

Hanukkah and the Humility of Mary

Hanukkah means "dedication" because it marks the re-dedication of the Temple by the Maccabees after it was desecrated by Antiochus in 163 B.C.

The 8-day festival was patterned after the 8-day Feast of Tabernacles, and deemed a "festival of lights."

It falls on the 25th of Kislev, just around the winter solstice, the darkest time of the year.

The best scholarship points to the birth of Christ not at Christmas but closer to the feast of Rosh Hashanah in the fall. Thus, Hanukkah would mark the time of Christ's conception 9 months before.

The story of the first Hanukkah is described in 1 and 2 Maccabees. After Alexander the Great's death, his vast empire was divided up among his generals. Seleucus received the area of Babylon, and began extending it to the surrounding areas, including Israel. The Seleucid king Antiochus IV later outlawed Jewish customs like circumcision and Torah reading, and even sacrificed a pig on the altar in the Temple. He wanted the Jews to assimilate and adopt Greek customs. Some of them did. But the Maccabee family resisted and began a revolt against their oppressors. In 165 B. C. after three years of war they miraculously defeated the much larger army.

Once Jerusalem was in their control, they began to cleanse the Temple of impurities, build a new altar and revive the Temple sacrifices and rituals. But central to all of them was the special oil used to light the Lampstand that was placed in the Holy Place, just outside the Holy of Holies.

According to the traditional story, when the Maccabees filled the Temple lamps with oil, they only had enough for one day's time. It would take eight days to secure more of the oil, which had to be specially prepared. Miraculously, the one-day supply of oil lasted the entire eight days. (Talmud, Shabbat 21b)

This day of purification of the Temple fell on the very day on which the Temple had been profaned by the Seleucids, the twenty-fifth of the same month, Kislev.

"They kept eight festal days with rejoicing, in the manner of the feast of Tabernacles... Then, carrying branches, leafy boughs and palms, they offered hymns to Him who had brought the cleansing of His own Holy Place to a happy outcome. They also decreed by public edict, ratified by vote, that the whole Jewish nation should celebrate those same days every year." (2 Maccabees 10:1-8)

Note that in **Exodus 39**, the vessels, tapestries, wall sections and other components of the Tabernacle were completed on the 25th of Chislev (see Tur Orach Chaim 684), but the actual assembly of the Tabernacle was delayed until the first of Nisan. Thus the Torah reading for every day of Hanukkah are the offerings and gifts of the tribal princes described in **Numbers 7**.

Also, the lighting of the Lampstand preceded the consecration of the Levites:

- **Numbers 8:2-3** - "Speak unto Aaron, and say unto him, When thou lightest the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light over against the candlestick. And Aaron did so; he lighted the lamps thereof over against the candlestick, as the LORD commanded Moses." - **Numbers 8:5** - "And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Take the Levites from among the children of Israel, and cleanse them...."

The Feast of Dedication

Later during Jesus' ministry, the Jews were again oppressed, this time by Roman armies, and they looked for deliverance from a Messiah who would defeat their enemies like the Maccabees had.

Hanukkah is mentioned specifically in the New Testament in John 10 — "At that time [when Jesus was in Jerusalem] the Feast of Dedication took place... it was winter, and Jesus was walking in the Temple..." (**John 10:22-23**).

It's interesting that the Jewish people were celebrating their liberation from the oppression of Antiochus while they were still under the oppression of the Romans. They were looking for a Messiah — perhaps another Judah Maccabeus the Hammer — to deliver them from Roman rule. This is why they asked Jesus, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly" (**John 10:24**).

Jesus used the opportunity of this question to clearly assert that He was the long awaited Messiah. "I and the Father are one," He declared (**John 10:30**). But that was not the answer they were looking for, so they "took up stones again to stone Him" (**John 10:31**). They wanted a military deliverer, not a spiritual one.

The Menorah

Today, Jews celebrate Hanukkah by lighting a special menorah with nine lights - a central candle called the Shammash (meaning "the servant" candle) which is used to light the eight others surrounding it. It is supposed to point back to the Lampstand in the Temple on which the miracle of the oil took place.

(After the destruction of the Temple, Jews were forbidden to make replicas of the Temple Lampstand, which had seven branches, so they created one with nine to use on Hanukkah.

The menorah must be placed where its light can be seen from outside. But its light cannot be used for anything other than to gaze upon and ponder the awe of God and be reminded of God's miraculous deliverance of Israel.

Messiah the Light of the World

From our point of view, this all foreshadowed the coming of Messiah, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary around the time of Hanukkah.

We remember the prophecy of the birth of Jesus by John the Baptist's father Zacharias:

“The Sunrise from on high shall visit us, To shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace.” (**Luke 1:78-79**)

Jesus said of Himself:

- **John 8:12** - "Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

On Hanukkah, Jewish children play a game with a dreidel, a four-sided top with Hebrew letters that stand for "A Great Miracle Happened Here."

Other miracles also traditionally happened during the time when Hanukkah is celebrated, each involving either something miraculously irrational or using a woman as a symbol of weakness overcoming strength.

Fire Consumes Nehemiah's Sacrifice

- **2 Maccabees 1:18** - “Since on the twenty-fifth day of Chislew we shall celebrate the purification of the temple, we thought it necessary to notify you, in order that you also may celebrate the Festival of Booths[a] and the fire given when Nehemiah, who built the temple and the altar, offered sacrifices.

19 “For when our ancestors were being led captive to Persia, the pious priests of that time took some of the fire of the altar and secretly hid it in the hollow of a dry cistern, where they took such precautions that the place was unknown to anyone. 20 But after many years had passed, when it pleased God, Nehemiah, having been commissioned by the king of Persia, sent the descendants of the priests who had hidden the fire to get it. And when they reported to us that they had not found fire but only a thick liquid, he ordered them to dip it out and bring it. 21 When the materials for the sacrifices were presented, Nehemiah ordered the priests to sprinkle the liquid on the wood and on the things laid upon it. 22 When this had been done and some time had passed, and when the sun, which had been clouded over, shone out, a great fire blazed up, so that all marveled. 23 And while the sacrifice was being consumed, the priests offered prayer—the priests and everyone. Jonathan led, and the rest responded, as did Nehemiah. 24 The prayer was to this effect:

“O Lord, Lord God, Creator of all things, you are awe-inspiring and strong and just and merciful; you alone are king and are kind; 25 you alone are bountiful; you alone are just and almighty and eternal. You rescue Israel from every evil; you chose the ancestors and consecrated them. 26 Accept this sacrifice on behalf of all your people Israel and preserve your portion and make it holy. 27 Gather together our scattered people; set free those who are slaves among the nations; look on those who are rejected and

despised; and let the nations know that you are our God. 28 Punish those who oppress and are insolent with pride. 29 Plant your people in your holy place, as Moses promised.”

30 “Then the priests sang the hymns. 31 After the materials of the sacrifice had been consumed, Nehemiah ordered that the liquid that was left should be poured on large stones. 32 When this was done, a flame blazed up, but when the light from the altar shone back, it went out. 33 When this matter became known and it was reported to the king of the Persians that, in the place where the exiled priests had hidden the fire, the liquid had appeared with which Nehemiah and his associates had burned the materials of the sacrifice, 34 the king investigated the matter and enclosed the place and made it sacred. 35 And with those persons whom the king favored he exchanged many excellent gifts. 36 Nehemiah and his associates called this “nephthar,” which means purification, but by most people it is called “naphtha.”

Judith Beheads Holofernes

<http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Judith+8-16>

Judith, a daring and beautiful widow, is upset with her Jewish countrymen for not trusting God to deliver them from their foreign conquerors. She goes with her loyal maid to the camp of the enemy general, Holofernes, with whom she slowly ingratiates herself, promising him information on the Israelites. Gaining his trust, she is allowed access to his tent one night as he lies in a drunken stupor. She decapitates him, then takes his head back to her fearful countrymen. The Assyrians, having lost their leader, disperse, and Israel is saved.

"Your strength does not depend on numbers, nor your might on the powerful. But you are the God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, savior of those without hope." (**Judith 9:11**)

Zechariah's Vision

The prophet Zechariah gives us the theme of Hanukkah while describing a vision of the Temple Lampstand surrounded by two olive trees:

- **Zechariah 4:6** - "Then he answered and spake unto me, saying, This is the word of the Lord unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.

7 "Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain: and he shall bring forth the headstone thereof with shoutings, crying, Grace, grace unto it.

8 "Moreover the word of the Lord came unto me, saying,

9 "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also finish it; and thou shalt know that the Lord of hosts hath sent me unto you.

10 "For who hath despised the day of small things? for they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel with those seven; they are the eyes of the Lord, which run to and fro through the whole earth."

Jesus is Conceived in Mary through the Holy Spirit

Luke 1:26-38

Matthew 1:18-25

On Hanukkah, Women Rest

Hanukkah can be read as two phrases: 'Chanu' and 'ka'. 'Chanu' means "they rested" and 'ka' is comprised of the letters 'kaf' and 'hey' which together have the numerical value of 25. This alludes to the fact that the Jews were relieved of their oppression on the 25th day of the month of Kislev, which is Hanukkah.

Jews tie this to God's using Judith to save the Israelites from the invading army.

But in all these cases, it points to believers taking a risk, trusting God, being at rest while He does everything.

The Humility of Mary - The Virgin as a Sign

Isaiah 7:14 - "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

Matthew 1:22-23 - "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us."

Was Mary a Virgin?

The word for virgin in **Isaiah 7:14** is *almah*, which signifies a young woman. But Matthew further explains what that meant in relation to Mary.

Yichud is a term that describes the period when a newly wed couple would consummate the marriage directly after the chuppah canopy ceremony by going into a private room. It comes from the Hebrew root *yachad*, which means "join together."

Matthew 1:18 - "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of

the Holy Ghost."

So "before they came together" (synerchomai - "together," but it can also mean conjugal cohabitation).

- **1 Corinthians 7:5** - "Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together (synerchomai) again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency."

The phrase is probably referring to this *yichud* - the point of consummation. This means that Mary was a virgin.

Following courtship and the completion of the marriage contract (Tob 7:14), the marriage was considered established: the woman had passed from her father's authority to that of her husband. But about a year typically passed before the woman moved from her parents' house to her husband's house (m. Ketub. 5:2; m. Ned. 10:5; b. Ketub. 57b). During that time, although the marriage was not yet consummated, the woman was 'wife' (Deut 20:7; 28:30; Judg 14:15; 15:1; 2 Sam 3:14) and she could become a widow (m. Yeb. 4:10; 6:4; m. Ketub. 1:2) or be punished for adultery (Deut 22:23-4; 11QTemple 61). - NET Bible

The virgin birth is mysterious, but it was not similar to mythical stories in which a god is the sexual partner of a human. Instead, the idea is that the Spirit intervened as the creative force that would "come upon" her and "overshadow" or "envelop" her (Luke 1:35).

The Holy Spirit is described as active in the original creation (Gen 1:2; Ps 33:6), active in the giving of life (Ps 104:30; Isa 32:15; Ezek 37:1-14), and having an eschatological role in connection with the Messiah (Isa 11:2; 42:1; 61:1).

A Second Eve

Mary is often seen as an antitype to Eve.

Eve was called the "mother of all living," while Mary became the "mother of all who truly live" i.e. those believing in her son.

Eve's disobedience after falling for the serpent's deception, led to the fall. When God promised to send a Deliverer who would crush the head of the serpent's seed, Eve expected that she would give birth to him.

When Cain was born, she cried, "I have gotten a man from the LORD." In the Hebrew she just says, "I have gotten a man, the Lord."

Mary by contrast was "highly favored" by God and displayed great humility, at first confused but ultimately believing the angel's message (**Luke 1**). She had the honor of giving birth to the Deliverer, the Messiah, Jesus.

“Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel” (**Isaiah 7:14**) or “God With Us.”

[Jewish traditions connect this verse with King Hezekiah (Justin, Dial. 43; Exod. Rab. on 12:29; Num. Rab. on 7:48) who was regarded by some rabbinical texts as an almost-Messiah because of his piety. Christians saw a prophecy of Jesus]

The Hanukkah Miracle

Remember that on Hanukkah, the menorah lamp was to be placed where it could be seen from outside. Its light was not to be used for anything, but to be gazed at and be reminded of the great miracle of the oil lasting eight days, keeping the Temple Lampstand burning.

It makes perfect sense that Mary would be gazing at the Hanukkah lamp when the angel appears to announce the Light of Jesus coming into the world, through her.

Mary was asked to do what all the other heroes of Hanukkah were asked - to risk something by believing in God's faithfulness.

Her risk was her reputation, experiencing a miraculous conception as a virgin before she was married, which resulted in a pregnancy that was socially unacceptable.

- Judah Maccabeus risked breaking the Law if the lamp was not kept burning after he lit it.
- Nehemiah poured what could have been an unclean, illegal substance on the altar to light the fire. (Recall that Nadab and Abihu were killed for offering “strange fire” on the altar - **Leviticus 10:1**)
- Judith like Mary risked her life, but also her reputation to pretend to sleep with Holofernese before she decapitated him.

It's the same with us. To experience Jesus born in us, we must risk - to present ourselves as living sacrifices, reckoning ourselves to be dead in the belief Christ's resurrection life will give us new and eternal life as we arise from the waters of baptism.

The Magnificat

To take that risk, Mary possessed an inner faith and humility that is expressed in her Magnificat, recorded in Luke 1:46–55.

Read **Luke 1:46–55**

God uses weak and broken vessels to accomplish His will.

- **Zechariah 4:6, 10** - "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts....For who hath despised the day of small things?"

- **1 Corinthians 1:27-29** - "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence."

Jesus didn't spring full grown clothed with a full set of armor from the forehead of Zeus, like Athena did in Greek myth. He began life as we do, as a speck of protoplasm, a miraculously fertilized embryo, but still just an embryo that was at risk from the moment the Holy Spirit hovered over Mary in conception. He came forth covered with blood and embryonic fluid, followed by afterbirth, in the stable at the base of the Tower of of the Flock (Migdal Eder) surrounded by animals.

His vulnerability is astounding, considering He was God fully, as well as fully man.

The extent of His emptying is described in Paul's letter to the Philippians.

- **Philippians 2:7-11** - "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

But first, Mary had to be vulnerable as well. Women do no work and are honored on Hanukkah, and Mary's Magnificat gives us the reason.

The Blessing:

"Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who sanctified us by His Torah and commanded us to kindle the light of Hanukkah."