



The Hanukkah Question

By Steve Cohen

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The Hanukkah Question: Was Jesus the Promised Messiah?

Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication, is marked over the same eight days every year. Because the Jewish calendar is a lunar one, the dates seem to move relative to our Gregorian calendar. But Hanukkah is really on the same eight days each year.

Hanukkah is a minor Jewish festival (meaning that work is permitted throughout the festival.) The holiday originated when Judah the Maccabee and his followers were victorious in battle in the village of Modi'in, just outside of Jerusalem. They defeated the Syrian King Antiochus IV. Antiochus' often eccentric behavior, capricious actions and even insanity led some of his contemporaries to call him Epimanes ("The Mad One"), a word play on his title Epiphanes (meaning God manifest).

Following this military victory in 165 b.c.e., the reclaimed Temple was cleansed and prepared for rededication. The Hebrew word Hanukkah means "dedication." When the sacred temple Menorah (candelabra) was relit, there was only enough sacred oil to burn for one day. Yet, according to tradition, the oil miraculously lasted eight days until more purified oil could be found.

A lesser known story from the Apocrypha tells of the beautiful widow Judith who plied enemy Assyrian General Holofernes with cheese and wine until he fell into a drunken stupor. Judith beheaded the general in his sleep, and his soldiers fled in fear, thus saving her people from the Assyrians. This story is the subject of much renowned artwork.

In remembrance of the miracle of the oil, a candle is lit each of the eight days of Hanukkah. Children receive gifts of gelt (in remembrance of the coins minted by the new independent Maccabee state) or money and play games of dreidel (a spinning four-sided top.)

Hanukkah is mentioned only one place in the entire Bible, John 10:22-31.

Then came the Festival of Dedication [Hanukkah] at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon's Colonnade. The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one." Again his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" "We are not stoning you for any good work," they replied, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God."

The wicked Antiochus was just a man who defiantly blasphemed the Lord claiming to be God. He desecrated the Temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar and erected statues of Zeus inside the Holy of Holies.

Jesus, who is God incarnate, was being accused of the same blasphemy and the Jewish leaders threatened to stone him. The irony is that he is God who chose to become man for our salvation.



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Today, the Hanukkah question, “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly,” is NOT being asked because according to tradition, the matter has already been settled – the Messiah has NOT come yet, we are still waiting.

The key for believers in Y’shua at this beautiful festival season is not only to light candles and eat potato latkes but to invite others to hear of the Messiah who is God incarnate.

The Dreidel

It is Jewish tradition to play with a four-sided top that spins called a dreidel. Each side has a Hebrew letter, a Nun, Gimmel, He or Shin. These four letters stand for the saying Nes Gadol Haya Shom – meaning “a great miracle happened there”. This is referring to the tradition that the oil lighting the Menorah was only enough to last for one day, yet it lasted for eight, the time it took to secure Kosher oil for use in the Temple.

In Israel, the letters are slightly different, they are a Nun, Gimmel, He and Pey - for Nes Gadol Hayah Po – a great miracle happened here! As believers in Jesus, we too can say that a great miracle has happened here in our hearts through faith.

Gifts were not always exchanged at Hanukkah. However since the festival is around the Christmas season when gentile boys and girls are recipients of gifts under the tree, it has become tradition to exchange modest gifts each of the eight nights of Hanukkah.

In Jesus day, there were two schools of thought regarding the lighting of the menorah. The school of Rabbi Shammai called for eight lights to be lit the first night and then one less light each night until just one is lit. The school of Hillel called for the adding of lights each night. Today we follow the school of Hillel and add lights each night. Children traditionally light the Shamesh candle (the helper and tallest in the nine branched Hanukkah Menorah – sometimes called a Hanukkiah) and then use it to light the others.

Jesus answered the Hanukkah question by announcing He is God and for that we are most thankful! He loves us so much that he died so that we might live with Him forever.

Happy Hanukkah!



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For More Information

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