

Observations About Hanukkah

(Notes originally from Theology Pub topic for 12/20/2011, revised for sermon on 12/1/2013)

This year, American Jews are celebrating a special coincidence, Thanksgivikkah; it is one of the rare times when Hanukkah (normally in December) falls on Thanksgiving, running 8 days from the day before Thanksgiving until December 5th. Hanukkah was a celebration of the purification of the temple from the “abomination” of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. This festival had been in place for well over a hundred years prior to the time of Christ (starting around 165 BC). It is mentioned one time in the New Testament, in John 10:22, but nowhere else (including the OT specifications of feasts and holidays). Since this celebration begins on the 25th of Chislev (the Jewish December) and runs for 8 days, which is typically overlaps the middle to end of December, there is quite a bit of confusion generally about the relationship between Hanukkah and Christmas. Is Hanukkah an important celebration for Christians and Jews? If so, what relationship (if any) does it have to the “traditional” Christmas celebrating the birth of Christ?

The basic celebration is around the eight days where only one day’s worth of undefiled priestly olive oil burned while the olive oil pressing occurred for new oil. This is the reason for the Menorah. It is not completely clear if the event celebrates oil at the time of this dedication or an earlier miracle, but most sources (particularly the Talmud) point it to the same event. *(There is mention that this tradition is perhaps older than the revolt, dating back to Nehemiah, and that the date was possibly adopted from tradition. I cannot find the specific reference, but it may come from the Second book of Maccabees)*

Jesus’ Birthday, the Reason for the Season?

It is possible that Jesus was born on or around December 25th, but there is strong, if not overwhelming, evidence that the celebration of Jesus birth on this date was adopted to coincide with the fact that this was already a celebration in almost every pagan culture; it was a “redirecting” of the celebration rather than an attempt to eradicate it. (Note that the Hanukkah, or Chanukah, celebration starts on the 25th of Kislev, or Chislev, which rotates through the year and rarely falls exactly on Dec 25th)

The primary misconception is that Christmas and Hanukkah both derive from the Winter Solstice: <http://www.iheu.org/node/2877>

Reality check on common misconceptions: <http://www.christiananswers.net/christmas/mythsaboutchristmas.html>

A secular viewpoint: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas>

A discussion of feasts: <http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Christmas/christmas.html>

The Pagan origins of the holiday: http://www.khouse.org/eneews_article/2003/679/

Could it be that one of the leading reasons Christianity has lost some sense of the break from normative pagan traditions is that our earlier Church leaders overloaded those pagan holiday

festivals with Christian meaning? No wonder that some see a correlation with the birth of the sun and the “birth of the son” and say that Jesus is just another myth...

“December 25 was also considered to be the birth date of the Iranian mystery god Mithra, the god of light and contracts. A once-minor god of the Persian pantheon, Roman soldiers adopted Mithra as the manly man's hero, a divinity of fidelity, manliness, and bravery. Women were excluded from the caves where men worshipped Mithra through secret rituals.” (quote from Chuck Missler, K-House)

So while (as pointed out in one of the links) it is possible that Jesus was born on December 25th, it is unlikely. Various scholars have reasons for pointing to either spring or fall, but likely not winter, however if it was critical God would have made it clear - the reality is we don't celebrate Christ's birth but His death and resurrection as our pinnacle event in history. Even so, most of the world sees the way we celebrate Christmas far surpassing what we proclaim about Easter. Is there any surprise that we see a battle about the reason for this particular season? What goes around comes around. So then what is the correlation between this date and Hanukkah?

Relationship to other Jewish Feasts

It is very important that this feast is added to the 7 feasts of Scripture. I'm not making any judgment on the feast, but it is not a “scriptural” feast like the other 7. A big part of this reason is the date of its origin – after the close of the prophets and before the opening of the New Testament. There is a reasonable amount of documentation about this period, including the apocryphal books* of First and Second Maccabees (note the different spellings all refer to the same thing). Each of the 7 other feasts is loaded with meaning, thus it is quite tempting to load meaning into this feast as well; however, I want to be careful to point it out that any kind of meaning that we might draw from the organization of this particular feast is by necessity not the same, since we have no scripture specifically describing it – it may be significant, but it is also different.

**Saving the discussion about apocryphal books for later, but for reference:*

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Maccabees

The Revolt of the Clan Maccabeus

In order to understand the significance of the Holiday, one must also get a grasp of the split that was starting to occur inside of Judea. This once had originally been a slave clan, freed, become a great nation, had been subjugated, rebuilt, and then had become part of the global empires in later years. Most Christians gloss over the historical importance of the Old Testament in lining up Israel as the nation from which the Messiah would come. Why was the temple important, or the line of David, or the prophecy about Judah? The purity of the temple was a key part of their national identity in the centuries leading up to the time of Christ. You have to follow the whole of Jewish history to understand the original rebuilding of the temple, however, because this was not just national but also racial and personal identity, there is great significance to the idea that Hanukkah is a celebration of the temple cleansing:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanukkah>

Berean Church of Huntsville

One should understand what the Maccabean revolt was and the environment it set:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maccabean_Revolt

So a couple of key points here are who were the Maccabeus family, what were they cleansing the temple from (who was the Epiphany guy), and what was the general environment of Judea as a result of this whole scenario? The above read from Wikipedia is pretty good as an overview, without giving too much away about the religious implications of the event. However, another point of view can be found here, including a major portion of the later discussion about how this reference comes up again:

<http://www.khouse.org/articles/2004/556/>

The Feast at the Time of Christ

The reference in the New Testament, the term to refer to the feast is exclusive, used only once:

<http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G1456&t=KJV>

Christ himself actually points to a couple of other events from this period, again pointing to the tumult of the day:

- Each one pick up your own cross: (ref to the massacre in Judea a generation earlier)
- Do not hide your light (a reference to Persian rule to hide lights from public display)
- The abomination of desolation: (end times reference, also recounting what had occurred with Antiochus Epiphany)
- References to olive oil, olive trees, the passing of the covenant, and the lamp of the temple.
- You can even see the references to Peter as if he saw himself as a new Maccabee

(Note: a glance at the timeline on the Wikipedia Hanukkah page shows several of these driving events, just not the Christian references back to them.)

Hellenism

It appears that the first time the terms “Judaism” and “Hellenism” are used is in the Second book of Maccabees! The issue of Hellenization is a huge topic in conjecture by various folks in biblical history; in fact, this is the issue that many claim was at the heart of much of the NT writings by Paul (neither circumcision or not, etc.) because he refers so often to not relenting to the “Judaizers” by falling back to the law. Many would claim that the Christian doctrine was basically the fallout of uniting Jews into Roman thought after the destruction of the temple. The book of Romans itself reads quite differently on this count, as do all of Paul’s letters if you actually read them. In fact, one of the main issues with “Hellenism” was the acceptance of all kinds of idol worship, an issue covered in great detail in the letters to the Corinthians.

Nonetheless the common misconception is out there that Christianity was an outgrowth of the failed prior attempts and synchronizing the Jewish state into the “world” system. Easy question: if that is true, why execute Christians en masse after the destruction of the temple? Also of

note: The alliance with Rome was a RESULT of the expelling of the Greeks... thus it was anti-hellenism that was creating the resurgence of national identity in Israel in anticipation of the coming Messiah.

The Scepter of Judah and the Second Temple

It is also significant to note that several specific prophecies were seen by the ancient Jewish rabbis (evidenced in their writings) that the Messiah must come in the second temple and prior to the removal of Judah's scepter. During the entire time of the captivity and the wars following, the Jewish people kept their tribal identities and ability to enforce Jewish law. Also, the second temple, key to certain prophetic views of the rabbis in this timeframe, never fell but also never had a record of being blessed with the Shekina glory as was expected. Anticipation had grown until 6 AD when the rabbis proclaimed "Woe unto us for the scepter has departed from Judah and the Messiah has not come"! It was at that time that Rome placed a Prefect (governor) named Coponius over the people and took away their right to assemble courts, most notably the Sanhedrin, without permission - including their right to judge capital offenses (death penalty, called the *jus gladii*) that was associated with the "scepter" of a ruler. The Talmud records that over 40 years prior to the destruction of the temple, the rights of capital punishment were removed, so this is the Jewish understanding, not the Christian overlay, that leads to the clarity that the time had passed for the fulfillment of this prophecy. This placed prophetically the Messiah (in the understanding of the early rabbis) as having to arrive first, making the potential candidates limited to someone born before 6 AD and presented as king prior to the destruction of the temple in AD 70 (by about 40 years). This is only one of several key prophecies about this specific timing, but sufficient to cover why Hanukkah is important to study! Some history lessons about the time of Messiah's arrival:

http://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/eastman_mark/messiah/sfm_06.cfm

<http://www.jewsforjesus.org/jffforums/thread-9793.html>

<http://www.khouse.org/articles/1999/187/>

The Hasmoneans

The split in the bible is quite clear with Herod and the rest of the Jewish leadership, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Samaritans. But it is not often clear to the modern reader where all these various factions came from and who they are. It was also not quite clear to the average Roman who was Jewish and who was not, so this is not a modern issue; however, it is a matter of history that neither the Herodian kings (who were Idumean, like Samaritans not considered clean in the eyes of Jews) nor the previous Hasmonean kings were universally received as having the right to rule. This was the reason behind the "slam" the Persian Magi made on Herod in Mat 2:2, "**Where is He who has been born King of the Jews!**" The reason Herod was troubled is because he was not born king. There was not just one clan of "Jew" in the time of Christ, even if it was not clear to the outside observer. What was clear is that the seeds of revolt were so hot after the Maccabean revolt period that Rome had constant trouble with uprisings in Judea, which culminated in the destruction of the temple in 70 AD that

Hanukkah celebrates the cleansing of about 200 years earlier. It was this turmoil that, with the underpinnings of revolution, the promised Messiah was hoped for. This season is certainly the advent, but for much deeper reasons than are often taught. It was not a baby that Herod feared, it was a coming king that would displace his rejected vassal dynasty with a Davidic dynasty. What's more, the new king was said to rule the whole world. Forever.

Jesus, Son of God?

My dad use to tell me that Jesus never claimed to be God... Then why did the Jewish leaders seek to stone him?

At that time the Feast of Dedication [Hanukkah] took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly. Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one." The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?" The Jews answered him, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God." Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came-and Scripture cannot be broken- do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." (John 10:22-38)

The entire region was a buzz waiting for the Messiah. They were expecting God to move amongst them. They were expecting a revolution, a king. They were just not expecting God to actually **be** amongst them. Christ did more than claim to be King. He claimed to be God. For this he was crucified. For **us** he was crucified.