

Hanukkah: The Jewish Festival, Its Historical Basis, and the Catholic Connection

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## Introduction

Hanukkah is perhaps the Jewish holiday with which Christians are the most well acquainted. As December approaches and Christmas preparations commence, one might have a vague awareness that Hanukkah too will be celebrated soon. It is likely the other holiday a Christian has in mind when wishing his coworkers and countrymen “Happy holidays!” Yet, besides knowing that dreidels and menorahs are involved in the celebration, Christians often do not know what Hanukkah is really all about. Upon delving deeper into its historical basis, many Christians would be pleasantly surprised to learn about a fascinating struggle for religious freedom that in many ways overlaps with their own traditions and sentiments. Indeed, Catholic Christians in particular have a special connection with Hanukkah.

## Historical Basis

The historical event commemorated every Hannukah is the dedication (*Hanukkah* means “dedication”) of the Jerusalem Temple that took place during the Maccabean Revolt, the tale of which begins with the death of Alexander the Great. When Alexander died in 323 BC, he left the most expansive empire the world had yet seen without an heir. Consequently, the Macedonian Empire was divided between four of Alexander’s generals (or *diadochi*), leaving Judaea surrounded by the Seleucid Empire to the north and the Ptolemaic Kingdom to the south. Although both the Seleucids and the Ptolemies vied for Judaea, it was ultimately brought squarely into Seleucid control by King Antiochus III the Great (r. 223-187 BC). While the Ptolemies and Seleucids were fighting each other for political control of Judaea, a cultural civil war was brewing amongst the Jews themselves—as the traditionalist Jews struggled against the

influence of Hellenistic Jews, who promoted greater assimilation into Greek culture. These tensions came to a head in the form of the Maccabean Revolt during the reign of King Antiochus IV Epiphanes (r. 175-164 BC), as recorded in the primary source texts of this event: the books of First and Second Maccabees.

According to the author of Second Maccabees, who himself claims to be epitomizing a five-volume work by Jason of Cyrene (2 Macc. 2:23), during the high priesthood of the traditionalist Onias III certain Hellenizing Jews attempted to circumvent Onias's authority by appealing to their Seleucid rulers and offering to bribe them with Temple funds. Indeed, when Antiochus IV came to power, Onias's own brother, Jason, offered the king 590 silver talents to install him as high priest and grant Antiochian citizenship to the men of Jerusalem (2 Macc. 4:7-9). Upon coming into power, Jason "at once shifted his countrymen over to the Greek way of life" (2 Macc. 4:10). Jason established a gymnasium in Jerusalem and induced the Jews to adopt a Greek manner of dress. So effective were his Hellenizing efforts that the priests ceased to serve at the altar (2 Macc. 4:14). Three years into Jason's high priesthood, he was outbid by another man, Menelaus, who offered an additional three hundred talents to King Antiochus IV. Menelaus had Onias killed, and this led to an uprising, after which Jason attempted to regain control by force with the help of one thousand men. This coup was unsuccessful, but when news of such rebellion reached Antiochus he marched on Jerusalem, slaughtering thousands of men, women, and children, and selling many others into slavery (2 Macc. 5:11-14). Afterwards, he raided the Temple and stationed in Jerusalem certain governors, tasked with ensuring the continued violent subjugation of the Jews (2 Macc. 5:15-26).

It was at this time that Antiochus IV Epiphanes enacted “the first known instance of religious persecution in history.”<sup>1</sup> As the author of First Maccabees reports, Antiochus issued a decree “that all should be one people, and that each should give up his customs” (1 Macc. 1:41). He ordered an end to circumcision and the traditional Jewish Temple liturgy, stipulating instead that idolatrous shrines should be built, and new altars erected, upon which swine and other animals considered by the Jews to be unclean should be offered in sacrifice—and all this under pain of death. The king sought to put an end to such culture wars as were erupting in Judaea by enacting Hellenization with the force of law, and he sent inspectors throughout the land to ensure his commands were heeded. Those traditionalist Jews who refused to comply were persecuted severely. Mothers who circumcised their sons were put to death, and their infants were hung from their necks (2 Macc. 1:60-61).

Notably, in 167 BC on the twenty-fifth day in the Jewish month of Chislev, unclean sacrifices were offered on a pagan altar that had been erected in the Temple, thus defiling it. When the king’s officers impelled the Jews to participate in such pagan sacrifices, many refused, led in their rebellion by a priest of the Hasmonean line named Mattathias and his five sons: John, Simon, Judas, Eleazar, and Jonathan. Mattathias spoke defiantly to the king’s officials:

“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, yet I and my sons and my brothers will live by the covenant of our fathers. Far be it from 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.” (1 Macc. 2:19-22)

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<sup>1</sup> Kessel, Lorraine, ed., *Understanding the Maccabean Revolt 167 to 63 BCE: An Introductory Atlas* (Carta Jerusalem, 2016), 5.

Yet even after hearing such bold words, a certain Hellenizing Jew stepped forward, volunteering to offer sacrifice. Filled with righteous anger, Mattathias killed him and the king's officer, and destroyed the pagan altar. As he fled with his sons, Mattathias shouted, "Let every one who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come out with me!" (1 Macc. 2:27). Thus began the Maccabean Revolt.

After Mattathias's death, his son, Judas, took the reins. Judas was known as Maccabeus, which means "Hammer," and it was from this that the traditionalist revolutionaries gained their name: the Maccabees. Greatly outnumbered by the Greek forces, the Maccabees resorted to guerrilla warfare tactics, making use of their superior familiarity with the land of Judaea. Judas the Hammer was a brilliant military strategist, who would lure his enemies into regions where the topography gave him the upper hand. He led the enemy forces on wild goose chases so that he could attack their camps while most of the soldiers were out looking for him. With this wit, the power of prayer, and the motivation of religious zeal for the true God, the Maccabees were able to regain control of Jerusalem—and, on the twenty-fifth day of Chislev in 164 BC, three years to the day that it was defiled, they cleansed and dedicated the Temple back to the authentic worship of Yahweh (1 Macc. 4:42-56). After rebuilding the altar and replacing all the necessary holy vessels and liturgical instruments, they offered lawful sacrifice and joyfully celebrated the dedication for eight days. According to Talmudic tradition, during the dedication there remained only enough undefiled oil to light the candelabrum for one day, yet it miraculously burned for eight days.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Talmud, *William Davidson Edition*, Shabbat 21b:10, Sefaria Website, accessed September 30, 2023, <https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.21b.10?lang=bi>. This is the source of the practice of celebrating Hanukkah by lighting a menorah, or hanukkiah, for eight successive days.

With the dedication complete, “Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of the dedication of the altar should be observed with gladness and joy for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Chis’lev” (1 Macc. 4:59). Thus, Hannukah was established—and the Maccabees were not content for this celebration to remain a purely local phenomenon. The first chapter of 1 Maccabees concludes with a letter sent from Judas Maccabeus and the Jerusalem Jews to the Jews in Egypt, informing them of this newly instituted holiday and asking them to observe it. Interestingly, as Harrington notes, “Instituting a feast in commemoration of an event of very recent experience was a Hellenistic custom. It is ironic that the group portrayed in the major Jewish sources as the champions of traditional Judaism against the inroads of Hellenism should be responsible for instituting a feast that had no biblical warrant and that this feast should be celebrated to the present day.”<sup>3</sup> The fact that the holiday celebrating this victory against extreme Hellenization is itself tinged by Hellenistic influence points to an important aspect of the historical impact of the Maccabean Revolt: it resulted in a Judaism “that was both traditional and adaptable to the realities of the time.”<sup>4</sup>

### **The Catholic Connection**

The first Hannukah was celebrated within two centuries of the advent of Christ. When Jesus was born, the Maccabean Revolt was perhaps the most historically significant Jewish event of recent memory. As such, the celebration of Hanukkah impacted—and was impacted by—the

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Maccabean Revolt: Anatomy of a Biblical Revolution* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 70.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

rise of Christianity. Perhaps the most obvious and direct connection between Christianity and Hanukkah is that Jesus Himself celebrated it and used it as an opportunity to proclaim His divinity and messianic status (John 10:22-39). Indeed, it is interesting that He chose such a setting to do so, since Judas Maccabeus would have much more closely resembled the type of Messiah that the Jews of the time were expecting and eagerly anticipating: a brilliant and successful military leader capable of throwing off an oppressive pagan empire. Yet, Jesus came not to physically overthrow Rome for the sake of the Jerusalem Temple, but to begin a spiritual revolution that would transform the world by allowing His followers to be joined the true Temple by becoming members of His Body. Harrington points out that “these themes suggest that the Hanukkah setting for this episode is not accidental. Rather, the incident appears . . . to show that in Jesus Jewish feasts and institutions reach their fullness.”<sup>5</sup>

Also interesting to note is the parallel between the names of the Maccabee family and the names of Christ’s Apostles. As noted above, the Maccabean Revolt was initiated by Mattathias (or, in English, “Matthew”) and his five sons, of whom three were named John, Simon, and Judas. Six of the twelve Apostles bear the same names: Matthew the former tax collector, John the beloved disciple, Simon Peter, Simon the Zealot, Judas the Greater, and Judas Iscariot. One can see how fondly these Hasmonean heroes were remembered by first-century Jews in the fact that so many parents were bestowing such names on their children that when Jesus called His Apostles, half of them happened to be named after a Maccabee! It is fitting that those who started a Church that would so resiliently—and ultimately triumphantly—endure centuries of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 131-132.

persecution under the Roman Empire would be named after the men who successfully fought off the first religious persecution known to history.

Catholic Christians specifically played an important role in the history of Hanukkah, in that the primary source texts that record the events of the Maccabean Revolt, 1 and 2 Maccabees, are found neither in the Jewish nor Protestant biblical canon, but in the Catholic Bible.<sup>6</sup> Were it not for the Catholic Church's faithful preservation of these texts, much of what is currently known about the origins of Hanukkah would have long since been lost to history. As Harvard Divinity School's professor of Jewish Studies, Jon D. Levenson, notes, "And so we encounter another oddity of Hanukkah: Jews know the fuller history of the holiday because Christians preserved the books that the Jews themselves lost."<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

The historical origins of Hanukkah are found in the Maccabean Revolt, that valiant effort by a faithful group of traditional Jews to maintain their faith despite being subjected to the first violent religious persecution in known history. Their victory ensured not only the preservation of Jewish monotheism and the worship of the true God, but also a continuing relationship between the Abrahamic tradition and Greek culture, thus enabling them both to come together during that most pivotal of all moments in human history: the rise of Christianity from the midst of the Roman Empire and the eventual formation of Christendom.

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<sup>6</sup> Although not found in the Hebrew Bible, Hannukah is mentioned in the Talmud—but the historical origins are not related in depth, as the Talmud's focus is on detailing how the holiday is to be celebrated.

<sup>7</sup> Jon D. Levenson, "The Meaning of Hanukkah," *Wall Street Journal*, December 16, 2011, accessed September 30, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203893404577100341793596390>.



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