

How the Story of Hanukkah Relates to the Gospel of John

The Apocryphal books of First and Second Maccabees are the written record of the story of Hanukkah. They are not inspired Scripture, but they are considered to be historically reliable. They describe how, in 175 B.C., a Greek Seleucid king named Antiochus IV Epiphanes gained control of the ancient land of Israel.

This was bad news for the Jewish people, because Antiochus despised their way of life and he outlawed all Jewish cultural and religious practices. He made it illegal to keep the Sabbath or to observe Torah or conduct biblical sacrifices in the Temple. Failure to comply was a death sentence.

Antiochus compelled the people to study Hellenism and to use Greek names. He renamed the city of Jerusalem as Antioch after himself. He erected a statue of Zeus inside the holy temple mount. And he defiled the altar in front of the Temple by sacrificing a pig on it, as a dramatic “in your face” repudiation of the Jewish way of worship.

Sadly, the majority of the people of Israel adopted this new way of life, either willingly or under the threat of execution. This situation would have continued if not for the Jewish resistance force called the Maccabees. Led by a man named Judah, who was the son of a priest, they fought back against Antiochus and defeated the Greek Seleucids.

Their victory was remarkable, considering their inferior numbers. But they were motivated to fight to the death because they considered the preservation of the Jewish way of life and worship to be ordained by God. And, after the battle was won, that meant having to restore the temple for biblical worship after it had been blatantly defiled. So that is what they did. They renamed the city Jerusalem again, not Antioch. They removed the statue of Zeus from the temple. Then, they addressed the altar of burnt offering in front of the temple, where Antiochus had sacrificed a pig in an act of blasphemy.

Here is how the book of 1 Maccabees describes what happened next –

“[Judah] chose priests who were blameless to cleanse the Sanctuary and to take away the defiled stones to another location. They decided to pull down the altar of burnt offerings which had been profaned, and they placed the stones outside on the Temple mount in a convenient place, to remain there until a prophet would come who could show what to do with them.

Then they took whole stones according to the Law, and built a new altar. They also made new holy vessels, and into the Temple they brought the menorah, and the altar of incense and the table. And on the 25th day of Kislev, they offered sacrifice according to the Law upon the new altar of burnt offerings which they had made.

Then all the people fell upon their faces, worshiping and praising the God of heaven. Moreover, Judah and the whole congregation of Israel ordained that the days of the dedication of the altar should be kept in their season from year to year over a period of eight days, from the 25th day of Kislev, with joy and gladness.”

(1 Macc. 4:42-47,49,52-53,55,59)

The word translated as “dedication” is the Hebrew word *hanukkah*. It describes a very biblical concept—putting Adonai first, meaning worshiping Him alone in the manner He has declared, which at that time, meant at the temple in Jerusalem. So the Temple was dedicated once again for the pure worship of Adonai on the 25th of Kislev, 164 B.C. And ever since that time, these days have been commemorated as the holiday of Hanukkah.

Two centuries after the events of the Hanukkah story, the tenth chapter of John describes what took place at the time of the annual commemoration. At that time, the issue of the defiled altar stones had not been resolved because no prophet had arisen to tell the people what to do with them.

This altar was much more than a simple pile of stones. It was 48 feet square at the base and 15 feet high, for a total of 27,000 cubic feet of stone. The dilemma of the Maccabees was that they had no explicit basis in the Torah to guide them in dealing with this massive collection of stones. These stones had received many sacrifices to God, just as He had ordained, which made them holy. But because these stones had received a pagan sacrifice, they were also defiled. The Maccabees knew they could no longer use them for sacrifices. But neither could they just discard them by dumping them in the valley of Gehenna below, which was like a trash heap. So they remained at the same “convenient place” on the temple mount as recorded in 1 Maccabees.

It was commonly believed that the Messiah would be the prophet who would solve the dilemma. The stones became a primary means for indicating a person’s qualification as the Messiah.

John 10:23 tells us that Yeshua was walking in the shelter of Solomon’s porch or portico or colonnade. This structure had two rows of columns and it formed a perimeter on the Temple Mount around the Temple itself. This was a popular place for people to gather for discussions. This portion named after Solomon was on the east side of the Temple.

Of all the places on the Temple mount, the area adjacent to Solomon’s porch was the most convenient place to put the stones. It was secure, but it was also the furthest point away from the temple itself, as well as from the busy entrance to the temple mount, and from the Royal Stoa, which was the central hub for commerce and residential quarters.

So as Yeshua was walking along this area during Hanukkah, it is likely that He would have looked at this pile of stones, as would have been common on the day of Hanukkah in those days. Everyone knew about the tradition of a great prophet—the Messiah—being the one to declare what to do with the stones. So, a group of people who had been watching Yeshua confronted him with this very issue. John 10:24 tells us:

Judeans therefore gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, “How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

If ever there was a time to demonstrate your Messianic credentials, this was it. It was the 25th of Kislev, and the pile of altar stones was right there. All he had to do was to give a compelling answer for what to do with them. But He would not play their game. His concern was not what to do with a pile of stones. His burden was for their hearts of stone. He spoke directly to this issue by replying:

Yeshua answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father’s name, these bear witness of Me. But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep.”
(vv. 25-26)

Later in their dialogue, Yeshua gave the strongest possible testimony of His qualification as the Messiah by boldly declaring in verse 30: “I and the Father are one.” The response of His audience reveals that they had no interest in searching the Scriptures to see if such a statement could be true. Instead, according to verse 31, they “took up stones again to stone Him.”

The irony is that stones were actually used to indicate who people were. But it was not about the Messiah doing the revealing. It was people who rejected the Messiah who was standing right in front of them.