

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis 2B**  
**Class Notes 11/28/21**

## **HANUKKAH**

“Then came the Festival of Dedication in Jerusalem. It was winter and Jesus was walking in the temple courts in Solomon’s portico.” (John 10:22-23) Jesus is in Jerusalem for Hanukkah, the feast celebrating the (re)dedication of the Temple that had occurred about 200 years earlier during the time of the Maccabees. Why is he there and what is Hanukkah all about? Since today is the beginning of Hanukkah this year, I thought it would be worth spending a little time discussing both the historical background of this feast and the way it has evolved in modern times.

### **THE MACCABEAN REVOLT**

Even though Jews celebrate Hanukkah, the story of the Maccabees is not part of their scriptures, not part of Tanakh. 1 and 2 Maccabees are part of what we call the Apocrypha, Jewish writings largely from the two centuries before the time of Jesus, mostly written in Greek. They were not included in the Jewish Bible but were used extensively by the early Christians. They were included in the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible that is the official Bible for Roman Catholics. They are also part of the Old Testament for the eastern Orthodox churches. The Protestant reformers tended to reject them as authoritative scripture, though they were part of the original King James Version of the Bible, and the Anglican and Episcopal churches still use them. The AME church does not.

The two books are actually independent tellings of the same events. Both deal with the problem of Jews maintaining their cultural and religious identity under foreign rule. 1 Maccabees was written in Hebrew about 100 BCE. 2 Maccabees is actually an “epitome,” an abridgment of a five volume Greek history of these events. It is more pious and moralistic, concerned especially with the establishment of the holiday we call Hanukkah.

By the time of the Maccabees in the second century BCE, the Jewish people had been living under a succession of pagan rulers for over 400 years. Two of their holy books, Esther and Daniel, depicted some of the struggles of Jews living in foreign lands. But the story of the Maccabees provides a very different answer to the question of what it means to be a faithful Jew in those circumstances. I would argue that the story of the Maccabees is part of the ongoing story of God’s people that is a significant (missing) link between the Old and New Testament periods. Like any nation’s stories, the stories that Israel told about herself reflect her worldview, her sense of purpose, her hopes, dreams, even frustrations.

The first Christians, along with Jesus, shared this story, this worldview, and they were wrestling with those same issues. So it is important for us to know that story too.

Setting In 323 BCE, Alexander the Great died, having conquered the area previously belonging to the Persians, including Judea. The Greeks brought unprecedented cultural and linguistic unity to the Empire: the philosophy of Aristotle, Plato, the Stoics, the Cynics; the literature and drama of Homer, Euripides, and Aeschylus; Greek art and architecture, and of course the Greek religion—Zeus and the whole pantheon of gods. Religion was not a separate sphere that you could participate in or not, as you chose. Religious practices were woven into the very fabric of everyday life. People made no clear distinction between religion, politics, and other aspects of society, including business. Temples and altars were everywhere, sacrificial meals were part of normal social and commercial relationships, and sacrificial meat was for sale in every market. All of this was not only a problem for Jews but also for the early Christian Gentiles, as we see in some of Paul’s letters.

Other aspects of Greek culture were widely influential, including dress and hairstyles, and pressure to conform to the prevailing lifestyle was strong. Athletics was a major obsession: the Greeks originated the Olympic games, and held regular public competitions at outdoor sporting arenas called “gymnasiums,” from the Greek word “*gymnos*,” which means “naked.” Athletic games were conducted in the nude (men only!), which was greatly offensive to Jews. Gymnasiums served as cultural indoctrination centers for youth, as they do in our day, and many young Jewish men were attracted to these activities. 1 Macc. 1:11-15 suggests that some Jews went so far as to try to reverse their physical circumcision so that they could participate in these sporting events without embarrassment! All of this raised the question: how much could you be a part of secular culture and still be a faithful Jew?

Antiochus IV “Epiphanes” The problem of cultural conformity became more than an issue of hairstyle during the rule of Antiochus IV (175-164 BCE). He adopted the divine nickname “epiphanes,” meaning “god manifest” but his enemies punningly called him “epimanes,”—utterly mad. Indeed, he was probably close to insane. Up to that time, the Greeks had allowed the Jews (and other groups) a certain amount of religious freedom, but Antiochus decided to end this multiculturalism and Hellenize his part of the empire. In 169, he sent 22,000 troops into Jerusalem on a Sabbath, killed many, and despoiled the Temple. Two years later, he issued a decree banning all Jewish religious practices, and rededicated the Temple to Zeus. On Dec. 7, 167, the first pagan sacrifice (most likely a pig) was performed in the Temple (called the “abomination of desolation” in I Macc. 1:54; see Daniel 11:31; 12:11). Those who continued to be faithful to Torah were tortured and killed.

The Maccabean Rebellion During this time, a priest named Mattathias moved with his five sons from Jerusalem out into the country, perhaps to avoid persecution. Modi'in was a village about 20 miles NW of Jerusalem, but even there they were not safe. One day an official from Antiochus came and ordered Mattathias, as a local leader, to offer a sacrifice on a pagan altar, with the promise of honor and wealth. When he refused, another Jew stepped forward to do so. Enraged with holy zeal for God's law, Mattathias killed the Jew and the official (1 Macc. 2). That incident eventually developed into a widespread Jewish revolt.

Mattathias died the next year and his sons continued the fight. They were led by Judas, who is nicknamed "Maccabeus" (the hammer), which is where we get the name for the family. Miraculously, in less than three year's time, the Maccabees were able to achieve a military victory over Antiochus. They reclaimed Jerusalem, destroyed pagan worship sites, and purified the sanctuary of the Temple (1 Macc. 4:36-59; 2 Macc. 10:1-9). On December 14, 164, they began an eight-day celebration of the re-dedication of the Temple. A decree was made to celebrate this event every year, and it became known as the feast of Hanukkah ("dedication").

The Maccabeans did manage to achieve a kind of political independence for the Judeans for about 100 years, but their revolt set the tone for the whole period, which was never free from power struggles and violence. The descendents of the Maccabees became increasingly like the pagan rulers they had originally opposed, and many Jews grew disaffected with their leadership. In 63 BCE the Romans conquered Judea and put an end to independent Jewish rule.

So in Jesus' day, the eight-day festival kept the Maccabean victory fresh in the public mind as once again they were living under foreign rule. Historically, the Maccabean revolt was closer in time to them than the American Revolution is to our day. So it is not surprising that people come to Jesus during the feast to try to get a clearer understanding of whether or not he is the messiah (John 10:24). There was a nascent movement in Jesus' day that looked to Mattathias' "zeal for the law" (1 Macc. 2:24-26) as a model for revolutionary action, much as we have modern-day armed "patriots" who claim to be the inheritors of the revolutionary values of the American colonists. But in Jesus' day, the "Zealots" mentioned in the NT were not an organized group as such. Not until the later Jewish Revolt against Rome 30 years later did any group adopt that name. In the New Testament it seems to be more of a general term for the direct inheritors of the Maccabean ideals, which were alive and well among some Jews at that time. Paul claims that such zeal led to his persecution of the early Christians (Gal. 1:13-14; Phil. 3:6).

But it is crucial to emphasize that the vast majority of Jews at the time of Jesus were not interested in a violent revolution. Traditionally Christians have made blanket

generalizations about “the Jews” who were all looking for a military messiah to overthrow the Romans, and they have interpreted passages like John 10:24 in that light. That generalization simply is not true. Many Jews were wary of the whole idea of taking up arms against the Romans or downright opposed to it, and so a question to Jesus about being the messiah should not presuppose a desire for him to be the next Judas Maccabeus. If the question came from Jewish leadership in Jerusalem (John does not specify), it is much more probable that they were worried that this might be what Jesus had in mind and were looking to keep him from starting a revolt. Among the Jews of that day, there was no universal belief in or hope for a coming messiah, and among those who did look for some sort of messianic figure there was no clear idea about what he would look like. We have been handed down too many false Jewish stereotypes that continue to affect how we read the Scriptures.

Yet Jesus was in Jerusalem for the feast, and we don’t really know what it meant to him other than that it was a part of his people’s history and religious observance, a time of offering up praises to God for what God had done for Israel in the past. Whatever it might have looked like in the first century, Jesus celebrated Hanukkah.

## **HANUKKAH**

Historically, Hanukkah has been a relatively minor festival in the Jewish calendar. We have little information about how it was observed in Jesus’ day. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, speaks of it as a festival called “Lights.” The Mishnah, the collection of rabbinic teachings coming from around the end of the second century, contains no detailed discussion of any laws or practices associated with it, unlike other more important holidays. The Talmud, coming several centuries later, in the context of discussing how to light candles during the eight days, recounts a story taken from an earlier source explaining why they do so. The story goes that when the Maccabean forces re-took the Temple, they found only one uncontaminated ritually pure container of oil, enough to keep the lamps burning for only a day. But a miracle occurred. During the 8 days it took to process more oil, they were able to keep lighting the lamps from that container (*Shabbat* 21b). With this legend as the central explanation of Hanukkah, the rabbis began the process of de-emphasizing the violent military aspects of the story and focusing on God’s miraculous preservation of the people of Israel.

So while light is associated with most Jewish holidays, it is particularly central to Hanukkah. Note that the menorah that burned in the Temple was a lampstand with seven oil lamps (not wax candles!), but during Hanukkah a special menorah with 9 candles is used, one for each day plus a central one with which to light the others. The festival can occur anytime between late November and late December, so at least in the Northern Hemisphere the lights are especially appropriate for that dark time of year.

The celebration of Hanukkah has not always been as important as it is now. Its proximity to Christmas led Jewish communities to begin developing and expanding the festival as an alternative. In America, the early Puritan settlers did not even observe Christmas, but by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christmas was increasingly becoming the commercialized consumerist nightmare that we all know, where Santa Claus has eclipsed Jesus as the reason for the season and people who have no Christian faith or church attendance celebrate what they call “Christmas.” So alongside other Hanukkah rituals Jews adopted the custom of gift-giving, which has no connection to the original Maccabean story. How that is done varies widely among different Jewish families and communities. Some families encourage their children to give *tzedakah*, charitable gifts to others in need. That might be a practice Christians could consider adopting to begin to counteract the idolatrous nature of the holiday.

Because the legend about Hanukkah focuses on the miracle of the oil, various traditions have developed about eating food cooked in oil. For Jews of eastern European origin, fried potato pancakes (*latkes*) are typical while those of Sephardic families (Spain and northern Africa) fried jelly doughnuts (*sufganiot*) are a favorite.

For some reason, an old German gambling game that uses a four-sided wooden top called a *dreidel* has also been adapted for the holiday, often wagering with gold-foil covered chocolate “coins.” And there are special prayers that are said throughout the week expressing gratitude to God for working powerfully among their ancestors to save them, especially in the time of the Maccabees. Celebrating Hanukkah has become one way in which Jews have been able to maintain their distinct cultural and religious identity in the midst of a larger society that celebrates a very corrupt and pagan version of Christmas.

Somewhat improbably, memories of the Maccabees live on in our day in various forms: as comic book superheroes, Jewish university sports mascots, a professional soccer team, a British rock band, even black Maccabees and Maccabee beer! While a lot of this seems to have little connection to the original events that led to the establishment of the holiday, Hanukkah does remain (alongside Passover and Purim) as another reminder of how world empires have repeatedly attempted to eradicate Jews and Judaism, and how God has been faithful to his covenant with them. Rabbi Sacks says that someone has characterized the Jewish festivals with this pithy saying: “They tried to kill us. We survived. Let’s eat.” There is an element of truth in this, but Rabbi Sacks goes on to insist that these festivals are also about joy, about a shared experience of God’s deliverance and love (*Studies in Spirituality*, p. 256). And as we know from the gospels, Jesus himself shared in that joy and in that celebration.