

# בשורה *Besorah!*

## *Chanukah- the Lord is my Shepherd!*

The eight days of Chanukah (Dedication), ordained to be celebrated every year by Judah the Maccabee (1 Macc : 54 ff), pays tribute to the Jewish victory over the Seleucids in the 2nd century BCE. The Maccabean revolt was as much spiritual as it was political, as the climax of the conflict was the recovery of Jerusalem and the re-dedication of the Second Temple, cleansing it from pagan defilement.

We see various ways of celebrating it today but as I wrote in my article last year (Winter 2021 issue; [www.messianictestimony.com](http://www.messianictestimony.com) or from our office), the myth of one cruse of undefiled oil lasting 8 days was inserted into the Talmud in around 500 AD. In fact, the customs of lighting menorahs and 8-days of celebration were borrowed from another feast: Tabernacles.

There is a very strong connection between Tabernacles and Chanukah. This was because the prior defilement of the Temple had prevented the Feast of Tabernacles from being observed that year, so the Maccabees borrowed the rituals. In fact, Chanukah is also known as the 'Second Sukkot' in Judaism. This would explain why Jesus' declaration that He is the Light of the World (at the Feast

of Tabernacles - John 8:12) makes **us** think of Chanukah.

The only specific Biblical reference to the Feast of Chanukah is in John 10:22,23: 'And it was at Jerusalem the feast of the dedication, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple in Solomon's porch.'

As Chanukah was not decreed by the Lord, national gathering was not mandatory. Jerusalem would not have been crowded with travellers but it is certainly noteworthy that Jesus was present in the Temple area then. This time, it was the Judeans – locals and those in authority - that crowded around Jesus at that time and said, 'How long dost thou make us to doubt? If thou be the Messiah, tell us plainly' (v.24).

(Before we examine this passage, let's remember that throughout the fourth Gospel, the words 'the Jews' refers to Judeans, i.e., Jewish leaders whose government was based in Jerusalem. John is not referring to *all* Jewish people. Sadly, a lack in understanding this has led to centuries of persecution of the Jewish people.)

No doubt, their inquiry harbours a hidden agenda. Either there was a political desire to overthrow the foreign occupiers (Rome) like



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the Maccabees had done, or it was designed to entrap Jesus. Jesus' answer seems a bit random! What does the shepherd/sheep analogy have to do with Chanukah?

First, let's review some history: In the time of the Maccabees, the compromise of Jewish leaders with Hellenism began before the cruel heathen ruler, Antiochus, actually took control. Joshua the High Priest changed his name to Jason, departed from God's Holy Law and encouraged national idolatry: 'In those days came there forth out of Israel transgressors of the Law, and persuaded many, saying, "Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles that are round about us; for since we were parted from them, many evils have befallen us."' (1 Macc. 1:11) "Now such was the height of Greek fashions, and increase of heathenish manners, through the exceeding profaneness of Jason, that ungodly wretch, and no high priest." (2 Maccabees 4:13).

Jason had become the high priest through extortion. Then, his brother Menelaus gained Antiochus' favour and deposed Jason. Both men had robbed the Temple of the sacred treasures to pay bribes to Antiochus in order to obtain their positions. These high priests were not even descended from Aaron. The blasphemous outcome was the sacrifice of a swine upon the altar.

The Maccabean revolt against all this finally prevailed and the Temple was liberated, cleansed and restored to true worship. However, in order to defend the Law and prevent any future return of paganism, the pendulum swung towards legalism. This is clearly one of the issues that Jesus addresses in His discourse, along with the question of who He is.

Throughout the Old Testament, God called and used shepherds: Abel (Gen 4:4), Joseph (Gen 37:2), Moses (Ex. 3:1) and David (1 Sam

17:34,35). This was because they were types of Himself, as Israel's Shepherd. We find God specifically referred to as Shepherd of Israel in Psalm 80. This psalm poignantly describes Israel in a similar tragic situation to that of Chanukah: crushing enemy domination resulting from Israel's sin. Ps. 80:13 reads, 'The boar (swine) out of the wood doth waste it, and the wild beast of the field doth devour it.'

The Hebrew 'waste' is the same root word as 'shepherd' in verse 1, but is translated negatively. In other words, a foreign, malignant oppressor has taken the place of the true Shepherd of Israel, establishing devastating, blasphemous rule. Psalm 80 is a plea that God would turn and restore them by way of a Deliverer: 'the branch that thou madest strong for thyself,' (v. 15) and, 'the man of thy right hand, upon the son of man *whom* thou madest strong for thyself' (v. 17). This psalm is sublime in its prophetic and Messianic poetry.

Some scholars have analysed the Gospel of John from the standpoint of Jesus' discourses being spoken in the context of the Feasts. Nearly all of His sermons are given on the successive festivals of the Hebrew calendar: the Passover (ch. 2), a certain Sabbath (ch. 5), another Passover (ch. 6), the Feast of Tabernacles (ch 7-9), a final Passover (ch. 11-19), and the Feast of Dedication (ch. 9-10). Much painstaking historical work has been done to reconstruct the Triennial Lectionary of Bible readings of the Torah and Prophets that apparently would have been used in Jesus' day. It seems clear that John is primarily concerned with preserving Jesus' sermons and miracles within the context of the Feasts and presenting Jesus as their fulfilments. Without bogging things down with lots of technical particulars, there is some agreement that in Jesus' day the prophetic reading (Haftorah) for Chanukah

would have been Ezekiel 34. When we understand this, we can see how Jesus weaves the coinciding remembrance of the history of Chanukah with the prophetic rebuke of Ezekiel 34 to expose the hearts of those who were antagonising Him and abusing their position in His day.

ALL of Ezekiel 34 deals with the problem of false shepherds. The prophet rebukes and condemns the authorities of his own time, contrasting them with the Good Shepherd. He declares that God will remove the self-serving shepherds and become the shepherd Himself. Finally he would appoint another shepherd after the figure of David. Jesus' reply reveals that He has come to fulfill Ezekiel's prophecy, declaring Himself Messiah and Son of God: 'I am the Good Shepherd.' (John 10:11)

Also, Jesus' earlier healing of the blind man combines with these things to expose the hypocrisy of His generation, in striking parallel:

The leaders in Jesus' day had decided to excommunicate anyone that believed in Jesus, causing fear (John 9:22). Not only that, but they actually cast out the blind man (v. 34). When Jesus heard about this, He went and found the man and ministered life to him (v. 35). Ezek 34: 4 & 5 reproaches shepherds that don't heal or gather the sheep, but which scatter them instead and use force and cruelty. Verses 11-16 show that God will seek, deliver, gather, feed and give rest to His sheep, Himself.

Against the backdrops of Ezek 34 and Chanukah, Jesus also mentions devious entrants into the sheepfold, calling them 'robbers and thieves' (John 10:1,8 & 10). This explicit allusion to Jason and Menelaus' fraudulent highjacking of the priesthood would have clearly implicated the Judeans. Strong stuff!

Incidentally, the word for sheepfold, in Hebrew, is 'naveh' - נוֹהַ. It is used twice in Ezek 34:14 ('fold'). It means the goal or intended destination and abode of a shepherd (2 Sam 7:8), but is also used in reference to the dwelling place of God (2 Sam 15:25) and a capital city (Jonah 1:2, Nineveh = Ninus' habitation). So again, we can see the deep symbolic connection between the Temple, the priesthood, shepherds and God's designated safe haven for sheep.

'Naveh' also has another meaning: adorned; beautiful. We can better understand the disciples' words as they admired the Temple, in Luke 21: 5. However, Jesus foretold its destruction. Salvation was not to be found in the Temple!

There was no ambiguity in Jesus' words. In the season of Chanukah, He declared, 'I am the good shepherd'. He was claiming that the promise of God was fulfilled in Him. He had come to bring the healing, gathering and salvation that Ezekiel promised.

What kind of Messiah were people expecting? As it was 2,000 years ago, the real need today is to be right with God. Salvation is only to be found in Yeshua (see Simon's report).

'Naveh' is also found in Isaiah 52:7: 'How **beautiful** ('navu', pl.) upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings ('besorah'), that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation (Yeshua); that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!' Toward this we continue to labour, by God's grace.

Happy Chanukah!

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