



Chanukah – Dedication, Sanctification, New Life

Chanukah is the festival which commemorates the purification and rededication of the Temple by Judas Maccabeus on Kislev 25, 165 BC (usually December-time). Three years prior, Antiochus IV, the Seleucid (Syrian) king, defiled the Temple by erecting an idol to Baal Shamen (Zeus), sacrificing a pig on the altar and proclaiming himself to be a god. Some of the coins he minted had his features on the face of Zeus along with the words "Theus Epiphanes" meaning "the god manifest". He also decreed that the Torah (the Law of God) could not be studied under penalty of death, circumcision was forbidden and the Sabbath was not to be kept. This brought an internal struggle that was going on within Judaism, out into the open. On the one hand there were the observant Jewish people who wanted to keep the Torah, and on the other hand, there were Jewish people, who were Hellenized, who wanted to assimilate into the Greek culture around them and become "born again" Greeks!

Antiochus sent troops from village to village, carrying a statue of him and ordering people to bow down to it. One day, the troops arrived in the village of Modi'im. An elderly man stepped forward to comply with the order, but an observant priest, Mattathias, of the Hasmonean family, thrust him through with a spear and also killed one of the Seleucid soldiers. Thus began the Maccabean revolt. Mattathias, his five sons and others fled into the Gophna Hills and conducted a guerrilla war against the Seleucids for three years. Finally, they liberated Jerusalem and the Temple, but the Temple had been defiled. (The history of this revolt is found in the Apocrapha - I Maccabees 1 and 4 and II Maccabees 6 and 10.)

The Rabbis begin to recount the miracle of Chanukah in these terms: "On Kislev 25, begin the Chanukah days, eight of them... because when the Greeks had entered the Temple Sanctuary, they contaminated all the oil for the Menorah (lampstand). When the Hasmoneans defeated them and entered the Temple, they searched and found only one cruse of oil bearing the unbroken seal of the High Priest. This cruse had enough oil for only one day's burning. But a miracle came to pass and it lasted for eight days, which was long enough to sanctify the rest of the Temple. The following year, these days were declared a holiday to be celebrated with the chanting of the Hallel (a series of Psalms) and thanksgiving prayers." (Megilat Taanit) This is the reason one additional candle is lit, each night, on the 'Chanukah' (Chanukah candelabra), until the final day, when a total of nine candles are lit: 8, plus the one 'servant candle'.

Jesus and Chanukah

In the Gospel of John (10:22, 23), we read 'And it was at Jerusalem the feast of the dedication (Chanukah means 'dedication'), and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple in Solomon's porch.'



Just prior to this account, Jesus gave two illustrations of the Good Shepherd (10:1-5 and 10:7-10) and explained that He is the fulfilment (10:11-18). The Jewish listener would immediately pick up the messianic connotation of these parables. The Davidic Messiah would be a Shepherd (Ezekiel 34). Naturally, a discussion arose, among those present, as to whether Jesus was the Messiah, or not!

continued from page 1

Then, as He walked through Solomon's porch on the east side of the Temple enclosure, some Judeans approached Him and asked Him point blank, "Are you the Messiah?" (10:24). Jesus was careful how He answered that question. During the festival, throngs of Jewish people, caught up in the nationalistic fever, were visiting Jerusalem. Against the backdrop of the Chanukah festival, the word "Messiah" might spark off riots because of its heavy nationalistic and political overtones.

Roman intelligence, headquartered in the Antonia Fortress to the northwest of the Temple, would have been aware of a popular song entitled "A Psalm of Solomon, with Song, to the King." (Psalms of Solomon, 17.) The 'Psalms of Solomon' are apocryphal, probably dating from the 1st or 2nd century BCE. However, though now a collection (there are 18 of them), they were originally separate, written by different people in different periods. Politically, the Psalms of Solomon are anti-Maccabee, and some psalms in the collection show a clear description of the Roman conquest of Jerusalem under Pompey in 63 BCE, metaphorically treating him as a dragon who had been sent by God to punish the Maccabees. For, though the Maccabees had heroically liberated Jerusalem, they later grew in power and corruption. Some of the psalms are messianic, in the Jewish sense, clearly referring to a mortal that happens to be divinely assisted, much like Moses.

In this song (17), the Lord was acknowledged as king and that a Davidic ruler would reign forever. The songwriter describes how the latter Hasmonean rulers led the people away from the Torah resulting in the people being punished by the Romans under the leadership of Pompey. He prays that the Lord will raise up a king, the Son of David, to rule over Israel. In so doing, this king would "destroy the unrighteous rulers," "purge Jerusalem from Gentiles", "drive out the sinners", "smash the arrogance of sinners", and "destroy the unlawful nations". All this would be done by their king, the Lord Messiah. If Jesus had answered the question "yes", the Roman authorities could have arrested Him, on the spot, for insurrection.

Jesus does, however, answer the question in the affirmative, but not directly. When He answers, He is careful not to use the contemporary term and understanding. After pointing out the security which a believer in Him has, He says "I and my Father are one" (10:30). That statement, alone, possesses significant meaning in the light of Deuteronomy 6:4 (The 'Shema'), where God is declared to be 'ONE' (Heb. ECHAD: a composite unity, not singular unit). But it also had potency in the context of the festival

which they were presently celebrating! Those gathered on the Temple Mount were recalling the events nearly 200 years before, on the very mount where Antiochus IV, only a mere man, proclaimed himself to be god!! Jesus, the LORD manifest in human flesh, made the same claim - but His claim was true! The Judeans picked up stones to stone Him for blasphemy because, in their thinking, He was a man who made Himself God (10:31-33). Jesus declared that He was the fulfilment of Chanukah by saying the Father "sanctified" the Son of God and sent Him into the world (10:34-36), The Father was in Him, and He in the Father (10:38).

John wrote his gospel primarily to a Jewish and Samaritan audience. One of the unique things about John's gospel is his emphasis on the Jewish and Samaritan festivals and his indication that Jesus was the fulfilment of these holidays. Chanukah was the rededication of a defiled Temple. At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, He said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up". Then the Judeans said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But He was speaking of the temple of His body" (2:19-21). Herod's Temple had been defiled by wickedness and corruption. The Lord Jesus was "sanctified" by His death, burial and resurrection and is the New Temple. All sacrifices for atonement were fulfilled in Him.

The Apostle John selected "signs" (miracles which pointed to something specific) and events when he penned his gospel, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for two purposes (John 20:30, 31): The first was to present the deity of the Lord Jesus. John skilfully selects the Chanukah event because of the festival impact on the crowd. In contrast to the arrogant and blasphemous statement by Antiochus IV, Jesus truly is God manifest in human flesh.

The second purpose was to challenge people to believe in Jesus the Messiah as the One who died for their sins and rose again from the dead. When they trust Him, God gives them the gift of eternal life, forgiveness of sins and a home in Heaven. There seems to be a marked contrast between the response of the Judeans on the Temple Mount (10:37-39) and those Jewish people "beyond the Jordan" who believed on Him (10:40-42). The question, as always, dear reader, is: what is your response? Who do you say that He is?

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