



Who is like Thee, O Lord, among the gods...doing wonders?

Chanukah, the Jewish **Festival of Lights** is also known as the **Festival of Dedication** (Chanukah means 'dedication'). It is an 8-day festival beginning on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev, which is 2nd - 10th December, this year.

The story of Chanukah is found in Maccabees I & II, which are not a part of the Hebrew Bible (Tanach), but are a part of the apocrypha and cover Jewish history for the 400 years that follow the book of Malachi.

To refresh our knowledge of the history: Solomon's Temple was completely destroyed by the Babylonians, in 586 BC. Later, under the direction of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Temple was rebuilt with the blessing of Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, beginning in 538 BC and taking 23 years. The Temple barely escaped destruction again, in 332 BC, when the Jewish people refused to worship Alexander the Great as god. After his death, Judea and the Temple came under the rule of the Ptolemies. Antiochus III, of the Seleucids, took over in 198 BC. He made strong attempts to cause the Jewish people to conform to Greek religious culture.

After his death, Antiochus IV came to the throne with the desire to further his

father's goals. In his zeal, Antiochus IV decreed that Judaism was no longer legal and that **all** must worship the pagan gods. Many Jewish people willingly complied. A priest named Joshua changed his name to 'Jason' and actively promoted the spiritual decline of the people. Political upheaval followed, resulting in the massacre of 80,000 Jewish people. People were forced to sacrifice to Bacchus and Zeus and were tortured if they refused. The Temple was defiled and robbed. More massacres followed. Orgies were held by the altar and eventually, a statue of Zeus was erected and a pig was sacrificed there.

In Modi'in, Judea, another Jewish priest named Matthias, and his 5 sons, led a revolt against the authorities. The small group of rebels finally liberated Jerusalem three years later. They reclaimed the Temple, cleansed it and re-dedicated it for use in true worship.

Chanukah has emerged as one of the most widely celebrated holidays on the Jewish calendar. It is easy to understand why: it is a happy time and 'accessible' in its observance. There are no 'prohibitions' as there are on Shabbat and other holidays. The basic observance is to light the Menorah each night, recite the



blessings and sing a few songs. It also has become a time of gift-giving and festive gatherings.

Most people associate Chanukah with the lighting of a 9-branched lamp, or, Chanukiah. According to tradition, when the Maccabees gained the victory over the Seleucids and the Temple was re-taken, cleansed and restored, the zealots only found one undefiled cruse of oil – only enough to light the Temple menorah for one day. But when they used this oil, it miraculously enabled the menorah to burn for eight days!

However, the tradition of this ‘miracle of oil’ does not appear in any of the historical, eye-witness accounts. While Josephus refers to Chanukah being called ‘the Holiday of Lights,’ he does not seem to know about the tradition of the oil and expresses his consternation about it, saying, ‘from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights. I suppose the reason was because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival.’ (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 12:7:7) Given Josephus’ intimate knowledge of Jewish tradition, this absence is telling. Neither is the miracle of oil mentioned in the special ‘Al HaNissim’ prayer, recited at this time!

A possible reason for calling it ‘Lights’, suggested by Dr. Herzfeld (a learned Jewish scholar), is that it commemorates the fire from Heaven, falling upon the newly dedicated altar in Solomon’s Second Temple (II Chronicles 7:1).

It seems that the story of the miracle of oil is a rabbinic innovation. Only the Babylonian Talmud provides a brief explanation: *Shabbat* 21b, attributes the teaching to the Rabbis, but this is approximately 600 years after the events described in the books of Maccabees.

Scholars don’t know why this story appears so much later and suspect that his

intention was to ascribe a supernatural nature to the events, in order to legitimise a holiday born of human zealotry. Even with this boost, Chanukah was still a minor holiday until the 20th century. Ironically, the promotion of Chanukah to a major Jewish festival got its impetus from two things that you might never have connected: Nationalism and Christmas!

Before we get to that, though, what can we learn from the name, ‘Maccabi?’

We find the name first used in I Maccabees 2:4, when referring to the 3rd of Matthias’ 5 sons, Judah: ‘Judah, who was called Maccabeus.’ Some say that the name is from the Aramaic, meaning ‘hammer’. However, others say that the origin is an acronym of the verse, ‘Who Is Like Thee, Oh Lord, among the gods!’ (From the Hebrew: **יִי מִכְבֵּי מִי־כַמְכָה בְּאֱלֹהִים** forming **מִכְבֵּי** - Exodus 15:11. Supposedly, this was inscribed on the shields of the priestly rebels). It is also said that the rebels rushed the enemy’s ranks shouting words of The Shema, ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!’ (Deuteronomy 6:4)

With this as a backdrop, we read of a different eyewitness account: ‘And it was at Jerusalem the Feast of the Dedication, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple in Solomon’s porch. Then came the [Judeans] round about Him, and said unto Him, “How long dost Thou make us to doubt? If Thou be the Messiah, tell us plainly.”’ (John 10: 22-24) It is clear in the Gospels that many were looking to Jesus – Yeshua – to deliver them from the military oppression and occupation of the Romans, reminiscent of the times of the Maccabees.

After His initial reply, Jesus says, ‘I and My Father are ONE,’ – a direct reference to The Shema and a proclamation of His deity! Remember that, in Hebrew, the word for ‘One’ is Echad - **אֶחָד** – a composite unity, *not* a singularity (Yachid - **יָחִיד**), thus showing the truth of the existence of the

Trinity and fully accommodating His Sonship.

At this, the Judeans wanted to stone Jesus for blasphemy. However, instead of 'logically' justifying His declaration, Jesus probes their hearts more deeply and asks them, 'for which of [My] good works do ye stone Me?' Their reply was 'for a good work we stone Thee not; but for blasphemy; and because that Thou, being a man, makest Thyself God.' (John 10: 32,33)

Jesus goes on to answer their accusation of blasphemy by saying, 'is it not written in your law, "I said ye are gods"?' In this, He quotes from Psalm 82. In the Hebrew Scriptures, 'gods' – *elohim* – does refer to judges and those in authority (see Ex 21:6 and Ex 22:8, 9, 28, as well as many other places).

He continues, using a common form of reasoning, called *Kal v'Chomer* (קל וחומר - this is a form of argument using extrapolation, working from a simple premise to a more complex one, for example: 'If she found one day with her mother-in-law difficult, a whole week would be unbearable!'). Jesus reasons, 'If He called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, (and the scripture cannot be broken) say ye of Him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, "Thou blasphemest;" because I said, "I am the Son of God?" If I do not the works of My Father, believe Me not. But if I do, though you believe not Me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in Me, and I in Him.' (John 10: 35-38)

Might Jesus' reply be a bit sarcastic, as a reproach to these leaders, when referring to His miracles as 'good works'? Let's face it: He performed miracles that only God could do! He gave sight to the blind (blind from birth!), He healed all manner of incurable diseases, healed the deaf and

the lame – and raised the dead! SURELY, this is all concurrent with the overarching Chanukah themes of 'Who is like Thee, O Lord, *among the gods*? Who is like Thee...*doing wonders*' (Exodus. 15:11), the battle-cry of The Shema (God is One, Deut. 6:4) and the words of Psalm 82, which begins: 'God standeth in the congregation of the *mighty* (Hebrew: 'el'); He *judgeth among the gods* (Hebrew. 'elohim'). How long will ye judge unjustly, and accept the persons of the wicked?'

Back to the aforementioned irony: Today, Westernised Chanukah celebrations include practices drawn from paganism (Chanukah 'bushes' and gift-giving, to coincide with Christmas) and Nationalistic athletic games, called 'Maccabiah'. The early Maccabees were zealous against assimilation and fought against paganism, which included the Hellenistic athletic competitions!



But perhaps the greatest irony and sadness of all is the putting of one's faith in traditions that have grown up from myths (however altruistic their invention) well after the time of the historical events; and these being practiced and believed - the world over - but not considering the testimonies of eyewitnesses and hard evidence concerning Yeshua, the Messiah of Israel, who fulfilled the Law and came as 'the Light of the World'. (John 8:12)

'And many resorted unto Him, and said, "John did no miracle: but all things that John spake of this man were true." And many [Jewish people] believed on Him there'. (John 10:41,42). So, dear reader, let us do as the name of this magazine suggests: 'Pause to consider these things.' (Hebrew: *Selah*).

Happy Chanukah! *Chrissy Rodgers*