



HANUKKAH: FEAST OF DEDICATION, FESTIVAL OF LIGHT

After the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC, his empire was divided by his generals. Israel was a bone of contention, because of its strategic location between the kingdoms of Syria to the north and Egypt to the south. After changing hands several times, it was conquered by Antiochus the Great of Syria in 198 BC. Antiochus IV, his son, succeeded him in 175 BC. He decided to launch a campaign against Egypt before they retaliated for his father's conquest of Israel.

In order to consolidate his forces and present a united front against Egypt, Antiochus IV instituted a form of religious and cultural totalitarianism. The Jews, who persisted in their ways, were a thorn in his side. Antiochus IV replaced the high priest Onias with his Greek-minded brother, Joshua, who changed his name to Jason. A radical policy of Hellenization was inaugurated. A Greek gymnasium was constructed, Greek customs were propagated, and Greek athletics were encouraged among the priests.

Many of the upper class and many priests went along with these policies, but pious Jews known as the *Hasidim* kept Jewish practices. Antiochus established a state religion of Zeus worship and declared himself the visible incarnation of the deity, "Epiphanes," god manifest. He then issued a decree prohibiting, on pain of death, any expression of Torah observance such as circumcision. The temple and priesthood were compelled to serve pagan religion. Greek gods were brought into the temple. An altar to Zeus was erected and pigs were sacrificed to the idol.

Meanwhile in the little village of Modein northwest of Jerusalem, an aged priest, Mattathias, lived with his five sons John, Simon, Judah, Eleazar and Jonathan. An emissary from Antiochus IV called upon Mattathias to make the pagan sacrifice, but he refused. When another of his townsmen stepped forward to do it, the aged priest struck him down, also killed the king's emissary and began to lead a revolution.

Mattathias died in 166 BC, so his son Judah, nicknamed *Maccabeus* (the hammer), took his place. He led a guerilla war against the Syrian Greeks. In spite of overwhelming odds they won a victory. The temple was regained in 165 BC and rededicated. *Hanukkah* means "dedication." Tradition says a one-day supply of ritual oil used in the temple miraculously lasted eight days. That is why the *menorah* has eight branches plus the *shamash* (servant light) and why the festival lasts eight days.

Hanukkah is a joyful time. Special foods are prepared. The oil used to fry the traditional potato pancakes, or *latkes*, is reminiscent of the oil in the temple. In Israel *sufganiyot* (doughnuts) are fried. The children are given *gelt* (gifts of money, chocolate coins or presents). The nine-branched candelabra called the

Hanukkiah (Hanukkah menorah) is lit at dusk. Each day an additional candle is lit until all eight plus the *shamash* are lit on the last evening. A blessing is recited and the traditional song *Maoz Tsur* or (Rock of Ages) is sung. During this festival children play a gambling game with a top known as a *dreydel*. Each of the top's four sides have a Hebrew letter. The letters are said to represent the Hebrew words meaning "a great miracle happened here." The central themes of Hanukkah are God's miraculous deliverance of His people, His provision, light, and the dedication of the temple.

HANUKKAH FULFILLED

We are told in **John 10:22** that Jesus was walking in the Temple area at Hanukkah. ***This is the only direct mention of Hanukkah in the whole Bible!*** The people asked "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus said, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak of me...I and the Father are one." John's reference to Hanukkah is no coincidence. The people were looking for a deliverer like the Maccabees to free them from Rome. This hope was on people's minds especially during Hanukkah. However, a greater deliverance was coming. God himself was in their midst, and His agenda for Israel's salvation was infinitely greater than liberation from Rome.

Isaiah prophesied: "...in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan — The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned...For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (9:1,2 & 6). Through the birth of a child, something weak and small, God would provide deliverance for His people! God would send His light into a world of spiritual darkness, first be seen in Galilee, where Jesus began his earthly ministry. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12). He is the servant light who gives his light to us. Messiah cleanses us and dedicate us to God so that we can be His spiritual Temple.

SUGGESTIONS

1. Ask Jewish friends what they do for Hanukkah. Perhaps they will invite you to watch the lighting of the Menorah.
2. Just for fun, sponsor a Hanukkah party and invite your Jewish friends or work on one together! Fry latkes or sufganiyot, play dreydel —enjoy!
3. Send a Hanukkah card or gift to your Jewish friend. Mention that the only passage in the Bible which directly speaks of Hanukkah is John 10:22 in the New Covenant! Perhaps you can explain this as you present a Bible as a Hanukkah gift.
5. Remember God's faithfulness to deliver his people at Hanukkah.

DATES: Dec. 10, 2001 Nov. 30, 2002 Dec. 20, 2003

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