

A menorah with lit candles against a dark blue textured background. The menorah is made of a reddish-brown metal and has nine lit white candles. The background is a dark blue, textured surface. The text "HANUKKAH" is centered in the middle of the image in a large, bold, serif font. Below it, "The Festival of Lights" is written in a smaller, serif font. At the bottom right, "HOLIDAY SERIES" is written in a small, sans-serif font.

HANUKKAH

The Festival of Lights

HOLIDAY SERIES

In 168 BC in a small town in ancient Israel, the age-old battle between spiritual compromise and godly character waged. The events which took place resulted in one of Israel's most widely observed holidays, the winter festival of Hanukkah, or the Festival of Lights.

ORIGIN AND DESCRIPTION

Hanukkah (lit., “Dedication”) commemorates the Jewish people's great military and spiritual achievement during the reign of Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV (or Epiphanes [God Manifest], as he dubbed himself).

Antiochus severely persecuted the Jewish people and forbade them from observing God's commandments. He even set up an image of Zeus on the bronze altar in the Temple in Jerusalem and there sacrificed a pig.

Though many Jewish people chose to compromise to save their lives, an aged Jewish priest named Mattathias and his five sons were among those who refused to cave. Mattathias' son Judah Maccabeus led an army to fight Antiochus' troops. Facing overwhelming odds, Judah and his men became seasoned warriors.

On the 25th day of Kislev, 165 BC, exactly three years to the day that Antiochus desecrated the

Temple, Judah and his troops re-dedicated the Temple in Jerusalem and consecrated it to God. 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.

The people of Israel celebrated for eight days. Judah decreed that such a festival should be observed every year to memorialize the “restoration of their Temple worship.”¹

Some posit the reason the Maccabees chose to fix the duration of Hanukkah at eight days was because when the Maccabees found only one cruse of consecrated oil with which to light the menorah at the Temple, the oil miraculously lasted for eight days. But since this story is not found in the event’s earliest manuscripts, the miracle of the oil story is probably fictitious.

Regardless, the real miracle of the story is how God protected His people and delivered them from their evil oppressors.

OBSERVANCE OF HANUKKAH

Beginning on the 25th day of the Jewish month of Kislev (November-December), Hanukkah is observed for eight days. It is a joyous time of food, family

gatherings, and activities for the children.

Jewish families begin the holiday by lighting the Hanukkah menorah, or *hanukkiyah*, which has nine candlesticks. One candle is added each evening; and the ninth candle, called the *shammash* (servant), is used to light the other eight.

After lighting the menorahs, families often sing songs, eat special foods such as crispy potato pancakes (*latkes*), exchange gifts, and play a traditional game called “Spin the Dreidel.”

HANUKKAH AND CHRISTMAS

Biblical Christians believe without Hanukkah, there could be no Christmas. If God had not preserved the Jewish people during the events surrounding Hanukkah, then Jesus would not have been born, nor could He have affirmed His Messianic credentials.

Jesus chose Hanukkah as the occasion to make His startling claim: “I and My Father are one” (Jn. 10:22–30). His statement affirmed the truth there is only one God, but that God exists as one being in three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Isa. 48:12–16).

How could He make such a claim? The answer is found in the empty tomb. Antiochus IV claimed to be

God. So did Jesus. But while Antiochus IV remains dead, Jesus the Messiah is alive.

Like the Hanukkah menorah, the Messiah came as “a light to . . . the Gentiles, and the glory of [God’s] people Israel” (Lk. 2:32; cf. Isa. 49:6). Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12). Like the shammash, the servant candle, the Messiah “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mt. 20:28). That is the good news of Hanukkah.

ENDNOTE

1. William Whiston, trans., Josephus (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1960), *Antiquities of the Jews*, 12.7.7.



For more information on this and the other Jewish holidays, check out *The Feasts of Israel: Seasons of the Messiah* by Bruce Scott.

www.foi.org



THE
Friends of Israel
GOSPEL MINISTRY

Building bridges. Bringing hope.

foi.org | 856-853-5590

PO Box 908 Bellmawr, NJ 08099