



# ONE NEW MAN ASIA

## THANK GOD FOR HANUKKAH

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As Christians around the world are preparing for Christmas, Jews are celebrating an eight-day holiday called Hanukkah. It is variously called, the Festival of Lights or Dedication. The word Hanukkah in Hebrew means dedication or rededication. It is called this because it celebrated the occasion when the Jews reclaimed the Temple in Jerusalem and rededicated it to God after it had been desecrated by the Greeks. Some people also call it the Jewish Christmas because it takes place in December on the 25<sup>th</sup> of the month of Kislev on the Jewish calendar and sometimes it overlaps Christmas as well. Most Christians hardly know anything about it and even if they do most disregard it as a Jewish holiday and has nothing to do with us. The fact is very different, it has everything to do with us. Let's begin by retelling the story of Hanukkah.



### The Story

The events of Hanukkah took place between the Old and New Testaments, around 165 BCE (B.C.) Because of this, we will not find any account of it in the Old Testament. The only mention of Hanukkah in the Bible can be found in the New Testament in the gospel of John, in John 10:22, the New Living Translation says:

*It was now winter, and Jesus was in Jerusalem at the time of Hanukkah, the Festival of Dedication.*

During those days the Greek empire ruled much of the world including Judea. The policy of the Greek Empire was to make all the nations they conquered Greek; what is called Hellenization, they exported their arts, dressing, language, lifestyle, philosophy, and religion to all the conquered nations and wanted everyone to become Hellenised<sup>i</sup>. In the early days of their rule in Judea, the Greeks took a passive approach to this idea; they enticed the Jews to take on their lifestyle. They built Hellenist towns nearby main Jewish towns. In these towns they had all the

trappings of Greek lifestyle; theatres, gymnasiums, philosophers in the town square etc. This was to exhibit their lifestyle to the Jews with the hopes that Jews would catch on and change and to be sure, some did.

Later on, however, as new Greek rulers came to power things changed, in particular during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanies, he rose to power in 175 BCE and he ruled a portion of Alexander the Great's Empire known as the Seleucid Kingdom. Antiochus took a different approach towards the Hellenizing of Judea; instead of enticement, he used force. He installed idols in the temple of God in Jerusalem and sacrificed pigs on the holy altar. He forbade the study of Torah and all Jewish practices such as circumcision, observance of the Sabbath and the Biblical Feasts. Then he sent out his soldiers around the country to force the Jews to sacrifice to the Greek gods.

When the soldiers came to the village of Modi'in they were faced with an old priest named Mattathias who had four sons. He refused to comply with the commands of the Greeks. Instead, they started a rebellion and many followed them and began fighting against the Greek army. They were given the name Maccabees, meaning "hammer" because they hammered at the Greeks.

In many ways, it was a David versus Goliath situation. The Jews were a rag-tag bunch of people with no experience at war and they were fighting against the best equipped and trained soldiers of the time. They fought for three years and eventually conquered Jerusalem and the Temple. They removed the idols and wanted to rededicate the temple to God and to do that they had to light the menorah in the Holy Place. However, they only found oil enough to keep the menorah lighted for one day and it would take eight days until they could get new oil. Judah the son of Mattathias ordered the people to fill the menorah and light it; they did and miraculously the oil lasted for eight days until the new oil arrived.

This is the miracle that Jews celebrate every year; the miracle of the oil and the liberation from the oppressors who tried to change their identity and make them Hellenists. To commemorate the miracle of oil they light a special menorah that has

nine branches. The centre light is used to light all the others; one on each of the eight nights of the celebration.

The greater miracle though is how a bunch of ordinary civilians were able to defeat the great Greek army and gain independence from the Empire, this independence lasted about a hundred years. It also brought a spiritual revival in Israel; Torah studies were reintroduced to the nation, and houses of Torah study (Beit Midrash) were built all over the country. The Maccabees turned the nation back to God.

### **Social / Cultural Implication**

Over the years I have heard many messages on Hanukkah, in general, they all focus on the spiritual or religious aspect; the desecration of the temple and Israel being forced to worship false gods. This is correct but the situation has a greater implication; the social and cultural implication. The Greeks not only colonized the nations but wanted to Hellenize the people; make them Greek. This was not a new tactic, the Babylonians before them did the same thing to Israel. They changed the names of Daniel and his friends from Hebrew to Babylonian ones. They were successful at it; today we know them better as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, instead of by their Hebrew names; Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah<sup>ii</sup>. They also tried to make them eat non-kosher food. All this was an attempt to change their identities, we can assume that they did this with most of the people.

Looking at it from the realm of the spirit we see that Satan was trying to remove the Jews from sight, change the people so that they were no longer Jewish and no longer following the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Greek lifestyle was contrary to the Torah observant lifestyle that God wanted for His people. What the Torah called immorality was the norm of Greek society; adultery, fornication, and homosexuality were common. They exalted the human form as we see in ancient sculptures, so to them, circumcision was considered vandalism. Studies have uncovered that some parts of Greek society also practiced child-sacrifice<sup>iii</sup>.

Can you imagine what would have been the result if the Maccabees had not rebelled against the Greeks and instead complied with their conquerors? They would no longer have been Jewish, the result would have been that there would be no people through whom God could have sent His Son into this world, and the world would have been totally lost in darkness. This was the very purpose for which God had chosen them; to bring Messiah into the world the first time, and also the second<sup>iv</sup>.

Our faith was born out of Israel, Isaiah says in Isa 51:1-2

*1 Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness, You who seek the Lord:  
Look to the rock from which you were hewn, And to the hole of the pit from  
which you were dug. 2 Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore  
you; for I called him alone, And blessed him and increased him." NKJV*

God speaks to people who follow righteousness and seek the Lord (that's us) and says that Abraham is our father and Sarah is our mother. They are the parents of Israel. Apostle Paul affirms this when he says that those who belong to Christ are children of Abraham<sup>v</sup>. The Bible also says in Romans that we Gentile disciples of Christ are branches from a wild olive tree that have been grafted into the nurtured olive tree of Israel and we get our sustenance from the root, the patriarchs of Israel<sup>vi</sup>.

We need to understand that without Israel and the Old Testament, we do not have a theological leg to stand on. The New Testament does not stand alone, the foundation is in the Old Testament.

When it comes to Israel, many Christian leaders try to avoid the "politics", they don't want to make a stand regarding land issues, in particular, Jerusalem and the questions "who has a right to the city?" They don't take into consideration God's end-time prophecies about His judgment of nations; the basis of His judgment will be on how the nations have treated the people of Israel and the land<sup>vii</sup>.

If the UN is successful in tearing away Jerusalem from the hands of the Jews and the city and indeed the whole land is renamed, and the Jews are removed from their land, what would be its effect on Christianity and the Bible? In the future when our

grandchildren read the Bible, they will look and see no such place as Israel, Jerusalem or Jews and say that the Bible is nothing more than a collection of stories with good moral teaching but without any reference to God's redemption plan.

So we should not look at Hanukkah as just another Jewish celebration; it is an event that has significant relevance to us the followers of Jesus Christ. We must be thankful that when God's people were under threat of extinction one small band of zealots stood up against a mighty army and because of them we, the church, are here today. God bless the Maccabees and the Jewish people.

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<sup>i</sup> In Greek the official name of the country is "Hellas" or "Ellada".

<sup>ii</sup> Daniel 1:6-7

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/did-ancient-greeks-engage-human-sacrifice-180960111/>

<sup>iv</sup> Matthew 23:39

<sup>v</sup> Galatians 3:29

<sup>vi</sup> Romans 11:16-24

<sup>vii</sup> Joel 3:1-3