

Faith Pulpit

Happy Hanukkah!

Judas Maccabæus instituted Hanukkah, which means “dedication,” to commemorate the consecration of the Temple, a ceremony made possible by his victory over the Syrian Greeks in 164 b.c.e. (1 Maccabees 4:36). This winter festival known as “the feast of the dedication” (John 10:22) or “Lights” (Josephus Antiquities xii 7:7), entails eight days of “joy and gladness” commencing on the twenty-fifth of Kislev (i.e., mid-December; 1 Maccabees 4:59). Observant Jews celebrate by kindling lights to memorialize the Hasmonean relighting of the Temple candelabrum (1 Maccabees 4:49, 50).

A later rabbinic tradition explains that the Syrians had desecrated all the Temple oil except for that found in a single cruse. Normally such a small amount would have kept the candelabrum burning for only a day, but miraculously the lights burned with that oil for eight days (The Babylonian Talmud, trans. by Michael L. Rodkinson, 1&2:34 [Tractate abbath]). Moshe David Herr concedes that this account is legendary (Encyclopædia Judaica, s.v. “Hanukkah,” columns 1283, 1284).

More likely, Judas’ troops commemorated the dedication of the Temple for eight days (see 2 Chronicles 7:9; Leviticus 23:33–36; 2 Maccabees 10:6); the practice then spread throughout Jewry. By the end of the first century c.e., the disciples of the two great rabbis, Shammai and Hillel, were debating some specific regulations for the kindling of the hanukkiyyah, or “Hanukkah lamp” (Talmud, 1&2:32–38). Resulting from these and later debates there arose the practice of using the shammash (“minister”) candle to light the Hanukkah lamp.

Beginning in the Middle Ages, Ashkenazi children received gifts and played with a special spinning top, called a sevivon, or in Yiddish a dreidel, that is emblazoned with four Hebrew letters primarily representing the phrase: “A great miracle occurred there.” Common festive foods include latkes (pancakes) and sufganiyyot (doughnuts). Mourning is prohibited.

The historical background to Hanukkah appears in the prophetic voice in Daniel 11:29-35, and supplementary information comes from some extra-biblical sources (e.g., Josephus Antiquities xii 5–7; 1 Maccabees 1:41–4:59; 2 Maccabees 6:1–10:8). The account begins with the “vile” king of the Seleucid Greeks, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (Daniel 11:21), marching southward intent on plundering Ptolemaic Egypt (11:29). While at Eleusis, on the outskirts of Alexandria, he encountered a Roman (“Chittim”) fleet under the command of a Senatorial Legate, Popilius Lænas (11:30). Lænas, whom Antiochus knew personally, ordered the Syrian king to desist or face Roman reprisal. The Romans did not want Antiochus to strengthen his position along the eastern Mediterranean; and Antiochus, who earlier had lived in Rome, knew first-hand the strength of the Roman legions. When Antiochus dallied with his decision, Lænas drew a circle in the sand around the disheartened monarch, demanding that Antiochus give his answer before he should step outside the circle.

Thoroughly humiliated, Antiochus promised to return to Syria. On the way home he turned with indignation against the people of the covenant, i.e. the Jewish nation (11:30). After securing his position in Judea, Antiochus desecrated the Temple fortress and abolished the daily sacrifice. Then, on the twenty-fifth of Kislev (December 16, 167) he set up the egregious abomination of desolation (Daniel 11:31; see also Matthew 24:15; Luke 21:20). Antiochus polluted the Temple by offering swine flesh to an idol of Olympian Zeus, an idol that bore striking resemblance to himself. He then ordered that swine be offered on the twenty-fifth of every month in honor of his birthday.

Antiochus continued his policy of Hellenization through flattery and corruption, but not everyone participated in his program (11:32). Some knew God and thereby found strength to resist; these people were the Hasidim (“pious ones”). Syrian emissaries and Jewish sympathizers fanned out from Jerusalem to the surrounding villages in order to erect heathen altars and to compel the faithful to sacrifice to idols. Seventeen miles northwest of Jerusalem in the village of Modein, a Syrian enforcer convened the populace and demanded that the local priest, Mattathias, offer a sacrifice. Mattathias refused, and another man volunteered to offer the sacrifice. In anger reminiscent of Phinehas’ (Numbers 25:6–13; Psalm 106:28–31), Mattathias killed both the Jewish man and the Syrian envoy.

The aged priest fled to the surrounding mountains with his five sons; the most renowned was Judas/Judah Maccabee. The Hasidim allied themselves with Mattathias and the Maccabee brothers, and they conducted guerrilla strikes against the Seleucids and their Jewish allies (Daniel 11:33). Under Judas, the struggle turned into a full-scale war, and he defeated every general and governor that Antiochus sent against him: Apollonius, Seron, Gorgias, and Lysias. Judas was never defeated, and with each victory more and more men joined Judas’ army, some of them having purer motives than others (11:34). After routing Lysias’ command, Judas advanced to Jerusalem and recovered the Temple. The rededication ceremony took place on the twenty-fifth of Kislev (December 14, 164).

The historical background of Hanukkah reminds us that God oversees history. Twice in the Daniel passage (11:29, 35), we read about the “time appointed” (11:29, 35). Antiochus planned to conquer Egypt, but it simply was not meant to be. He desecrated the Temple, but only with allowance from God. Then, God gave “a little help” (11:34) to the Maccabees, and they attained their freedom against overwhelming odds. Finally, in accordance with God’s time-table, the Maccabees rededicated the Temple on the anniversary of Antiochus’ desolation (1 Maccabees 4:54).

The story of Hanukkah not only reminds us of God’s sovereignty, it should also encourage us to exercise discernment. In addition to the verb “know” (Daniel 11:32), the verbs “understand” and “instruct” also occur (11:33, 35). The term “understand” means to “have insight, comprehension” (BDB, p. 968; italics original). The word “instruct” essentially means to “discern,” and here it means to “give understanding” or discernment (BDB, pp. 106-107; italics original). In the Maccabean era flattery and corruption abounded, and so the ability to separate truth from error and orthodoxy from heterodoxy was of the utmost importance. This kind of discernment begins by knowing God (Daniel 11:32) and improves through adversity (11:35).

During this winter season, may we rededicate ourselves to know God better, to grow in discernment during times of suffering, and through it all to rest in God’s sovereignty. Happy Hanukkah!

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