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Chanukah and Encountering Worldly Philosophies

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One of the responsibilities of any Bible teacher is to bridge the gulf that exists between Scripture passages given in an ancient historical context, and providing practical application for those living in the Twenty-First Century. Human nature often remains the same between an ancient period and modern society: people still commit sin, people still need redemption, people still desire to be loved. Certainly as Messianic Believers, we learn and encounter many things that teach us about ourselves from the weekly Torah portions, from the Tanach, and from looking at the Apostolic Scriptures in their ancient Jewish and Mediterranean setting.

Making a connection between the *Chanukah* story and society today is actually quite easy, but it is also very complicated. I will not disagree with anyone who says that a main feature of the *Chanukah* story is resistance to Hellenism or errant Greek philosophy. But what we define as Hellenism or errant Greek philosophy is very much contingent on a teacher **actually knowing a few things about classical Greek philosophy**, and being able to provide documentation from primary and secondary sources when one defines a concept or idea as specifically being “Greek.” Again, it is easy for me to talk about this because in our Wednesday Night Bible Study,¹ when we encounter classical concepts that the Apostles are directly confronting—engagement with the relevant Greek or Roman philosophers, historians, or politicians is

¹ MP3 audio lectures of our current studies are accessible online at <messianicapogetics.net/biblestudy>.

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offered.² Yet for many who promote the concept of a so-called Hebrew mind versus a Greek mind, such engagement is often not provided. It should make one wonder if this soundbyte is often used to just be a smokescreen to promote some ear-tickling teaching (2 Timothy 4:3).

Whether you are aware of it or not, 1 Maccabees 1:44-50 actually gives us specific examples of the kind of Hellenism directly imposed upon the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes, and rightly opposed by the 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).

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 and 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

The “Hellenism” that was **not** fought against was learning, speaking, or using the language in which the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament were inspired by the Holy Spirit.³ The Hellenism that was fought against was a way of life that would lead people away from the God of Israel and His Teaching.

² For a strident example, note the comments under the subheading “The Greek View(s) of Immortality” in the publication *To Be Absent From the Body* by J.K. McKee, which actually addresses the diverse views of the afterlife as held by the Ancient Greeks and Romans.

³ I am fully aware of the fact that many of today’s Messianic Believers think that the whole of the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew. This is more of an opinion, though, rather than a fact. Such a view would need to be substantiated by specific book-by-book analysis, and also engagement with relevant scholastic research. No one I have ever encountered advocating a so-called “Hebrew New Testament” has ever really done this.

For a further discussion of this subject consult *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee. Also see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), and D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

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I could explain to you many concepts that I feel are floating around today's Messianic movement that have been passed off as being "Hebraic," when in actuality they are Greek to their very core. One of the biggest and most severely overlooked problems originating from Hellenism regards how women are often treated by today's Messianic movement, and what can often manifest itself as blatant chauvinism. Qualified women are not only frequently barred from positions of leadership and teaching,⁴ but wives are frequently unable to have a say in the home—things that run against Paul's instruction in Ephesians 5:21-33 on mutual submission. The message of the equality that Yeshua has restored, not only among all people of all nationalities—but both genders—is not something that we really hear (Galatians 3:28).⁵

Chanukah is to be a time of rededicating ourselves to the Lord, and to one another as fellow brothers and sisters. Yet there is one concept that I would like us to consider, one that is very Hebraic as seen in the Torah, and one that seldom receives any attention from Messianic leaders or teachers: **the corporate identity of God's people.**

In Deuteronomy 6:25, the Ancient Israelites declare, "It will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment before the LORD our God, just as He commanded us." Many people read this verse and assume that if an individual keeps all of God's commandments then that individual will be considered righteous. Of course, there are no examples that individual Ancient Israelites ever did this, as human actions are considered "filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6, NIV) before God, and as soon as the Ancient Israelites entered into the Promised Land—idolatry largely prevailed (Book of Judges). The problem with this interpretation of Deuteronomy 6:25 is that it just assumes that individuals are in view. Whether you are aware of this or not, *tzedaqah* (צְדָקָה) has a corporate context that relates to one being a part of God's people.⁶ What is likely being said in Deuteronomy 6:25 is that if one keeps God's commandments he or she can be identified as being in covenant status before Him as a part of His people.

This kind of corporate identity is significantly foreign to a post-Enlightenment Western mind. How many of you have ever heard that there are places in the Bible when "righteousness" or "justification" is being talked

⁴ Consult the FAQ, "Women in Ministry."

⁵ For a further discussion, thoroughly substantiated with quotations from classical philosophy and Rabbinical sources, and how "the husband is the head of the wife" (Ephesians 5:23) speaks of him being the source or origin (Grk. *kephalē*, κεφαλή) of her (cf. Ephesians 5:28), consult the commentary *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee. Also consult his paper on Galatians 3:28, "Biblical Equality and Today's Messianic Movement."

⁶ Cf. Harold G. Stigers, "צְדָקָה (root)," in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:752-755.

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about, where anything but individuals are probably in view? Various Christian theologians within the New Perspective of Paul (like James D.G. Dunn or N.T. Wright) have pointed out some possible places in Galatians and Romans where *dikaioσunē* (δικαιοσύνη), the Greek equivalent of *tzedaqah* via the Septuagint, has corporate connotations.⁷ The reaction to their proposals have been met with a great deal of resistance among some evangelicals, as though they somehow deny the Biblical concept of justification by faith. All they have proposed, however, is that perhaps in a place like Romans 3:28, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law,” inclusion among God’s covenant people is the likely issue. Does this covenant inclusion come about via faith in God, or by “works of law” (whatever these “works of law” actually are)? This is a worthy topic of exploration for your Biblical studies.⁸

The problem is not that God is concerned with individuals; He surely is. Individual salvation is more important than any other concept we can emphasize! The problem comes when we over-emphasize the individual at the expense of the whole corporate Body of Messiah. Many of the divisions we have seen in Judaism, Christianity, and even the Messianic movement have largely come about because of an emphasis on hyper-individuality—a **direct result of our Western culture**. It is as simple as people not demonstrating enough concern for others, because when others’ needs are considered as being more important than your own (Philippians 2:3), then the Body of Messiah can truly flourish. Consider how most interpret Romans 12:1, versus what the issue really is within the larger scope of Paul’s letter:

“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship.”

The NIV actually renders this as “offer your bodies as living sacrifices,” even though *thusian* (θυσίαν) appears in the singular, **not the plural**. While we are each to surely live our individual lives as a living sacrifice to God, in his teaching to the Romans Paul is more concerned about stopping the divisions present among them.⁹ He wants them to understand, “we, who are many, are

⁷ Consult the commentaries *Galatians for the Practical Messianic* and *Romans for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee for more information on this.

⁸ For a further examination on how “works of law” likely related to ancient Jewish sectarian observances, consult the article “What Are ‘Works of the Law’?” by J.K. McKee (appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*).

⁹ About as close as I have ever seen a major commentator refer to this, are Douglas J. Moo’s remarks in his Romans commentary, in a footnote:

“The shift from the plural σώματα (‘bodies’) to the singular θυσίαν (‘sacrifice’) could indicate that Paul thinks of this presentation as having a corporate dimension, involving the service of the

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one body in Messiah, and individually members one of another” (Romans 12:5). The living sacrifice that Paul has in mind here is not exclusively one of individuals being living sacrifices—but of the corporate Body of Messiah, *which is made up of individuals*, functioning as a singular living sacrifice. Lives of self-sacrifice and mutual submission to one another within the corporate Body of Messiah are able to accomplish the mission of God much better than individuals off on their own.

Similar to this is how Paul instructed the Corinthians, “Do you not know that you are a temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16). And also, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? (1 Corinthians 6:19). As important as it may be for us to individually think of ourselves as being a receptacle of the Holy Spirit, it is undeniable that *oidate* (οἶδατε), “know,” and *en humin* (ἐν ὑμῖν), “in you,” appearing in 1 Corinthians 3:16, are in the **plural**. Likewise, 1 Corinthians 6:19 has references to *to sōma humōn...en humin...echete apo Theou, kai ouk este heautōn* (τὸ σῶμα ὑμῶν ἐν ὑμῖν ἔχετε ἀπὸ θεοῦ, καὶ οὐκ ἐστὲ ἑαυτῶν)—“your body...in you...you have from God, and that you are not your own”—also with you in the **plural**. What does this all mean? It means that once again the corporate Body of Messiah is principally what is in view. Only by functioning together can we fully be a Temple of God’s presence that will attract others to Him.

I believe that if there is anything distinctly Western that our faith community suffers from, it is our inability to function with corporate unity. It will not be impossible for us to function with corporate unity in the future, but in order for this to be achieved we must have a more refined understanding of what God’s mission is for His people, what we need to be doing in order to achieve that mission, and how we can be men and women empowered by the Holy Spirit who live in mutual submission to one another. **And the biggest challenge of all is to actually have hearts and minds transformed by the Holy Spirit!** If we have hearts and minds transformed by the Holy Spirit, then every single one of us will have a burden for the lost, and we will be able to “be subject to one another in the fear of Messiah” (Ephesians 5:21).

As you confront worldly philosophies at this *Chanukah*, consider your relationship to other Believers and how you can contribute to us all being a pleasing *corporate* living sacrifice before Him! How are we to *all* function as His Temple, and not necessarily individual “temples”? Rededicate yourselves

entire Christian community together” (*New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 750, fn #24).

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not only to the Father, but to your fellow brothers and sisters, and we will definitely go far!