Hanukkah – about its history, about the events that it commemorates, and about its prophetic ramifications.

A History of Invasions

During the centuries throughout history, the land of Israel has been conquered by many different empires. Here is a brief timeline of some (not all) of the powers that took over Israel over the years:

- Assyria conquered the northern kingdom – called Israel – in 722 BC.
- Babylon took control over the southern kingdom – Judah – in 606 BC; and they completely destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC.
- Medo-Persia conquered Babylon, and gained control over the land of Israel, in 539 BC.
- In 332 BC, Greece – under Alexander the Great – took over the land of Israel from Medo-Persia; and within a few years they conquered all of Persia’s territory.

The conquest of Israel by Greece is the most relevant item to this article – because it leads up to the events of Hanukkah.

Breakup of the Greek Empire

Alexander the Great died in 323 BC – at the age of 32. The Greek empire then eventually split up into four separate kingdoms. Each of those kingdoms was initially ruled by one of the generals in Alexander’s army.

The four kingdoms became known as follows:

- The Antigonid empire, which existed in modern-day Greece;
- The Attalid empire, which existed in modern-day Turkey;
- The Ptolmaic empire, which existed in modern-day Egypt;
- The Seleucid empire, which existed in modern-day Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Iran – and Israel.

Note that the Seleucid Empire eventually became known simply as “Syria” – because of its geographic location.

For the most part, the rulers of the Seleucid Empire were relatively **tolerant** of other religions. In particular, they generally allowed the Jewish people to practice their faith without interference.

Unfortunately, that period of tolerance did not last – the treatment of Jews in the Seleucid Empire eventually took a *dramatic* turn for the **worse**.

The Rise of Antiochus IV

In 175 BC, a new ruler came to power in the Seleucid Empire – Antiochus IV. Originally named Mithradates, he took the name “Antiochus” when he came to power – and he added the title “Epiphanes” to his name.

There are two different meanings of the word “Epiphanes”. The more common meaning is “illustrious” – i.e., distinguished or outstanding. However, there is *another* meaning as well: the meaning of “manifestation” – as in, the manifestation of a pagan god.

Evidently, Antiochus actually believed that he was the physical manifestation of pagan Greek god Zeus – and that is why he assumed the title “Epiphanes”. In fact, coins that were minted during his reign had this inscription: “King Antiochus – god made visible.”

That – along with his eccentric behavior – prompted his enemies to give Antiochus a different title – they changed his title of Epiphanes to Epimanes. The reason they did that is because “Antiochus Epimanes” means “Antiochus the madman”.

Oppression of Israel

From the very beginning of his reign, Antiochus tried to suppress the Jewish religion – and replace it with Hellenistic (Greek) culture. At least part of the reason for this oppression is due to Antiochus’ belief that he was actually Zeus.

He began by interfering with internal Jewish religious matters – in particular, with the office of High Priest. In 173 BC – he removed the legitimate high priest Onias, and replaced him with Onias’ brother Joshua. This was primarily because Joshua was very “Greek culture-friendly” – and he even changed his name to the Greek “Jason”.

Jason then started to send Temple treasury funds Antiochus – for use in his wars. Jason also used those funds to build Greek-style gymnasiums – including one *right next to* the Temple. In other words, Jason was significantly corrupt.

In 171 BC, Antiochus went a step further – and replaced Jason with an outsider named Menelaus. Menelaus was not related to Onias at all – in fact, he was not even a descendant of Aaron. As a result, he was completely ineligible to be any priest – let alone the High Priest. Not only that, but Menelaus – and his brother Lysimachus – literally robbed the Temple of many of its sacred artifacts.

This interference in the Jewish faith caused widespread resentment among the Jewish people. Even “Greek friendly” Jews – such as Jason – **strongly** opposed this treatment.

The Initial Uprising

In 169 BC, while Antiochus was away fighting a war against Egypt, religious Jews removed Menelaus – and reinstated Jason as High Priest. When Antiochus returned, he was completely enraged at this uprising – and he caused a massacre of thousands of Jews in Jerusalem.

He then placed a statue of Zeus in the Temple – and he sacrificed a pig on the altar in the Temple. As a result, he completely deseccrated the Temple.

To make matters worse, Antiochus completely outlawed the Jewish faith. In particular, resting on the Sabbath day, eating Biblically clean foods, celebrating Scriptural festivals, and performing circumcision were all declared crimes that were punishable by **death**. There are some recorded accounts which state that when a baby was discovered to be circumcised, the baby and his mother were taken to the tops of city walls – and then thrown off them to their deaths.

In addition, Antiochus decreed that the Jewish people were required to worship pagan idols. In fact, armed soldiers **enforced** this idol worship. Anyone who refused to worship the idols would be summarily executed.

The Maccabean Revolt

In 167 BC, an outright Jewish rebellion against Antiochus began. There are multiple historical accounts of that rebellion. Some of the most detailed accounts are found in the books of 1st and 2nd Maccabees.

Those books are not part of Scripture – i.e., they are not included in any Protestant or Jewish Bibles. (They are contained in Catholic Bibles.) However, those books are considered to be historically accurate. In other words, the events described in those books did actually occur in history. So, 1st and 2nd Maccabees are not considered **inspired** – but they are considered **historical**.

The rebellion officially began in 167 BC, when an elderly priest named Mattathias refused to worship a pagan idol – and he killed a Syrian soldier during that encounter. Mattathias then tore down that idol; and called for all Jews who were loyal to God to follow him, in resistance to the Syrians. Mattathias then fled to the mountains, with his five sons and a handful of followers. This tiny band of Jews then began orchestrating “guerilla warfare”-type attacks on the Syrian forces.

Mattathias died in 166 BC, one year after the rebellion began. His oldest son – Judah – then succeeded him; and continued the resistance. Judah was known by the title “HaMakabi” – “the hammer” – because of his combat skills. As a result, the rebels, as a group, became known as the “Maccabees”.

During the course of the rebellion, the Maccabees gained many more followers to their ranks. Even at their height, though, the Maccabees were always **vastly** outnumbered by the Syrian forces. Nevertheless, the Maccabees gained victory after victory – despite facing enormous disadvantages.

In addition to the guerilla warfare, the Maccabees fought three large-scale battles against Syrian armies, between 166 and 164 BC. The first battle took place near the city of Beth-Horon, under the Syrian commander Seron. The Maccabees won this battle decisively; despite being outnumbered. The second battle, near the city of Emmaus, was fought against an even larger Syrian force. Through the use of brilliant tactics, the Maccabees were able to rout that Syrian force as well.

Finally, the Syrian general Lysias brought an *enormous* army into Judea, to try to crush the rebellion. However, over the course of several years of fighting, the Maccabees were able to drive that army completely out of Jerusalem. That final victory then allowed the Maccabees to purify the Temple – i.e., to remove all of the pagan idols and symbols from it; and to then re-dedicate the Temple to God. This re-dedication occurred on the 25th of the Jewish month of Kislev, in 164 BC.

Reasons for the Festival

There are three primary items that are celebrated on Hanukkah. Two of those items are *historical events* – as found in the books of 1st and 2nd Maccabees. The first item that the festival celebrates is the defeat of the Syrian armies by the Maccabees – against overwhelming odds. The second item which is commemorated by the festival is the re-dedication of the Temple to God, by the Maccabees. In fact, the word “Hanukkah” actually means “dedication”.

The third item is not historical; it is *traditional*. There is a legend that when the Temple was re-dedicated, there was only enough consecrated oil present to keep the Temple menorah lit for one day. That was a problem, because the Bible states that that menorah needs remain lit **continuously** – and it takes eight days to consecrate additional oil. So, according to tradition, the oil that was found miraculously burned for eight days – rather than one – and that allowed time for additional oil to be prepared.

The third item above – the “miracle of the oil” – is celebrated on Hanukkah with a special type of menorah, called a “hanukkiah”. A standard menorah has **seven** candle holders; with each holder being the same height. In contrast, a hanukkiah has **nine** candle holders – and the holder in the middle is raised up higher than all of the other eight holders.

Hanukkah lasts for eight days – symbolic of the eight days that the Temple oil lasted. On the first day, one of the “lower eight” candles is lit; on the second day two of those candles are lit; etc. – all the way up to the eighth day, when all of the lower eight candles are lit.

The center candle – the one that is higher than all of the others – is called the “shamash” candle. The word shamash means “servant”. That candle is always lit first – and then that candle is used to light all of the other candles.

Relationship to Jesus

There are several items about Hanukkah, which are “related” to Jesus in one way or another. In particular, some items about Hanukkah appear to be quite “prophetic” about Jesus.

First of all, the central candle in a hanukkiah is lifted up higher than all of the rest of the candles – i.e., it has more “honor” than all of the other candles. However, that candle is the “shamash” – it is the “servant” of all of the others. That description of the shamash candle is directly prophetic of Jesus – because he is lifted up higher than any of us – and yet, he came to serve us. For example:

Philippians 2:9-10 (ESV):

9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.

Mark 10:45 (ESV):

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Another item to note about Hanukkah is that the central candle – the shamash – is always lit first. After that, the shamash is then used to light the other candles. In other words, the light of the shamash candle appears first – and then that candle’s light causes other candles to have light. This is also directly prophetic of Jesus – because Jesus is the original “light of the world” – but then he causes his followers to have light in themselves. Consider these passages:

Isaiah 9:2 (ESV):

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

John 8:12 (ESV):

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

There is one final note about Hanukkah. Interestingly, that festival does not appear anywhere in the Old Testament. It is not one of the seven festivals listed in the Torah; and it is not mentioned anywhere *else* in the Old Testament, either. However, Hanukkah is mentioned in the New Testament! Take a look at this passage:

John 10:22-23 (ESV):

22 At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon.

As mentioned above, the word “Hanukkah” means “dedication”. So, the Feast of Dedication mentioned in that passage refers to Hanukkah!

Also, due to the way that passage is worded, it appears that Jesus **celebrated** Hanukkah! (That is not *explicitly* stated in the passage; but it is *implied*.) Of course, if Jesus celebrated it, then Hanukkah definitely is a “legitimate” festival!

Conclusion

The following claim is sometimes made about Hanukkah: “If Hanukkah had not occurred, then Christmas could not have occurred”. In essence, that means that if the Syrian forces had completely wiped out all of the Jewish people, then Jesus could not have been born – because Jesus needed to be a direct, genetic descendant of King David.

In any case, the success of the Maccabees in defeating the Syrian forces is certainly an item to commemorate. In addition, the symbolic items present in the Hanukkah traditions certainly *appear* to be prophetic of Jesus – so of course that is another item of which to take note. I hope this article was useful to you!