



Hebrew Roots

Yeshua and the Feast of Chanukah

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In John 10:22, 23 we read, “Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Yeshua was in the temple area walking in Solomon’s Colonnade.” Readers of the New Testament often think that this passage is just a simple descriptive predicate and will continue on as if these words were unimportant. Most of the time, they do not really understand them. In these verses of the Gospel of John, we see that Yeshua paid special attention to the feast of Chanukah.

Jewish Background of John 10:22, 23

People are often surprised to hear that Yeshua was in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Chanukah. Most Christians, even those who have read the Gospel of John many times, do not see Chanukah mentioned in this text. This is not because they would disagree with such an interpretation, but because they do not ask themselves any questions about this text and do not know the Jewish background of the Gospel. Reading this text, Christians understand it as if there were a special celebration for the dedication of the first Temple built by Solomon or after the renovation of the second Temple by Herod the Great.

Anyone who lives in Israel and reads the text in Hebrew has no doubt about the meaning of these verses. The text refers to Chanukah, which is the specific designation for the Feast of Dedication or Festival of Lights which was instituted by the Jews after the purification of the Temple which was desecrated by Antiochus Epiphanes around 160 B.C.E.

To appreciate the full meaning of this text we should first understand

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what John intended to say. The text gives us two statements: “Then came the Feast of Dedication,” and “It was winter.” Why did John feel the need to specify further that “it was winter”?

Indeed the dedication feast identified here, Chanukah, is a winter feast. Chanukah occurred on the 25th of the Jewish month of Kislev, often taking place at the same time as Christmas.

The statement, “it was winter” implies that it was difficult for Yeshua to be there in Jerusalem

for Chanukah. I am living in Jerusalem. I like the climate of Israel very much. For much of the year it is hot and quite dry. However, the most difficult season in Israel, especially in Jerusalem, is winter, from December to March. Jerusalem is built on the mountain, so it is often rainy, windy, and cold. Yeshua was not living in Jerusalem. He lived in the Galilean town of Capernaum near the Kinnereth. Galilee is the best place to live during the winter in Israel. The temperature never goes below about 60 degrees Fahrenheit. Even though it was winter, Yeshua and His disciples walked more than 140 miles to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Chanukah.

Thus Chanukah must have been important for Yeshua. The Jewish calendar is full of feasts; the most important of them are the feasts commanded by God in the Torah. The second category of feasts are those celebrations that were instituted by the Jewish people during their history. These are called “minor feasts.” Everybody who knows the Jewish calendar knows that of all the biblical feasts and sacred assemblies, the holiest and most important day for the Jewish people is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Yet nowhere do the

gospels tell us that Yeshua was in Jerusalem during Yom Kippur, though He was there for the Feast of Tabernacles which is only five days after Yom Kippur. This point gives even more importance to Chanukah.

Chanukah, Feast of Dedication

The feast of Chanukah is also called the Feast of Dedication or the Festival of Lights. Because Chanukah occurs approximately at the same time as Christmas, most people think that Chanukah is the Jewish Christmas. It is not. Chanukah is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, but in the apocryphal book of the Maccabees. Chanukah celebrates a great miracle God performed for the people of Israel during the time of Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century before the common era. The Jewish people had lost their independence a long time before in the sixth century when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, destroyed the temple of Jerusalem and deported the people of Israel far away from their homeland. In the following century, the Medo-Persians conquered Babylon and became the new rulers of the Middle East. In the fourth century B.C.E., Alexander the Great began his conquests and expanded the Greek empire. After Alexander's death, Antiochus Epiphanes was one of the Greek rulers. He came to Judea, entered Jerusalem, and the Temple, which had been rebuilt during the Medo-Persian period. Antiochus was a dictator who wanted his subjects to be Greek by culture and religion. He wanted to destroy the Jewish faith by forbidding its practice. He banned the most visible practice of Judaism, the keeping of Shabbat, and he desecrated the Temple by erecting pagan idols and sacrificing pigs on its altar.

Those who practiced Judaism were killed. This was a very difficult time for the Jewish people.

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Here we understand the problem for the Jewish people. If Antiochus had been successful, the Jewish people may have been destroyed, the Jewish faith lost, and the Messiah might not have come as was prophesied. The Jews were sure that God was faithful to His promises. He said the Messiah would come through David's seed and would enter His Temple. A family of priests, the Hashmonim, the Maccabees, who were living in the small town of Modi'in, were spiritually hurt by this attempt to destroy their faith and they fought against Antiochus, recaptured Jerusalem, and drove the Greeks out of Israel. The priests of Israel started to clean and to purify the temple in order to celebrate the divine services. However, to rededicate the Temple they needed sacred oil for the candelabra. They did not have any sacred oil and they needed a week to prepare that oil. While cleaning a storage room of the Temple, a priest found a very small phial of sacred oil, which was enough for only one day. It was the 25th day of the month of Kislev. The priests celebrated a service of dedication. They lit the Menorah with that small amount of oil. Although there was only enough for one day, it lasted eight days, which gave enough time to process the holy oil. Chanukah commemorates this miracle of the lights. That is why the candelabra of Chanukah has nine candles. One called the *chamash* is used to light

the eight others which symbolize the eight days of the miracle.

Yeshua and Chanukah

We understand the importance of this celebration and why Yeshua wanted to be in Jerusalem for the celebration of Chanukah. If the Jewish people had accepted the rule of the Greeks and not revolted against this attempt to destroy Judaism, the temple of Jerusalem at the time of Yeshua would have been a pagan temple and many prophecies in relation to the Mashiach could not have been fulfilled by Yeshua who is the Mashiach of Israel. That is why Yeshua wanted to be in Jerusalem for the celebration of Chanukah and even used the symbol of Chanukah, the light, to teach many spiritual lessons to His listeners.

The gospel introduced Yeshua as the light: "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world" (John 1:9) and "In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it" (John 1:4, 5). Yeshua confirmed this affirmation in John 9:5: "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." And His disciples were asked to be a light in this world: "You are the light of the world" (Matt 5:14).

Chanukah commemorates the re-dedication of the Temple, and it serves as a reminder that we too must rededicate our lives to the Lord. We must be dedicated to serving Him, letting our "light shine before men" (Matt 5:16).