

## **CHANUKAH AND CHRISTMAS**

### **Bringing LIGHT to December 25<sup>th</sup>**

#### **I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The Greek general, Alexander the Great, captured the known world in the late part of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Alexander would unite his kingdom in the Greek culture and language, the Hellenization of the world, which would have a big impact on Israel and the Jewish people. His reign was short-lived as Alexander died at the young age of 33 and his kingdom was then divided among among his four leading generals in 313 B.C.

Two of the resulting dynasties were known as the Ptolemaic, headquartered in Alexandria, Egypt, and Seleucid, headquartered in Antioch, Syria, empires. Israel was located between these rival kingdoms.

The most difficult time for Israel came during the reign of Antiochus IV (also known as Antiochus Epiphanes, Antiochus is God Manifest). On the verge of conquering Egypt Antiochus was ordered by the Roman Empire to back off or face her wrath. Reluctantly, Antiochus retreated but on his way through Israel he vented his frustration and anger on the Jewish people of Israel. Hoping to rid himself of his troubles with Israel Antiochus decreed that the Jews would have to change their practices. They would no longer be allowed to keep their religious practices and distinctions and all would have to worship Zeus, the chief God of the Greeks.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> day of the month Kislev in 168 B.C. Antiochus took over the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. He set up a statue of Zeus in the Temple and sacrificed a pig on the bronze altar to Zeus.

Many of the Jewish people of Israel had become Hellenized in their thinking and practices because of the 150 years of Greek rule. Although stunned by the actions of Antiochus they went along with his decrees believing this to be the best course of action. These Hellenized Jews would later be despised by those who stayed true to Jehovah. A small remnant of Jewish people refused to bend their wills to the dictates of this despotic ruler. Thousands were tortured and killed because of their faith in Jehovah.

Shortly after Antiochus issued his decrees and defiled the Temple, a contingent of his army came to the small town of Modin, about 10 miles to the northwest of Jerusalem. An elderly priest by the name of Mattathias and his five sons, John, Simeon, Judah (called Maccabeus), Eleazar and Jonathan lived in this town. The captain of the troops ordered an altar built and the citizens of Modin to offer a pig as a sacrifice to Zeus. One apostate was very willing to make the sacrifice but Mattathias and his sons were enraged at this unholy provocation and slew the apostate as well as the soldiers of Antiochus. They fled to the hills where they were joined by many and began a time of guerrilla warfare against the evil forces of Syria and their king, Antiochus Epiphanes.

Shortly after fleeing to the hills Mattathias died. He left his forces in the hands of his son Judah Maccabeus. It was a wise choice. After months of battles Judah led his forces into Jerusalem and recaptured the city and the Temple. They cleansed the defiled Temple, rededicated it back to Jehovah, and Judah declared that an eight day holiday should be instituted memorializing the restoration of the Temple. This was done on the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev, 165 B.C., exactly three years after the desecration. This holiday became known as the Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah.

One explanation for the length of the holiday is based on a legend which is probably not historically accurate. According to this legend only one cruse of consecrated oil, a day's worth, was found for the lighting of the menorah. Miraculously, this one cruse of oil burned for eight days providing time to consecrate more oil. And so today Jewish people celebrate this holiday for eight days around the lighting of candles in their menorah on each night.

#### **OBSERVANCE OF CHANUKAH**

Beginning on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of Kislev (November-December) Hanukkah is observed for eight days. The holiday begins with the lighting of candles. The Hanukkah menorah has nine candlesticks.

One candle is added each evening (one on the first day, two on the second, etc.) 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. Oftentimes, the *shammash* candle is elevated or separated from the other candles of the menorah. The menorah is usually placed near a front window so that it's lighting may serve as a testimony to the miracle that occurred long ago.

Songs are sung, special foods are eaten (*latkes*, potato pancakes in the U.S., *sufganiot*, jelly doughnuts in Israel), and gifts are given to the children each night. A traditional game using a *Dreidel*, a four sided top is often played.

## II. CHANUKAH AND CHRISTMAS

There are many common factors in the holidays of Hanukkah and Christmas. In a real sense these holidays are tied together more than most understand. If there was not a Hanukkah there would not have been a Christmas.

	<u>Chanukah</u>	<u>Christmas</u>
Originated in same land	Israel	Israel
On the same day	Kislev 25	December 25
Both remember a Savior	Judah Maccabeus	Jesus
Light is major theme	Candles of Menorah	Decorations
Gifts are given	Over 8 days	On one day
Servant is prominent	<i>Shammash</i> candle	Jesus
Songs are song	<i>Maoz Tzur</i> (Rock of Ages)	Christmas carols

### CHANUKAH IN THE BIBLE

Not mentioned in the Old Testament as the events of Chanukah took place in the 400 "silent" years. The book of Daniel mentions it as a prophecy - Daniel 8:1-22.

### JESUS CELEBRATED HANUKKAH

It was at this holiday that he was asked if he was the Messiah. John 10:22-24

What do we know about the celebration of Chanukah at this time? **NOTHING**

What can we speculate about the celebration of Chanukah?

1. The telling of the story of the Maccabean deliverance and re-dedication of the Temple was probable.
2. The lighting of a menorah (Chanukiah) was likely.

## III. THE ORIGINS OF THE SHAMASH CANDLE

The *chanukiah* (Chanukah menorah) has one candle elevated or separated from the other candles. It has a primary role in each of the eight evenings. When, where, and why are some of the questions that we will look at with the *shammash* candle.

Most of the following is excerpted from *Hanukkah Riddle: The Elusive Origins of the "Shamash"* by Hannah Weiss, Dec. 22, 2016.

Was the "servant light" invented by the 1st-century Nazarenes, and then suppressed by the rabbinic community?

The Talmud (Shabbat 21-23) testified that during or after the second Temple, Jews were lighting Hanukkah lights in their homes. But the passage only mentioned eight lights - no "*shamash*". That name first appeared in the 16th-century summary of Jewish law, *Shulchan Aruch* (Orach Chaim 671-673), applying it to the Talmudic description of an extra light sometimes kindled in the same room with the Hanukkah lamp.

The origin of the *shamash* being in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is questionable because of unexplained archeological discoveries in Israel.

The first was an ancient chanukiah offered in a recent California auction. The description indicated a truly historic find:

"JUDAEA. Second Temple / Roman Era (circa 70-200 CE). Ceramic nine-spouted Hanukkah lamp...with nine wick spouts in a line along the front and a single central filling hole....The decorative motif and general form share similarities to the Beit Natif type, commonly dated to the Third Century CE or later. However it appears to be an early, transitional form, extending the dating to the period between the Jewish War (66-70 CE) and the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-135 CE)."



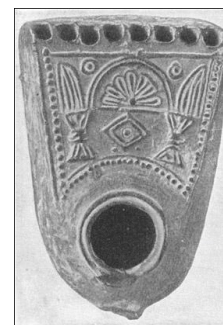
It's peculiar that this artifact was even allowed to leave Israel. Dr. Meir Ben Dov, archaeologist and Field Director for the Temple Mount Excavations in Jerusalem, examined it in 1988, and called it "an object of extraordinary significance. It is undoubtedly the earliest Hanukkah lamp extant. It is also possibly the oldest Jewish ceremonial object to have been discovered to date."

Since contemporary rabbinic sources like the Mishnah showed no awareness of a tradition that made the *shamash* one of the holy Hanukkah lights, we can assume that the innovation was hatched outside their authority. The theory is strengthened by specific elements on this lamp.

First is the inscription: "*with God's help*"... in Greek. Try to imagine a Greek-speaking Judean community so devoted to God that they celebrated Hannukah in the shadow of the recently destroyed Temple, but they did so apart from the Mishnaic rabbis. Only one group comes to mind: the Hellenist Nazarenes, who had gathered in great numbers around the apostles in 1st-century Jerusalem (Acts 6:1).

Moreover, the decorations ("vine scrolls, grape bunches and grape leaves") and the same oil shared by all the lights are images from the New Covenant (John 15:1-8, 1 Cor.12:13). So is the concept of a shamash identical to the other lights: "the Light that gives light to all men" humbling Himself to live as one of us (John 1:1-14).

A similar archeological find escaping scholarly attention is an intriguing photo in the 1906 edition of the Jewish Encyclopedia (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/7233-hanukkah>): an undated Hanukkah lamp "found in Jerusalem excavations" sometime before the Encyclopedia's publication, which closely resembles the Greek-Judean hanukkiah.



A third witness is a portrayal of the other "new" design, a nine-branched candelabra, also dating back to the 1st-2nd century. This one was unearthed in the ancient Golan town of Sogana (renamed by local Arabs as el Yehudiye). The engraving is thought to be from the arch of the town synagogue. But no scholar has commented on this appearance of a hanukkiah design that Jews would not use for the next 1000 years.



So although the evolution of the shamash from profane to holy mystifies both religious and secular experts, these tantalizing archeological clues have provoked no interest... a mystery in itself. The answer to both riddles might be buried in our [Jewish believers in Jesus] unknown history as a community.

Perhaps, and the symbolism is undeniable, the *shammash* was introduced by Jewish believers in Jesus as a way to celebrate Chanukah with the emphasis on the ultimate deliverer, Jesus, as the servant of God - Isaiah 42, 49, 50, 53.

#### **IV. WHAT DO WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT THESE DAYS – CHANUKAH AND CHRISTMAS – FOR US AS INDIVIDUALS?**

Sin has desecrated our body as it did the Temple in Jerusalem and we are in darkness as was the Temple.

Romans 3:23 *For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;*

Isaiah 59:1 *Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear:*

2 *But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.*

God raised up Jesus to save us from the penalty of our sin as He raised up Judah Maccabeus to save Israel.

Romans 5:8 *But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

As only the *shammash* candle can bring light to the candles so only can God's *shammash*, Jesus, bring light to us.

Isaiah 53:11 *He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.*

Acts 4:12 *Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.*

As the light of the Menorah should be placed in a window so all can be reminded of the miracle of Hanukkah so should we let it be known that the miracle of Jesus' birth (and death and resurrection) is the light for a darkened world of sin.

Isaiah 9:2 *The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.*

John 1:4-5 *In him was life; and the life was the light of men.*

*And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.*

John 8:12 *Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.*

Personally, these holidays remind us of our need for a Savior, the Light of God, so our Temple (our body) can be cleansed of our sin and defilement.

#### **V. DECEMBER 25<sup>TH</sup>**

##### **IS IT BASED ON A PAGAN HOLIDAY OF THE SUN GOD OR BASED ON THE EVENTS OF CHANUKAH?**

Origen (c.185-c.254) preached that it would be wrong to honor Christ in the same way Pharaoh and Herod were honored. Birthdays were for pagan gods."

Christianity Today, *Why December 25<sup>th</sup>?*, 2008,

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/why-december-25.html>

Origen was no friend of the Jewish people or the proper understanding of biblical interpretation. He was one of the first to introduce an allegorical understanding of Scripture, leading to a-millennial belief and replacement theology.

"Origen frequently attacks in his homilies, the observance by Christians of the Jewish fasts and feasts."

"He could be severe in his condemnation of those who 'fawned on the Jews', and who introduced Jewish teachings and practices into the Church. He lost no opportunity, in his sermons, to attack Jewish literalism, and his powerful invective no doubt made its contribution to the later tragic persecution of Jews by Christians." Nicholas De Lange, *Origen and the Jews*, page 36, 135, published 1976

"Not all of Origen's contemporaries agreed that Christ's birthday shouldn't be celebrated, and some began to speculate on the date (actual records were apparently long lost)."

Christianity Today, [Why December 25<sup>th</sup>?](http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/why-december-25.html), 2008,  
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/why-december-25.html>

"Seeing that pagans were already exalting deities with some parallels to the true deity, church leaders decided to commandeer the date and introduce a new festival."

Christianity Today, [Why December 25<sup>th</sup>?](http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/why-december-25.html), 2008,  
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/why-december-25.html>

"The eventual choice of December 25, made perhaps as early as 273, reflects a convergence of Origen's concern about pagan gods and the church's identification of God's son with the celestial sun.

Christianity Today, [Why December 25<sup>th</sup>?](http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/why-december-25.html), 2008,  
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/why-december-25.html>

## **What is missing in the *Christianity Today* article and most discussions about the origin of December 25<sup>th</sup> as the date for the birth of Jesus is the possible Jewish cultural backgrounds to the biblical text and future Christian practices.**

### **1. The early church fathers were anti-Semitic and anti-Judaism.**

"Rejected [speaking of Jewish Christians], first by the Church, in spite of their genuine belief in Jesus as the Messiah, and then by the Jews in spite of their loyalty to the Law, they ceased to be a factor of any importance in the development of either Christianity or Judaism."

James Parkes, [The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue](#), 1981, page 92

"Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch, claimed in his epistle to the Philipppians at the beginning of the second century that Satan 'fights along with the Jews to a denial of the cross' and that 'if any one celebrates the Passover along with the Jews, or receives emblems of their feast, he is a partaker with those that killed the Lord and his apostles.'"

David A. Rausch, [A Legacy of Hatred: Why Christians Must Not Forget The Holocaust](#), 1984, page 20

"*The Epistle of Barnabus*, which circulated about the same period, explained that the Jewish sacrifices were abolished, their fasts not acceptable to God; and that Christians, not Jews, were actually the heirs of God's Covenant with Abraham. To those who believed the Jewish people still had a future through the Covenant, the epistle harshly stated: 'Take heed now to yourselves, and not to be like some adding largely to your sins, and saying, 'The covenant is both theirs and ours.' But they [the Jews] thus finally lost it.' This epistle was highly regarded in the church and even included in some of the early canon lists."

David A. Rausch, [A Legacy of Hatred: Why Christians Must Not Forget The Holocaust](#), 1984, page 20

"*The Epistle of Diognetus* (ca 150) takes a jaundiced view of the Jewish faith and rarely cites the Jewish Scriptures to prove the case for Christianity. Chapter 4 is full of anti-Jewish feeling and expression, with explicit repudiation of Jewish ceremonial customs and conspicuous failure to use even the common line of Christian apologetic which appropriated the Jewish heritage even while referring negatively to the living Jews."

Franklin H. Littell, [The Crucifixion of the Jews: The Failure of Christians to Understand the Jewish Experience](#), pg. 27, 1996

"By the time of the teaching of *The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles* (Didache, early 2<sup>nd</sup> century), ill feelings toward 'the hypocrites' - the Jews, professors of a false religion - are clearly evident (chap.8). The scheduled feasts of the Jewish week fall on the second and fifth days; therefore, the Christians should fast on different days, Wednesday and Friday. Whereas early Jewish Christians had observed both the traditional Sabbath and the 'Lord's Day,' the first day of the week, the anniversary of Christ's resurrection, the gentile Christians' program began to delete the Sabbath."

Franklin H. Littell, [The Crucifixion of the Jews: The Failure of Christians to Understand the Jewish Experience](#), pg. 26, 1996

**A profession of faith from the Church of Constantinople in the year 325 A.D. under the Emperor Constantine**

"I renounce all customs, rites, legalisms, unleavened breads and sacrifices of lambs of the Hebrews, and all the other feasts of the Hebrews, sacrifices, prayers, aspersions, purifications, sanctifications and propitiations, and fasts, and new moons, and Sabbaths, and superstitions, and hymns and chants and observances and synagogues, and the food and drink of the Hebrews; in one word, I renounce absolutely everything Jewish, every law, rite and custom, and above all I renounce Antichrist, whom all the Jews await in the figure and form of Christ; and I join myself to the true Christ and God."

James Parkes, The Conflict Of The Church And The Synagogue, 1981, pp. 397.

**2. The first church was made up mostly of Jewish believers and, as with other Jewish holidays such as Passover, wanted to celebrate them with a biblical understanding exalting their Messiah.**

"The date of the feast of Dedication (Chanukah) - the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev seems to have been adopted by the ancient church as that of the birth of our blessed Lord - Christmas - the dedication of the true temple which was the body of Jesus."

Alfred Edersheim, The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as they were at the time of Jesus Christ, page 334

"The Church did not choose December 25<sup>th</sup> because it was an ancient heathen holiday, but because of the Jewish feast of Chanukah that occurred on that date, and the added significance that Jesus gave to it. This date eloquently testified to the fact that at the birth of Jesus deity was dwelling in a human body (Temple) and shining out to give light in the midst of darkness."

Marvin Rosenthal, Israel My Glory, Why do we celebrate Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup>, Dec. - Jan. 1986-1987

**WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF DECEMBER 25<sup>th</sup> AS THE DATE OF THE BIRTH OF MESSIAH?**

1. Jesus was almost certainly not born on December 25<sup>th</sup>.
2. The early church bias against Jews and Jewish culture most likely influenced their understanding, and continues to this day.
3. It was the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev date that likely introduced December 25<sup>th</sup> on the Julian/Gregorian calendar as the date of His birth. Not a tie in with paganism.
4. The similarities of Chanukah and Christmas, especially with:
  - \* the possible introduction of the *Shammash*, light, by Jewish believers in Jesus
  - \* the date of the 25<sup>th</sup> for both holidays
  - \* Jesus' presence at Chanukah

provide evidence, although circumstantial, that the choosing of December 25<sup>th</sup> was done by the first church, made up of Jewish believers, to remember the LIGHT that God sent into the world, incorporating it into a Jewish holiday context.

6 *There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.*

7 *The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe.*

8 *He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.*

9 *That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.*

John 1:6-9