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Why We Should Celebrate Chanukah

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Chanukah is my favorite of all the holidays we get to celebrate as Messianic Believers. Why is it my favorite, you may ask? It does normally take place in December, which means it is in close proximity to my birthday. In December, I get to open a lot of presents! As a Messianic Bible teacher, *Chanukah* has the least amount of controversy associated with it, which means I get to relax (somewhat). We all know when *Chanukah* begins, the twenty-fifth of Chislev (2 Maccabees 1:18; 10:5), so there's no dispute about when it takes place. The traditions associated with *Chanukah* are fairly straightforward: light your *menorah* for eight days, on Day 1 lighting one candle, Day 2 lighting two candles, etc. Be sure to eat fried foods like latkes or doughnuts, remembering the miracle of the oil remaining lit. **Probably the biggest fight I've ever seen among people who celebrate *Chanukah* is over the menu!** Not too bad if you ask me.

Believe me, as one who often has to moderate disputes among Messianics during either the Passover season, or the time period from *Rosh HaShanah* to *Sukkot*—*Chanukah* is easy in comparison. But that does not mean that there are no questions that people ask. Generally speaking, I think those of us of the Jewish traditionalist camp in terms of Torah observance and *halachah* have often not explained ourselves as well as we should. (Please note that this does not mean that we are all "Orthodox.") Because of this, there are some who scratch their heads and wonder whether we should really celebrate *Chanukah*. Isn't this just "the Jewish Christmas"? While the traditionalist perspective has longevity, and brings a great deal of stability to the faithful, we do need to ask

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whether the custom of celebrating *Chanukah* passes the test of Philippians 4:8:

“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”

I think we will all agree that the Holy Scriptures pass the test of being holy, pure, excellent, and worthy of our attention and praise. Suffice it to say, *Chanukah* or the Feast of Dedication is mentioned in the Holy Scriptures, where John 10:23-24 speaks of Yeshua being present in Jerusalem:

“At that time the Feast of the Dedication took place at Jerusalem; it was winter, and Yeshua was walking in the temple in the portico of Solomon.”

For some, such as myself, it does not seem that difficult. Our Messiah Yeshua was present when *Chanukah* was being celebrated at the Temple complex in Jerusalem. There had to have been some kind of festivities going on, where the actions of the Maccabees in cleansing the Temple a century-and-a-half earlier were commemorated. The attention in the verses following is not spent discussing whatever celebration was going on, but instead considers the opportunity that Yeshua had to teach and demonstrate who He was as Savior (John 10:25-42). There are some critical statements made here about Yeshua’s oneness with the Father and His Divinity (John 10:30, 33), worthy of exploration in other studies. Yet for some, Yeshua’s presence at the porch of Solomon does not automatically mean that He celebrated—or would even endorse—the celebration of *Chanukah* today.

I agree, along with many other Messianics, that Yeshua observed all of the appointed times of Leviticus 23. But are you aware of the fact that there is no direct statement in the Apostolic Scriptures which says that the Messiah kept *Yom Teruah/Rosh HaShanah*? I haven’t found it. . . (at least not yet). This does not mean that the Lord did not observe the Feast of Trumpets, but we actually have more direct evidence as seen in John 10:23-24 that the Lord observed *Chanukah*. I have heard some Messianic skeptics say that while Yeshua was present at the porch of Solomon, He was away from the Temple, as though He were standing off to the side disapproving of the celebration of *Chanukah*. However, F.F. Bruce’s remarks in his commentary on the Gospel of John are more true to what is stated in the text:

“Jesus evidently had spent the two months since Tabernacles in or near Jerusalem. . . The note that ‘it was winter’ may be intended to explain why he was in a covered part of the temple precincts. Solomon’s colonnade was the name given to the portico which ran along the east side of the outer court of Herod’s temple.”¹

¹ F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 230.

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Yeshua's presence at the porch of Solomon is not difficult to deduce: **it was Winter when *Chanukah* was being celebrated.** There could have been cold winds, freezing rain, or maybe even snow. This was, in all likelihood, where many of the people were gathered to see what was going on for the memorial of the Feast of Dedication. If any of us live in Winter climates today, would we not be expected to celebrate *Chanukah* in some kind of an enclosed, or at least a covered, area? We would want to be shielded from the harsh elements.

I sincerely hope that during the *Chanukah* season, every one of you has taken the time to peruse through the Books of Maccabees. This is easy for me, because I have four study Bibles on my desk that include the Apocrypha, and even a copy of the Septuagint which includes the Greek source text used for today's English translations. As one who writes commentaries, I have to engage with literature like Maccabees on a semi-frequent basis, as verses may be referred to in the more technical commentaries that I consult in my studies. Maccabees is often considered to be martyr literature, as the Jews during the time of Antiochus Epiphanes and the Seleucid invasion had to resist assimilation and the occupation of their country. Many were tortured and killed for their faith in the God of Israel—before Yeshua even came on the scene. There is a Biblical reference to these martyrs in Hebrews 11:36:

"Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection" (NRSV).

The story of the seven brothers in 2 Maccabees 7 is something that you all need to read, if you have never read it. The second brother, before being murdered, tells his captors, "You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws" (2 Maccabees 7:9). David A. deSilva concurs,

"Those who were tortured' but who maintained their loyalty to God and trust in his reward of the faithful are frequently and rightly identified as the martyrs who suffered under Antiochus IV, whose story is vividly preserved in 2 Maccabees 6:18-7:42 and 4 Maccabees 5-18. . . That the author of Hebrews should include among his examples of faith this group of martyrs is not at all surprising. . ." ²

Honoring those who give their lives in the service of God is something very appropriate during the season of *Chanukah*. When the Apostle Paul went out into the Mediterranean and faced unwarranted arrest, imprisonment, beatings, and abuse—do you at all think that he considered the example of the

² David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000), 419.

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Maccabean martyrs who had preceded him? Does the celebration of *Chanukah* pass his test in Philippians 4:8?

Some would say no. Some would say that the Maccabees were murderers who preyed upon Antiochus' troops and disloyal Jews, killing innocent people in cold blood. But in all honesty, if the traditions and customs of your people were based in the Torah, what else would you do when you saw gross idolatry, abominations, and collaboration with the enemy around every corner? You would stand up, fight, and resist—purging the sin and the idolaters from your midst—the exact same thing happened when the Ancient Israelites were in the wilderness. Mattathias, the father of Judah Maccabee, is testified to being of the same character as Phinehas:

"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).

Some are still not convinced that honoring the Maccabees is a good thing, because some of their descendants conspired with Rome and helped set up a Hasmonean dynasty that led to the kingship of Herod, an Edomite. Yet, the celebration of *Chanukah* is not to honor those who came two to three generations *after* the cleansing of the Temple. Messianics still celebrate the Passover, even though only two adults from the Exodus generation actually made it into the Promised Land! And likewise, are the godly achievements of Joshua nullified because things get grossly out of control in the Book of Judges after he died?

One of the problems that some skeptics have about *Chanukah* pertains to the miracle of the oil remaining lit for eight days. It is true that it is not mentioned in the historical accounts of 1-4 Maccabees, and instead appears in the Talmud (b.*Shabbat* 21b). Does this mean that it was a totally fabricated legend and that most Jews and Messianic Jews, and people such as myself, are promoting mythology? One of the advantages of reading the Scriptures in their ancient context is that you actually get to compare the Bible against the religious stories of others. You get to see what real mythology is. Some would say that Balaam's donkey speaking to him is obviously mythological (Numbers 22:28-30). Some would say that the whole Old Testament, especially things like Noah's Flood (for which there are competing stories in the Ancient Near East), is obviously mythological. But there are some major differences between mythology and the way that the Scriptures are presented. K.A. Kitchen explains,

"[The patriarchal narratives] are entirely concerned with a purely human family whose lifestyle is firmly tied to the everyday realities of herding livestock (pasture, wells), yearning for children, arranging suitable marriages, and so on. We never read (for example) of animals divided up that magically

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rejoin and live again, or of a patriarch's path barred by blocks of lapis or gold. Rather, bearing strictly real, human names, the patriarchs move in well-defined, specific locations. . . and not in some vague, never-never land. By their names and characters, the patriarchs are a group of distinguishable individuals, neither ghosts nor stereotypes."³

When one compares many of the accounts of the Tanach to extant religious literature from the Ancient Near East, one compares concrete people living real lives to kings and monarchies that consort with the gods (perhaps even sexually). The contrast is so great between such mythology and the Bible that I do not know even where to begin.⁴

A candelabra of olive oil remaining lit for eight days is not an impossible miracle to believe in—even if it is mentioned in the Talmud! We all believe in the resurrection of Yeshua the Messiah, do we not? Is that not the greatest miracle of them all? If we believe in Yeshua's resurrection, and we do not consider it mythology, why would we deny God the possibility of leaving the Temple *menorah* lit for eight days while new oil was being consecrated? Oh, do people have problems with it because it is mentioned in the Talmud and we do not trust *any* of the religious literature of the Jews? What does that say about a Messianic movement whose shared faith heritage originates from both the Church **and** the Synagogue? Whatever happened to the Jewish people having the oracles of God (Romans 3:2)?

Certainly there have been abuses by some Messianics during the *Chanukah* season. Much of this comes from a lack of understanding, and a lack of information. Not enough attention is given to the Maccabees' story and what they faced and endured, or people do not understand the historical complexities of the era of Hellenism and specifics of Greek religion and philosophy. Some people go overboard with presents and with eating (*and* with drinking), and not enough time is spent focusing on the very serious and very sober theme of martyrdom. **Being killed in the service of God is never a popular theme at any time of year.** Yet, such a theme should be emphasized as it binds us together with men and women of God all throughout the Biblical story, through the millennia since the original Feast of Dedication, and today as millions of Believers in the third world suffer under the threat of tyrannical regimes, not knowing if they will live another day.

Chanukah should be celebrated because it has important themes of salvation history that cannot be taken for granted, when God works through His people to accomplish His deliverance. Had the Maccabees not purged the

³ K.A. Kitchen, *The Bible In Its World: The Bible & Archaeology Today* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), 64.

⁴ Consult the article "Encountering Mythology: A Case Study from the Flood Narratives" by J.K. McKee for a further discussion (appearing in *Confronting Critical Issues*).

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idolatry from Ancient Judea, we may not be having this discussion today. The Jewish people would have been eliminated via cultural assimilation.

The Maccabees sacrificed their lives for the gospel before Yeshua was even born. While I will not justify much of the unfair criticism of Christmas by today's Messianics, *Chanukah* should not be summarily dismissed in extreme response to such criticism. It is a holiday where we all—whether Jewish or not—benefit from the actions of the Maccabees. It is a commemoration where we honor their sacrifice—but **now as Messianics we can remember them as some of the forgotten members of the Hebrews 11 Hall of Faith.**