

THE FEAST OF DEDICATION (HANUKKAH)

Taken from the Holiday Series by Bruce Scott

Introduction:

I begin with a story, as told by Bruce Scott of FOI:

The year was 168 B.C. The place was a small town in ancient Israel. There the age-old battle between spiritual compromise and godly character was being waged.

The aged priest stood defiantly, his steely eyes firm in their resolve. "Be reasonable, old man," the captain urged, as his small band of soldiers nervously held back the crowd. The captain continued. "You know our orders. And you know the decree of his Excellency, King Antiochus Epiphanes [God Manifest]." "You mean Epimanes [Madman]," a wily on-looker called out.

The captain snarled, "Enough of this! Mattathias, you are a respected leader here in Modin. The people look up to you. This is your last chance to be a good example by presenting an offering to Zeus, our most high god. I want your final answer—now! Will you or will you not sacrifice this pig upon the altar?" All eyes turned toward the obstinate rebel. Surrounded by his five grown sons—John, Simeon, Judah (called Maccabeus), Eleazar, and Jonathan—Mattathias drew himself up, as if the challenge had somehow infused him with new strength.

The crowd held its breath as the old man took a step forward. Planting his feet and squaring his jaw, he was resolute in his reply: "Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him and have chosen to do his commandments, departing each one from the religion of his fathers," he declared, "yet I and my sons and my brothers will live by the covenant of our fathers. Far be it for us to desert the law and the ordinances. We will not obey the king's words by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left."

"Very well," the captain hissed. "You will pay for your impertinence with your life." "No need to worry, captain," said a man strolling forward. "We Jews are not so inflexible that we cannot accommodate our

Syrian friends and their Grecian ways. I will sacrifice your pig." The man took the knife, looked around as if for approval, then stepped toward the animal lying on the altar. The crowd was silent as a smug smile crossed the man's face.

Suddenly a howl of fury erupted from behind him. It was the voice of Mattathias. "No!" he screamed, racing toward the place of sacrifice. Pulling a sword from his tunic, Mattathias ran it through the horrified apostate. Seeing the courage of their father, his five sons unsheathed their swords and fell upon the captain and his troops. The battle was over in minutes.

Disgustedly, Mattathias demolished the unholy altar with its profane sacrifice. Then, standing over his defeated foes with sword in hand, he cried out to the timid bystanders, "If anyone be zealous for the laws of his country and for the worship of God, let him follow me!" And with that, Mattathias and his five sons scurried to the hills, beginning a prolonged season of guerrilla warfare against the evil forces of Syria and their king, Antiochus Epiphanes.

This story highlights an amazing period in Jewish history. The events that transpired after this episode resulted in one of Israel's most widely observed holidays, the winter festival of Hanukkah—the Festival of Lights or Feast of Dedication.

Origin and Description of Hanukkah

The holiday of Hanukkah (*lit., Dedication*) is not a God-given feast day. It is a man-made festival commemorating a great military and spiritual achievement by the Jewish people during one of the darkest periods in their history. The event took place during the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments. It was a time when the nation of Israel underwent dramatic changes. The greatest change occurred when a young Macedonian general, Alexander the Great, conquered most of the then-known world by the time he was 33 years of age. The subjugated territory included the land of Israel.

When Alexander died at the age of 33, his kingdom was divided among four of his leading generals. Two of the resulting dynasties were known as the Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires. The Ptolemaic empire

was headquartered in Alexandria, Egypt, while the Seleucid empire was headquartered in Antioch, Syria. Located in the middle of these two conflicting kingdoms, Israel received the brunt of their mutual animosities. The most difficult period for Israel came when the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV (or Epiphanes [God Manifest], as he dubbed himself) came to power.

After some opposition from the rapidly rising power of Rome, Antiochus chose to flex his power against the Jews. Reaffirming Alexander's dream of making a one-world people through a one-world culture, Antiochus decreed that the Jews would have to change. From that point on, the Jewish people were forbidden under penalty of death from circumcising their newborn boys, celebrating the Jewish festivals, keeping the Sabbath, offering the daily sacrifices, and reading or having in their possession a copy of the Torah. Coupled with that, all Jewish people in every locale were required to erect altars dedicated to Zeus, the chief god of the Greeks. On these altars they were forced to sacrifice swine—obviously an unclean and abhorrent animal to the Jews—and pay homage to Greek deities. To accentuate his point, Antiochus marched into the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, stole its ornaments, set up an image of Zeus on the bronze altar, and there sacrificed a pig in the sight of everyone. The date was the 25th day of the month Kislev, 168 B.C.

This turn of events stunned the Jewish populace. They were forced to show their allegiance one way or the other. There could be no middle ground in this situation. They would either follow the Lord and keep His ways, paying the penalty with their lives, or cave in to the pressure and adopt the Grecian customs. It was a difficult decision.

Many Israelites chose to compromise. When weighing the options, they thought it would be better to be alive and apostate than to be dead and orthodox. Many others refused to surrender to the pagan culture and were brutally tortured and murdered.

Shortly after Antiochus issued his decrees and defiled the Temple, a contingent of his enforcers came upon the small town of Modin, just northwest of Jerusalem, where Mattathias and his five sons lived. Following the events at the altar to Zeus that were described earlier, Mattathias fled to the hills with his sons and anyone else who chose to fol-

low. During the next year, Mattathias attacked Syrian outposts and destroyed foreign idols and their altars. At the end of that year Mattathias passed away, but not before entrusting his son, Judah Maccabeus, with the army. It was a wise choice.

Eventually, Judah led his troops up to Jerusalem. The sight that met their eyes upon entering the Temple Mount reduced many to tears. The doors of the Temple were burnt. The holy curtains had been torn down. Weeds were sprouting through the Temple pavement, which had been vacant and neglected for many years. The altar of burnt offering was defiled with an idol of Zeus and the remains of sacrificed pigs. It was a scene almost too difficult to bear.

However, Judah the Maccabee rallied his troops and they began task of cleansing the Temple and consecrating it again to God. They purged the Temple area. They constructed a new Temple lampstand, a new table of showbread, a new altar of incense, new curtains, and new doors. They also tore down the old altar of burnt offering and replaced it with a new one fashioned of uncut stones.

At last the task was complete. On the 25th day of Kislev, 165 B.C., exactly three years to the day from when it was desecrated by Antiochus and his troops, Judah and the people of Israel dedicated the cleansed Temple. It was dedicated not to Zeus or Apollo but to the ancient and ever-living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It was a solemn hour. It was also a time of rejoicing. The celebration lasted for eight days and featured music, feasting, worshiping, and praising God. Judah then decreed that such a festival should be instituted and observed ever year, lasting for eight days and memorializing the "restoration of their Temple worship." Thus was established what became known as the Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah.

There is a legend surrounding the fact that celebration of Hanukkah lasts for eight days. According to the legend, when the Maccabees came upon the Temple, they found only one vessel of consecrated oil with which to light the eternal flame of the menorah, only enough to last one day. The legend goes on to say that the oil miraculously lasted for eight days, the time needed for more consecrated oil to be produced. This story is not found in any of the earliest accounts of these

events. The miracle of the oil may or may not be true, but it has become part of the rabbinical tradition and it is the reason most Jewish people give today for why Hanukkah is celebrated for eight days.

Observance of Hanukkah

Beginning on the 25th day of the Jewish month of Kislev (November-December), Hanukkah is observed for eight days. Hanukkah begins in the home with the customary lighting of the holiday candles. The candelabra that is used is unique to Hanukkah. The Hanukkah menorah has nine candlesticks. One candle is added each evening in memory of the eight days that the oil purportedly lasted in the time of the Maccabees. The ninth candle, called the *shammash* (servant), is used to light the other eight. The menorah is usually placed near a front window so that its lighting may serve as a testimony to the *miracle* that occurred long ago. After lighting the Hanukkah menorah, the family often sings songs.

Special foods are eaten at Hanukkah meals. Oil-fried dishes, such as crispy potato pancakes (called *latkes*) eaten with applesauce or other toppings are common on Hanukkah in memory of the Maccabean *miracle oil*. In Israel, doughnuts are prevalent.

Later in the evening, in many homes gifts are exchanged. Children also often receive Hanukkah *gelt* (money) in the form of coins made of chocolate or actual coins.

Along with the gifts, Jewish children also enjoy playing a traditional game called Spin the *Dreidel*. The dreidel is a four-sided top. The children spin the top to see who wins the game. On each of the four sides of the top is a Hebrew letter. The four letters combine to form an acrostic that stands for “A great miracle happened there.” Once the State of Israel came into being, one letter was changed on Israeli dreidels so that the acrostic reads, “A great miracle happened here.”

There is no doubt that the manner in which Hanukkah is observed today has been highly influenced by the holiday of Christmas especially outside the nation of Israel. Both holidays occur around the same time of the year. Both holidays feature warm family gatherings full of happiness and good cheer. Yet it has been difficult for the Jewish minority living in the midst of an overwhelmingly Gentile majority to retain a dis-

tinct, Jewish Hanukkah identity at this season. Surrounded by Christmas carols, jolly Santas, and Bethlehem scenes, it has been hard not to incorporate just a little bit of the “Christmas spirit” into the Hanukkah celebration. Some Jewish families even bring a Christmas tree or *Hanukkah bush* into their homes, which they decorate as any non-Jewish family would. Other Jewish families try to resist the temptation. As one Jewish author put it, “Appreciation does not mean appropriation. Because appropriation leads to confusion, loss of identity, and, ultimately, assimilation. And assimilation is what the Maccabees and generations of Jews after them fought so hard to prevent. To appropriate Christmas into our homes would give posthumous victory to Antiochus. Christmas does not belong in a Jewish home—period.”

The author's point is well taken. It would be an accurate statement and a legitimate concern if not for one detail—the reason for Christmas is Christ. If Jesus is the Messiah, as He claimed to be, then incorporating a celebration of His birth into the Hanukkah festivities would not be a denial of the Jewish faith but, rather, an affirmation of it. It would be an “assimilation” into the truth, which is something not to avoid but to embrace.

Hanukkah Implications

Hanukkah and Christmas are similar, considering their close proximity on the calendar, the exchanging of gifts, the display of lights, and their common theme—miracles. Biblical Christians also believe that without Hanukkah, there could be no Christmas. If God had not preserved the Jewish people during the time of the Maccabees, then Jesus would not have been born.

By the time of Jesus Hanukkah was an established celebration. *Turn to John 10, read v. 22-23.* It was at this very time that Jesus made one of His most startling claims. He said, in v. 30, “I and My Father are one.” How could He make such a claim? The answer is found in the empty tomb. It is on this point that the appearance of Jesus at Hanukkah takes on meaning. Antiochus IV called himself Epiphanes (God Manifest). He claimed to be God. So did Jesus. The difference between the two is that Antiochus IV is dead. Jesus the Messiah, however, is very much alive.

Like the Hanukkah menorah, the Messiah came as “A light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory your people Israel” (words of Simeon in the temple, Lk. 2:32). Jesus Himself said, “I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12). Like the *shammash* (the servant candle), the Messiah “came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt. 20:28).

Because of the Messiah's death and resurrection, a great miracle did happen there. For all who would believe it, this is the good news of Hanukkah... and of Christmas.