



Should I Observe Hanukkah?

by Tim Kelley

In November of 2001 Angie and I were driving through Kentucky on our way to visit her family for Thanksgiving when the thought came to mind that “maybe we should host a Hanukkah celebration in East Texas”. It had been about four years since we had begun to study the “Hebrewness” of the scriptures, and during that time we had hosted a number of seminars in our area as well as hosting the Feast of Tabernacles in Oklahoma. But Hannukah would be something new, something “out of the box” even for us. Why? Because we weren’t really sure if we should observe Hanukkah, or more importantly, if we should not!

Never-the-less, we proceeded forward. I contacted a teacher who was quite knowledgeable about the history and traditions of Hanukkah, and when I got back from the Thanksgiving get-together, I jumped into a study of Hanukkah myself. Based on those studies, we decided to proceed with plans by securing a facility and making arrangements for others to participate in our endeavor. The event was quite successful (at least in numbers of attendees) with people coming from as far away as Austin to be a part of it.

As part of our preparations, Angie and I made a trip to Sam’s Club to buy supplies. Our shopping buggy was stacked high with food and paper goods, and as we were checking out a friend of ours passed by, and seeing all the paper goods, said “You guys must be planning a big party!” to which I answered “No, we’re planning a Hanukkah celebration”. Probably thinking that Angie and I were way off the track anyway, he returned with “Oh, I don’t keep those Jewish holidays! I keep God’s festivals instead!”.

Well, I already knew - and he knew that I knew – that he and his family observed the Leviticus 23 festivals. So why the “. . . I keep God’s festival . . . instead!”. Is there a this or that in regards to “God’s festivals” and “Jewish traditional festivals?” Does it have to be one or the other? Can’t it be both?

Can God’s people, those who strive to truly walk in the ways of Messiah Yeshua, observe certain Jewish festivals and traditions and still be pleasing to God? In this study, I want to answer that question by answering these questions:

- Why would we want to observe Hanukkah?
- Is Hanukkah rooted in idolatry?
- Do we have any Biblical examples of God’s people observing Hanukkah?

Before we get started on the questions, I want to give a very brief overview of what Hanukkah is and how it came to be a Jewish tradition.

The 8-day festival of Hanukkah is called such because it celebrates the rededication of the altar at the Temple in Jerusalem after it was desecrated a little over three years earlier by Antiochus Epiphanies.

Approximately 165 years before Yeshua was born, the Seleucid (Hellenist) king Antiochus set out to change the culture of the Jewish people from that of Torah observant Hebrews to being philosophical Greeks. He began by making certain Jewish practices illegal including reading the Torah, observing New Moons and Sabbaths, and circumcision. Then to prevent the people from offering their sacrifices at the Temple, he “sacrificed” a pig on the brazen alter, thus defiling it. This happened on 25th day of the Hebrew month Kislev, and according the writer of the book, it was all done –

^{NRS} **1 Maccabees 1:49** so that they would forget the law and change all the ordinances.

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So the story of Hannukah is one of religious freedom, but more importantly, the preservation of the Hebrew culture in the midst of a pagan-Greek world. It's not the celebration of a political victory, but rather a commemoration of the victory God provided the Jewish people who were willing to stand up for their values.

Because of the significance of the events, the Jewish leaders of the day proclaimed that these days should be observed by the Jews in Judea from that day forward –

^{NRS} **1 Maccabees 4:59** Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication of the altar should be observed with joy and gladness for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Chislev.

Why then (to answer our first question) would non-Jews want to observe Hanukkah? There are a number of reasons.

Restoration of the Hebrew Walk

Probably the foremost reason in my mind is that God is beginning to restore His Torah-based walk back to His people Israel and thus the adversary is kicking back. Many who believe that Yeshua is indeed Israel's messiah are now turning back to the walk that Yeshua himself walked. They are turning away from the Greek-based culture of the last 2400 years to a mindset of acting on what God has instructed. They are slowly leaving behind the mindset of the pagan Greek philosophers – Philo, Aristotle, and Plato and are becoming more literal based – “If God said it, I'm going to do it.”

The adversary is not blind to what's going on. He knows that his attempts to subvert God's plan are threatened when people begin to walk in God's ways, so instead of personal attacks, he does like he did 2200 years ago – make it to where it's illegal to follow the ways of God. But HaSatan is not an idiot. His attempt to turn the people from the Torah walk thru brute force did not work in the days of the Maccabees, so instead of an all out assault on the Torah walk, he's picking away at it piece by piece¹. We can glean encouragement from the Hanukkah story because “there is no new thing under the sun”², what happened before will happen again – and just as God enabled a small band of Jewish zealots were able to drive the Syrian army out of Jerusalem, He will fight our battles for us as well.

Preservation of the Hebrew Culture

Though it ties in with the above topic, the Maccabees helped preserve the Jewish culture into which Yeshua was born. If they had not stood up to the onslaught of Hellenism, then – in the words of Richard Spurlock -

" The battle over G-d's Word would have not occurred . . . Instead, G-d's people would have quietly disappeared into the melee of Hellenism.³

Yeshua needed to be born into a visible Jewish culture. He had to have an audience that believed in the God of Israel, who respected His Torah, and who were educated in the Biblical prophecies pertaining to the Messiah. He also needed the Jewish infrastructure of synagogues that were spread throughout Asia Minor that would serve as platforms for His gospel message of Restoration. He even needed the sect of the Pharisees – the separatists who came on the scene about 100 years after the Maccabean revolt as they played a huge part in spreading the Gospel as well as seeing to it that the prophecies of the “suffering servant” Messiah would indeed come to pass.

¹ This is not to say that HaSatan is only attacking Hebrew Roots believers. He's attacking all those who profess a belief in the God of Israel for whatever aspects of His law they might observe.

² Ecclesiastes 1:9

³ Richard Spurlock - http://www.bereansonline.org/studies/Wisdom_vs_philosophy.pdf - pg. 7

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Insight Into Prophecy

The Hanukkah story is widely understood to be a fulfillment of the Daniel 11-12 prophecy of the “abomination that makes desolate”. A similar end-time prophecy was given by Messiah Yeshua in Matthew 24 and again in Mark 13 (two witnesses to the same account). This happened while Yeshua was in Jerusalem just days before He was crucified. A partial fulfillment of Yeshua’s prophecy took place when the Romans destroyed the second Temple, but because the Jewish believers heeded Yeshua’s warning in the prophecy, they escaped death.

Though the Hanukkah story and the destruction of the Temple were partial fulfillments, the greater fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy will be at the end time, thus it’s important to know the Hanukkah story so we’ll recognize what’s happening.

Make Judah Jealous

While explaining to the congregation in Rome why so many “Gentiles” (non-Jews) were being called into the congregation, Paul made this statement –

NKJ Romans 11:11 ¹¹ I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation *has come* to the Gentiles.

In essence he was saying that one of the roles of the non-Jews is to provoke the Jews to a better Hebrew walk. In other words, we should become “better Jews than the Jews”. For 2000 years, the small percentage of religious Jews have kept pretty much to themselves, while at the same time, those who are more secular have adopted many of the Greek – Hellenist ways and have mixed with society at large. With the coming of “Torah-based Christians”, both groups have begun to take note. No longer can they say that all Christians are anti-Torah. No longer can they claim that our Messiah taught against the Torah. The Jewish people now have to consider our arguments because we are now quoting out of the same book they are – the Tanakh.

We Torah-based believers should exhibit a walk that portrays our Messiah in a more Hebraic light than the current Greek image that’s been portrayed for better than 1700 years. In so doing, we can help tear down the barriers that 1700 years of “Christianity” have put up that keep Judah from accepting Yeshua as the Jewish Messiah. And what better way to do that than to honor the faithfulness of the Jewish people in the Hanukkah story. Instead of condemning their yearly celebration, we can join with them in celebrating their stand against the forces of evil, and thus open up avenues of dialog by which they can come to see Yeshua from a different point of view.

We’ve heard four compelling reasons why we should observe Hanukkah, but are there reasons why we should not? Of course there are. For one, God doesn’t command Hanukkah observance just as he doesn’t command we observe the 4th of July. Thus, if we choose not to observe it, that’s fine. But many people’s objections are based on their perception that Hanukkah, like Christmas, is rooted in paganism – but is that really the case?

Back in 1995 I was at home - standing at our kitchen sink - discussing a certain scriptural passage with a fellow who had once taught that we should uphold the Torah, but was now turning away from it. This is that scripture –

ESV Deuteronomy 12:29-31 ²⁹ "When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, ³⁰ take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods?- that I also may do the same.' ³¹ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.

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I was presenting a case that if the pagans do it, we shouldn't. His response was simply – “The pagans pray to their god, so you're saying that we shouldn't pray to ours?” I was taken back. I didn't have an answer. Sometime later I realized that everything has to be taken in context. As we discuss the various traditions of Hanukkah, we should do the same.

Let's take a look at some of the claims that Hanukkah is based on paganism.

Pagan Origins of the word “Chanukkah”

“But the word ‘Chanukkah’ itself is derived from a pagan god”. This was a claim that was made back in 1997 when a three day seminar that we hosted⁴ just happened to coincide with Hanukkah. A gentleman came up to me and said that we should have not scheduled this during Hanukkah because Hanukkah is pagan. To support his belief he later sent me an article he wrote which included this statement –

“The word CHUN KAH comes from CHUIN who was a false god in Israel and in Babylon. I Chronicles 18:8 tells us that this City named CHUN was in Samaria and that it was a Brass-making center. The Root of this word is KUIN for the false god for whom that city was named which is Strong's Number #3594. This idol symbol was also known as Baal-Peor.”

I checked out his allegation and found it to be questionable at best. The word “hanukkah” (חֲנֻכָּהּ – Strong's 2598) is not just the name of a Jewish festival; it's a perfectly good Hebrew word! The first time we see it in the scriptures is in Moses' discussion of the offerings that were given at the dedication of the Tabernacle in the wilderness.

^{ESV} **Numbers 7:10** And the chiefs offered offerings for the dedication of the altar on the day it was anointed; and the chiefs offered their offering before the altar.

“Hanukkah” is the noun form of the Hebrew word “chanak” (חָנַךְ – Strong's 2596) which means “to train, dedicate, inaugurate”. One notable use of “chanak” is in a very well known proverb –

^{NKJ} **Proverbs 22:6** Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it.

The etymology of “chanak” is that of rubbing the palate of a newborn child with chewed up dates before it begins to suck the breast⁵. I would assume this was done in order to entice the baby to want more of that taste in its mouth. In regards to training our children, it would imply that we should give them reasons to want more of God's way, so they – like the prodigal son – will want to return to it.

Though “train up” is an interesting use of the word, the most common use is that of dedicating a facility that's used in the service of God such as the altar of burnt offerings at the Tabernacle⁶ as well as at the Temple⁷. Once we understand the purpose of the sacrifices, we can see why the altar was “chanak” - dedicated – so that the people would be drawn to it in the same way a child is drawn to its mother's breast.

The words “chanukkah” or “hanukkah” are not derived from any pagan god, but simply mean “dedication”. A study of the word would show that the same Greek word⁸ is used throughout the Greek translation of the Tnakh as well as in the New Testament any time you see the word “dedication”.

⁴ “Footstep of the Messiah”, Waggoner, Oklahoma

⁵ Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon; Hendrickson Publishers Peabody, MA; pg. 335

⁶ Numbers 7:10

⁷ 2 Chron. 7:9

⁸ ἑγκαινισμὸν

Pagan Customs

What about the pagan customs that were later brought into the festival by Jews? Do those customs make Hanukkah pagan simply because they were later added to it? To answer that, let's think about this . . . Our Messiah was born 2000 years ago in Judea and people came from far away to honor His birth. Some 300 years later, the story of his birth was mixed in with the pagan holiday of saturnalia (sun worship). Where those men who came to visit and bring gifts to the child participating in a pagan practice when they set out to honor the birth of The King? If we could strip away all the pagan accoutrements, would it be proper to honor the birth of The Messiah today? Are we in fact honoring his birth when we observe Sukkot?⁹

Let's face it; HaSatan has tried to introduce his idolatrous culture into practically everything. But does that mean we have to avoid everything? Let's look to the scriptures for answers.

Yeshua himself claimed that He was born into a "wicked and idolatrous"¹⁰ generation". Not only had Hellenism permeated the culture, but the Romans had also brought in their own form of idolatry patterned after that of the Greeks. Yet Yeshua didn't avoid these places, in fact one of his most well known statements was made at the foot of a pagan temple –

^{NKJ} **Matthew 16:18** "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

The text preceding this quote shows that they were at a part of Samaria called Caesarea Phillippi. This was a place named after the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus and after Herod the Great's son Philip, It lies at the foot of Mount Herman and was previously known as Paneas after the Greek god Pan. There was a large cave at Paneas out of which a large volume of water would flow. This water, along with two other streams, filled the Sea of Galilee, out of which flowed the Jordan River – the river in which Yeshua was baptized.

The pagans believed that this cave from which the water flowed led to the underworld and was thus called "the gates of hell" They would thus build statues and temples there to honor the Greek and Roman gods. Paneas was also a place for idol worship, including child sacrifice.

This place – steeped in idolatry, was where Yeshua choose to show His disciples that it was their job to begin the restoration of God's people back from the idolatry that they had become so steeped in themselves. As we can see, He did not avoid the place even though it had been used for pagan purposes.

Pagan Customs Added to Hanukkah

Over the years, many Reform and (to some degree) Conservative Jews have added additional customs to the traditional Hanukkah celebration in order to make it look like Christmas. Those customs include the exchanging of gifts, the "Hanukkah bush", and various colorful decorations. The addition of these customs by some in the Jewish community does no more to make Hanukkah "pagan" for the rest of us than would the stringing of Christmas lights in a sukkah and the giving of gifts make the Feast of Tabernacles pagan. In fact, I used to hear fellow "feast goers" tell others that the Feast of Tabernacles is "our Christmas". You're always going to have some who just can't leave the paganism behind and thus taint the festival for everyone else.

Judah Maccabee Patterned Hanukkah after a pagan festival

There are some who attempt to attach Judah Maccabee's intent in establishing this festival with ancient saturnalia worship, but unlike the case with Christmas, there is no evidence of that intent.

⁹ Since a very good case can be made that He was born during the fall festival season.

¹⁰ Ezekiel 23:35

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So is Hanukkah rooted in paganism? That doesn't appear to be the case, though there are certain factions of Judaism that have tarnished its meaning by bringing pagan customs into it. We simply need to discard those customs if we want to observe it in its intended meaning.

What about Biblical characters observing this festival. Is there evidence that any Biblical characters participated in Hanukkah? Yes, there is.

Non-Canonical Books

We know that the 1st and 2nd Book of Maccabees are not included in most English Bibles, so technically – the books that teach us about Hanukkah are not in the Bible, and thus the characters in those books are not “biblical” characters. Did you know that the books of Daniel and Esther were nearly excluded as well? What if they had been excluded? But Septuagint, the Greek translation of the known Hebrew bible does include the books of Maccabees? Why does our modern Bibles exclude them? There are a number of theories about this, but the most plausible is that when the Tnakh was confirmed at Yavneh, the rabbis (mostly Pharisees) opposed the books of Maccabees because they supported the Hasmonean dynasty, from which came Herod the Great. If indeed they had decided to include the book of Maccabees, all those characters would have been “biblical”.

Never-the-less, we do have one biblical character who does appear to have observed Hanukkah. His name is Messiah Yeshua.

Yeshua Did It

The Apostle John wrote about an event in Yeshua's life where the Jewish leadership was ready to stone Him. They alleged that He has blasphemed God by calling Himself the Son of God¹¹, but when Yeshua reminded them that the psalmist also made the same claim in regards to the rulers of the day¹², they relented for a moment and He escaped.

Yeshua had been in Jerusalem just weeks earlier, during which time He had observed the Feast of Tabernacles and had performed His most notable miracle – giving sight to a man who had been born blind. His fame had spread throughout Judea and Samaria, and now He was at the Temple in Jerusalem, in the middle of the winter, and during the celebration of Hanukkah –

NKJ John 10:22-24 Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. ²³ And Jesus walked in the temple, in Solomon's porch. ²⁴ Then the Jews surrounded Him and said to Him, "How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly."

We don't know if He made the roughly 110 mile trip from His home in Capernaum to Jerusalem just for Hanukkah, or if He had simply stayed in Jerusalem after Sukkot. In either case, He was there and the Jewish leaders caught up with Him on the Temple Mount¹³, and in the Hanukkah theme, asked Him if He was the promised Messiah. Now, I say “in the Hanukkah theme” for a reason.

Keep in mind that one of the themes of Hanukah is freedom from oppression. The Jewish people had been under the oppressive hand of the Romans for about 100 years and they were looking for a champion, a hero, a Judas Macabee to free them from the Romans. The prophecies indicated that the Messiah would rule on the Throne of David, and David was a mighty warrior. “So” they said to Yeshua, “If you're that warrior, would not Hanukkah be a great time to free us?”

We, of course, know that was not Yeshua's intent at the time, so instead of freeing Israel, He headed back home and continued to provide different signs of His Messiahship.

¹¹ John 10:31-39

¹² Psalm 82:6

¹³ Some claim that He was not there to observe Hanukkah because He was not actually at the Temple, but merely on the Temple Mount. One must keep in mind that Hanukkah is an 8-day event, and unlike Sukkot, it was not Temple based, i.e. – there were no sacrifices involved.

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So why do I observe Hanukkah? I believe there are some very compelling reasons to do so including:

- It helps to reinforce our walk, especially as more people are drawn back to this way of life
- It commemorates a people who were willing to stand up against great odds to preserve the Hebrew way of life
- It provides insight into prophecy
- It provides an avenue whereby we can fulfill our role to making Judah jealous for YHVH
- It's not based in a previous pagan practice, that is – as long as we don't bring paganism into it
- Yeshua did it.

There's one more reason which I'd like to add before finishing up . . .

Just a few weeks ago, we all enjoyed observing the feast of Tabernacles. A very good case can be made that Messiah Yeshua was born during the fall festival season, and possibly on the first day of Sukkot. If that's the case, and we count back 40 weeks from Sukkot, it's quite possible that the Light of the World was conceived during the Festival of Lights.

Hanukkah is a good Jewish festival, that - just as the 4th of July, celebrates God's hand in bringing freedom to a small group of people against much greater odds. I believe God looks down on us and is pleased when we celebrate these days, and as we do, I hope we can all appreciate the sacrifices our forefathers made to preserve our freedom and our Hebrew way of life.

Shalom Alecheim