

The Importance of Chanukah

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The subject of what Messianic Believers are to be doing for the Winter holiday season can be very controversial. On the one hand, Messianics should not really be celebrating Christmas, because it is non-Biblical and was created to be one replacement for observing the appointed times of Leviticus 23. On the other hand, should all Messianic Believers celebrate *Chanukah* (חֲנֻכָּה), or the Feast of Dedication? Primarily the debate surrounds the fact that often the celebration of *Chanukah* can become a replacement for Christmas, and that *Chanukah* is not a Biblically-mandated holiday, as it is not in the Leviticus 23 list.

If there is anything we must consider regarding this issue it is two things: (1) We must have an attitude that brings glory to our Heavenly Father, and (2) our actions must foster unity and understanding between Jewish and non-Jewish Believers. Sadly, like many of the issues that we face, the subject of whether or not we should celebrate *Chanukah* has two extremes. There are those who vehemently oppose its observance, and perhaps might even consider it a “gross Jewish error.” And, there are those who go overboard in encouraging its celebration, in an effort to prove that they are “better” than Christians who celebrate Christmas in ignorance. Neither one of these positions is right.

In this article, we examine the historical origins of the celebration known as *Chanukah*, *Chanukah* and Yeshua, and *Chanukah* as a special time for those who who are a part of the Messianic community.

The Prophecies of Daniel and the Rise of Antiochus

Before we can examine the issues pertaining to the celebration of *Chanukah*, we must first understand its historical origins, which actually precede the time of the Maccabees in Second Century B.C.E. Israel, going back much further to the exile of the Southern Kingdom to Babylon in the 500s B.C.E. While in Babylon, the Prophet Daniel was shown visions of the future, which included both the immediate future concerning his time as Babylon would be overtaken by Persia, as well as the far distant future. One of these prophecies included the vision of the four beasts, representative of the empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome (and revived Rome in the end-times). The third kingdom, Greece (Heb. *Yavan*, יָוָן), would arise and would conquer the Persians:

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“The he-goat, the kingdom of Greece, and the large horn that is between its eyes is its first king” (Daniel 8:21).

Many conservative expositors are agreed that this prophecy is a reference to Alexander the Great, the Macedonian king whose father Philip II had conquered the Greek Peloponnesus. Alexander continued his father’s legacy by extending his military campaign into Asia Minor, Egypt, Persia, and all the way into India. Alexander, however, died at the age of 33 in 323 B.C.E. in Babylon. After his death, his empire was divided among his four generals who took control of Macedonia, the Greek Peloponnesus, Egypt, and Syria. It is not surprising to know that ancient history tells us that these four kingdoms became rivals and often fought among themselves:

“As for the broken one, in whose place four arose, four kingdoms will arise from one nation, but lacking its strength” (Daniel 8:22).

A notable part of Alexander’s conquering of the ancient world was not only the extension of his rule, but also the exposure of the Greek language and culture into foreign areas. Macedonia itself, not really considered to be “Greek” by the Greeks, had been Hellenized during the childhood of Alexander, who was tutored by Aristotle. Part of Philip’s, and later Alexander’s military campaign, was to spread the way of life that had made Macedonia the great power that it was. But, not everyone in the ancient world desired to be Hellenized or forced to become like the Greeks.

Prior to Alexander the Great, the Jewish exiles had returned from Babylon to the Land of Israel. The Jewish province was a vassal of the Persian Empire, but later became engulfed into Alexander’s empire and became a part of Syria. Greek culture was slowly influencing the Jews, with many Jews abandoning the Torah and its commandments in favor of Greek customs and philosophies. It became increasingly more difficult for the Jews to maintain a Torah-obedient lifestyle with the policies of the Syrian Greeks.

Things got out of control when Antiochus IV of the Seleucid dynasty came to power (175-164 B.C.E.). He was actually called Epiphanes or “God manifest.”¹ Antiochus made it illegal for the Jews to practice the Torah, perform circumcision, follow the kosher laws, and worship in the Temple. He moved his troops into Jerusalem and had the Temple desecrated by the sacrificing of a pig, and by having a statue to the god Zeus erected. This, and the subsequent and related events following, are recorded in the Apocrypha in the Books of 1-4 Maccabees:

“And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the cities of Judah; he directed them to follow customs strange to the land, to forbid burnt offerings and sacrifices and drink offerings in the sanctuary, to profane sabbaths and feasts, to defile the sanctuary and the priests, to build altars and sacred precincts and shrines for idols, to sacrifice swine and unclean animals, and to leave their sons uncircumcised. They were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane, so that they should forget the law and change all the ordinances. And whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die” (1 Maccabees 1:44-50).

It can be rightly assumed that Antiochus was an ambitious man, and he was making a political power play, demonstrating that he was more powerful than the

¹ Grk. *Antiochos Epiphanēs* (Ἀντίοχος Ἐπιφανής); *epiphanēs* actually means “coming to light, appearing, of gods” (H.G. Liddell, and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994], 306).

Ptolemaic Greeks of Egypt. After fighting Ptolemy, he sought to fully control the Land of Israel and Jerusalem:

“When Antiochus saw that his kingdom was established, he determined to become king of the land of Egypt, that he might reign over both kingdoms. So he invaded Egypt with a strong force, with chariots and elephants and cavalry and with a large fleet. He engaged Ptolemy king of Egypt in battle, and Ptolemy turned and fled before him, and many were wounded and fell. And they captured the fortified cities in the land of Egypt, and he plundered the land of Egypt. After subduing Egypt, Antiochus returned in the one hundred and forty-third year. He went up against Israel and came to Jerusalem with a strong force” (1 Maccabees 1:16-18).

The Maccabean Era

As you can imagine, the actions of Antiochus were not well received by the majority population of the Land of Israel. Led by the retired priest Mattathias, many Jews opposed the oppression of the Syrian Greek invaders and sought to see them pushed out of the Land of Israel. Many of the Jews, fearing for their lives, succumbed to not following the Torah and would not follow the rite of circumcision or eat kosher. Many of them adopted Greek religion and wanted to “blend in.”

As Antiochus’ army entered into the town of Modin, where Mattathias and his five sons were living, they tried to persuade them to forsake the Law of Moses and sacrifice to Greek gods. Mattathias refused to give into their demands and proclaimed his loyalty to the God of Israel and to His Instruction:

“But Mattathias answered and said in a loud voice: ‘Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to do his commandments, departing each one from the religion of his fathers, yet I and my sons and my brothers will live by the covenant of our fathers. Far be it from us to desert the law and the ordinances. We will not obey the king’s words by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left’” (1 Maccabees 2:19-22).

Mattathias then declares that any Jew succumbing to these demands was a traitor to the covenants and to the God of Israel, and he calls all to join him in a revolt:

“When he had finished speaking these words, a Jew came forward in the sight of all to offer sacrifice upon the altar in Modein, according to the king’s command. When Mattathias saw it, he burned with zeal and his heart was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and killed him upon the altar” (1 Maccabees 2:23-24).

He then began a military revolt against the Syrian Greeks, killing those who opposed him. His zeal is described like that of Phinehas in the wilderness:

“Thus he burned with zeal for the law, as Phinehas did against Zimri the son of Salu. Then Mattathias cried out in the city with a loud voice, saying: ‘Let every one who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come out with me!’” (1 Maccabees 2:26-27; cf. Numbers 26:7-8).

Mattathias would not live through his campaign to see the final victory over the Syrian Greek oppressors. The mantle would pass onto his son, Judas Maccabeus, who would lead the Jews in a revolt against the Seleucids that would take around three years. He was nicknamed *Makkabbi* (מַכַּבִּי), which means “hammer.” During this time, a guerilla-type warfare was carried out against the

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Syrian Greeks, while the Jews sought allies in the Egyptian Greeks or Ptolemies, the Spartans, and the Romans. Their military challenges and triumphs are detailed and chronicled in the Apocryphal Books of 1-4 Maccabees.

The rise of Antiochus Epiphanes and the events of the Maccabean Era were prophesied by Daniel after speaking about the division of Alexander's kingdom into four regions. Daniel rightly prophesied that Antiochus would arise to expand his own kingdom, would come against the faithful ones, but would not die in battle:

"In the latter period of their rule, when the transgressors have run *their course*, a king will arise, insolent and skilled in intrigue. His power will be mighty, but not by his *own* power, and he will destroy to an extraordinary degree and prosper and perform *his will*; he will destroy mighty men and the holy people. And through his shrewdness he will cause deceit to succeed by his influence; and he will magnify *himself* in his heart, and he will destroy many while *they are* at ease. He will even oppose the Prince of princes, but he will be broken without human agency" (Daniel 8:23-25).

Antiochus was unable to stand against the Jews, many of whom faithfully resisted any attempt to Hellenize them, namely getting them to reject the Torah, circumcision, kosher eating, and the Temple service, and instead practice Greek religion. Antiochus believed himself to be a god, but later wasted away and died not in battle, but from a flesh-eating disease:

"But the all-seeing Lord, the God of Israel, struck him an incurable and unseen blow. As soon as he ceased speaking he was seized with a pain in his bowels for which there was no relief and with sharp internal tortures—and that very justly, for he had tortured the bowels of others with many and strange inflictions. Yet he did not in any way stop his insolence, but was even more filled with arrogance, breathing fire in his rage against the Jews, and giving orders to hasten the journey. And so it came about that he fell out of his chariot as it was rushing along, and the fall was so hard as to torture every limb of his body. Thus he who had just been thinking that he could command the waves of the sea, in his superhuman arrogance, and imagining that he could weigh the high mountains in a balance, was brought down to earth and carried in a litter, making the power of God manifest to all. And so the ungodly man's body swarmed with worms, and while he was still living in anguish and pain, his flesh rotted away, and because of his stench the whole army felt revulsion at his decay" (2 Maccabees 9:5-9).

The Miracle of the Oil

The Maccabees drove the Seleucids out of the Land of Israel in the month of Kislev 165 B.C.E., which is in about the month of December. They had the task of cleaning up the mess that the Seleucids had left, notably in the city of Jerusalem and in the Temple complex. Antiochus' forces had completely ransacked the Temple and made it into a haven of idolatry. The Temple needed to be cleansed of its defilement and restored to its previous sanctity so proper sacrifices could once again be performed. Of all of the items of Temple furniture that had to be cleansed and rededicated, one of the most important was the great lampstand or *menorah* (מְנוֹרָה). The *menorah* required special consecrated oil in order to be lit.

As many of you are no doubt aware, modern observance of *Chanukah* is commemorated by the lighting of a *chanukia*, or a special nine-branched *menorah*.

This is different from the *menorah* that was in the Temple that had seven branches. It is used because when the Temple was rededicated there was only enough oil to be lit for one day. However, the oil remained lit for eight days, allowing time for newly consecrated oil to be produced. Today a ninth candle or servant candle is used to light the eight candles of the *chanukia* to commemorate the eight days the *menorah* was lit. *Chanukah* (חֲנֻכָּה), meaning “dedication,” became the nation’s commemoration of this miracle. The miracle of the eight days of oil is spoken of in the Talmud:

“What’s the point of Hanukkah? It is in line with what our rabbis have taught on Tannaite authority: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev the days of Hanukkah, which are eight, begin. On these days it is forbidden to lament the dead and to fast.

“For when the Greeks entered the sanctuary, they made all of the oil that was in the sanctuary unclean. But when the rule of the Hasmonean house took hold and they conquered them, they searched but found only a single jar of oil, lying with the seal of the high priest. But that jar had enough oil only for a single day. But there was a miracle done with it, and they lit the lamp with it for eight days. The next year they assigned these days and made them festival days for the recitation of Hallel psalms [Psa. 113-118] and for thanksgiving” (b.Shabbat 21b).²

What would have happened if the Maccabees had not stood up to Antiochus and his armies? Not only would they have succeeded in wiping out the Jewish people, either through military defeat or cultural assimilation—but Israel, *in any form*, would not have existed to give rise to Messiah Yeshua. We have ample reasons to celebrate *Chanukah* as Believers in Yeshua today—the foremost of which being that if the miracle of *Chanukah* had not taken place, **there would be no miracle of Yeshua!**

Chanukah and Yeshua

But what about Yeshua the Messiah? As *Chanukah* was established as a celebration in the mid-Second Century B.C.E., did our Lord and Savior celebrate it?

John 10:22 tells us, “Then came Hanukkah in Yerushalayim. It was winter” (CJB). The Greek source text actually uses the word *egkainia* (ἐγκαίνια), which in most Bibles is rendered as the “Feast of Dedication.” *BDAG* defines it clearly as “*festival of rededication*...known also as Hanukkah and the Feast of Lights, beg. the 25th of Chislev (roughly=November-December) to commemorate the purification of the temple by Judas Maccabaeus on that date in 165 B.C.”³

So what was Yeshua doing in Jerusalem during this time?

“[I]t was winter, and Yeshua was walking in the temple in the portico of Solomon. The Jews then gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, ‘How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’ Yeshua answered them, ‘I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father’s name, these testify of Me. But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no

² *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

³ Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 272.

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one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one.' The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him" (John 10:23-31).

Yeshua was present in Jerusalem during *Chanukah*. We may assume by His presence in the holy city that He was celebrating whatever was commemorated at that time. Notice that during *Chanukah* some Jews ask Him if He was the Messiah. Yeshua tells them that He has already demonstrated His Messiahship to them by His actions and that they do not believe. The quintessential statement made here is "I and the Father are one." This includes echoes of the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" In proclaiming that He and the Father are one, Yeshua was proclaiming Himself to not only do the work of the Father, but to also be Divine and to be of the same substance as God. By doing so, the Jews present wanted to stone Him as they believed He was committing blasphemy.⁴

Celebrating *Chanukah* and understanding that Yeshua was in Jerusalem at this time is very important. It is especially important when we understand what Yeshua was doing and the questions that He was asked regarding His mission.

Today's Dilemma: Encountering Hellenism

One of today's serious dilemmas is how *Chanukah* is handled in certain sectors of the Messianic movement. Because *Chanukah* often occurs in close proximity to Christmas, many people say *Chanukah* is a more Biblical celebration than Christmas, even though neither holiday is mandated in Scripture. Many, in wanting to expose the questionable nature of the Christmas tree, become vehemently opposed to commemorating the birth of Messiah Yeshua. Certainly, if Yeshua's birth is to be commemorated, it would be appropriate to remember it during the actual time of His actual birth (which some Messianics are agreed was during *Sukkot* or Tabernacles, making His conception sometime around *Chanukah*).⁵ But celebration of *Chanukah* should not be viewed as a replacement for Christmas. Celebrating *Chanukah* should be an occasion where we rededicate ourselves to God and to one another, as the Maccabees did to the Temple some 2,200 years ago.

Another serious problem is that *Chanukah* often becomes a time for unwarranted "Greek bashing," which oftentimes manifests itself in criticism and denial of the inspiration of the Greek Apostolic Scriptures. Hellenism, or Greek philosophy, is by no means something that we endorse, but definitions of Hellenism vary. As it concerns the time of the Maccabees, there are some very distinct definitions of Hellenism that must be taken into account that the Seleucid Greeks forced upon the Jews:

"And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the cities of Judah; he directed them to follow customs strange to the land, to forbid burnt offerings and sacrifices and drink offerings in the sanctuary, to profane sabbaths and feasts, to defile the sanctuary and the priests, to build altars and sacred precincts and shrines for idols, to sacrifice swine and unclean animals, and to leave their sons

⁴ A thorough defense of the Divinity of Yeshua, with passages across the Apostolic Scriptures being classified to be examined, will be conducted in the forthcoming book *Salvation on the Line*.

⁵ Even trying to remember Yeshua's birth at Tabernacles has been met with a great deal of resistance. Indeed, probably the "safest" time to address the subject is when *Shemot* (Exodus 1:1-6:1) appears in the yearly Torah cycle, as parallels between Moses' birth and Yeshua's birth in the Gospels can be considered.

uncircumcised. They were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane, so that they should forget the law and change all the ordinances. And whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die” (1 Maccabees 1:44-50).

The Hellenism that the Maccabees fought against included:

- Following the Greek religion, which included the worship of multiple gods and images, and making sacrifices to them with unclean or unfit animals
- A prohibition on animal sacrifices and prescribed offerings according to the Torah
- A prohibition on keeping the seventh-day Sabbath
- A prohibition on circumcision
- A prohibition on studying the Torah and its ordinances, so the people would forget their covenant status with the God of Israel

Hellenism, as the Maccabees understood it, included these things. Are there Christians, and indeed liberal Messianics, that adhere to some of these things? Yes. There are those who believe that God’s Torah is unimportant, that the seventh-day Sabbath was done away with, that eating kosher is unimportant, that circumcision is unimportant, and that the significance of the Temple service is unimportant. **I am not one of those who believes these things to be unimportant.** These things are being restored to and appreciated once again in the Body of Messiah as we approach the Lord’s return.

However, in fair balance to First Century history and the time of Yeshua, the Greek language and Greek philosophy did exist in the world of the Messiah. Hebrew and Aramaic were the local languages of the Land of Israel, but Greek became the standardized language of the Eastern Mediterranean and of business on the street. *NIDB* states it correctly in saying, “The fact that Greek became the language of literature and commerce throughout the ‘inhabited world,’ for example, was of inestimable importance to the spread of the gospel.”⁶ If it had not been for Alexander the Great, the Apostles would have had a very difficult time in going out on missionary journeys, as there would have been a whole host of local languages they would have had to learn, rather than one standardized international language. A Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, was widely disseminated and was helpful in seeing many non-Jews convert to Judaism, or at least hear about the God of Israel, prior to the First Coming of Yeshua.⁷

The use of Greek in the First Century is no different than how the expansion of the British Empire in the Nineteenth Century, and American television in the Twentieth Century, have helped make English the dominant international language of today. We should be thankful that English has the widespread usage that it has

⁶ Brewster Porcella, “Alexander the Great,” in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 33.

⁷ Consult Tim Hegg, *The Letter Writer* (Littleton, CO: First Fruits of Zion, 2002), pp 39-42. Hegg suggests that the Apostle Paul, while being a Rabbinical scholar and student of the Jewish Sage Gamaliel, likely also studied Greek language and philosophy at the *same* Rabbinical school (b.*Sotah* 49b). If indeed true, this would correspond with the historical understanding that Pharisaical Judaism was an active proselytizing religion (Yeshua condemned the leadership’s manner of proselytizing in Matthew 23:15). Paul would not have studied Greek language, philosophy, and culture just for the sake of learning it, but for the sake of converting Greek-speakers to the religion of the God of Israel. The same should be our goal if any of us is called to the mission field: we must know about the people grouping to whom we are called.

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today; otherwise the restorations that are being accomplished to the Body of Messiah may not be taking place as easily as they are through communication with Believers worldwide.

Our *Chanukah* celebrations should not be a time for “Greek bashing.” Those who would do so need to understand the complex history of the ancient world a little better.⁸ Our *Chanukah* celebrations need to instead focus on the unity of all of God’s people, as we each rededicate ourselves to the Lord *and* to one another—and that individually we need to clean our personal temples of any defilements that we may have.

Commemorating Chanukah

As we focus on the Festival of Lights, we must not forget the Light of the World, Messiah Yeshua, and we must not forget the hardships and trials that the Jewish people have had to endure. We must be inspired by the dedication of the Maccabees to stand, fight, and even die for the truth of God. We must not succumb to the temptations of the popular culture, but stand for what we know is right, just, and godly.

All of us must join together and rejoice in the miracle that the Lord God performed those many centuries ago as the *menorah* remained lit for those eight special days. *Chanukah* is a great time for us to contemplate the ongoing *salvation history* of our Heavenly Father, and how we should stand up for Him in the similar challenges that the world may present us with today.

⁸ For a further discussion, consult the article “The Role of History in Messianic Biblical Interpretation” by J.K. McKee.