



Messianic Insights from the Jewish Feast of Hanukkah

Part One: “Come See Messiah, ‘The Light’ of the World”!

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Prologue: As Christians celebrate Christmas (traditionally at the end of December), Jewish communities around the world share in the Festival of Hanukkah over eight days, beginning on 25th Kislev. This is the year 5778 for Jewish participants and their celebrations correspond to the evening of 12th - 20th December 2017 on the Gregorian calendar.

This current edition of *The Australian Shofar* investigates what the Jewish celebrations of Hanukkah involve and why. The study shows the inter-relatedness of this “Feast of Dedication” (otherwise designated the “Festival of Lights”), in regard to Jesus who claimed two arresting facts. First, He avowed that He is “the Light of the World” (Jn. 8:12). Secondly, that He and His Father (God) are “one” (Jn. 10:30). The implication is clear: He is the Messiah as promised in the Jewish Scriptures!

A novel approach has been adopted in this present edition. Two full time Ministry Representatives of The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry have authored inter-related articles on this informative Festival of Hanukkah. Part One by Deane Woods deals with Messianic overtones in Scripture and invites Jews and Gentiles to “Come See Messiah - ‘The Light’ of the World”! Part Two is written by Kevin Vigus and outlines Messianic Themes in Music and Songs of Hanukkah. In short, he shows that the Messiah of Hanukkah is the “Rock of Ages”!

Hanukkah: “Come See Messiah, ‘The Light’ of the World”!

I. The Sole Scripture mentioning Hanukkah

Amazingly, the only mention of Hanukkah is in the New Testament (ברית חדשה - *brit hadashah*/New Covenant)! It occurred in John’s Gospel:

“Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the Temple, in Solomon’s Porch.” (John 10:22-23)

As we shall observe in carefully studying this passage of Scripture, and noting its Judaic historical context, Jesus wanted His Jewish protagonists to understand a fundamental truth about Himself: He is God and Messiah! (Jn. 10:30; see also 20:30-31).

II. The Story behind Hanukkah

A. Hanukkah sheds light on “the Jews’ Dedication”. The Festival of Hanukkah is an annual Jewish holiday commemorating the rededication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem at the time of the Maccabean Revolt (168 – 165 BC) against the Seleucid Empire. What follows is basically sourced from Wikipedia, [http/ “Hanukkah”](http://“Hanukkah”), *ad loc.*, with emphases added. In effect, the historical record underscores what has been legitimately called “*Jewish Dedication*”!

Judea was part of the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt until 200 BC when King Antiochus III the Great of Syria defeated King Ptolemy V Epiphanes of Egypt at the Battle of Panium. Judea then became part of the Seleucid Empire of Syria. King Antiochus III the Great wanting to conciliate his new Jewish subjects guaranteed their right to “live according to their ancestral customs” and to continue to practice their religion in the Temple of Jerusalem. However, in 175 BC, Antiochus IV “Epiphanes”, the son of Antiochus III, invaded Judea, at the request of the sons of Tobias. The Tobiads, who led the Hellenizing Jewish faction in Jerusalem, were expelled to Syria around 170 BC when the high priest Onias and his pro-Egyptian faction wrested control from them. The exiled Tobiads lobbied Antiochus IV “Epiphanes” to recapture Jerusalem. As Flavius Josephus wrote:

The king being thereto disposed beforehand, complied with them, and came upon the Jews with a great army, and took their city by force, and slew a great multitude of those that favored Ptolemy, and sent out his soldiers to plunder them without mercy. He also spoiled the temple, and put a stop to the constant practice of offering a daily sacrifice of expiation for three years and six months. (Jewish Wars, ad loc.).

When the Second Temple in Jerusalem was looted and services stopped, Judaism was outlawed. In 167 BC, Antiochus ordered an altar to Zeus erected in the Temple. He banned *brit milah* (circumcision) and ordered pigs to be sacrificed at the altar of the temple.

Antiochus’s actions provoked a large-scale revolt. Mattathias, a Jewish priest, and his five sons Jochanan, Simeon, Eleazar, Jonathan,



The Dreidel: a 4-sided spinning top. The Hebrew anacronym translates as: “A great miracle happened there”

and Judah led a rebellion against Antiochus. It started with Mattathias killing first, a Jew who wanted to comply with Antiochus’s order to sacrifice to Zeus, and then a Greek official who was to enforce the government’s behest (1 Mac. 2, 24-25). Judah became known as Yehuda HaMakabi (“Judah the Hammer”). By 166 BC Mattathias had died, and Judah took his place as leader. By 165 BC the Jewish revolt against the Seleucid monarchy was successful. **The Temple was liberated and rededicated. The festival of Hanukkah** was instituted to celebrate this event. Judah ordered the Temple to be cleansed, a new altar to be built in place of the polluted one and new holy vessels to be made. According to the Talmud, unadulterated and undefiled pure olive oil with the seal of the *Cohen Gadol* (High Priest) was needed for the menorah in the Temple, which was required to burn

throughout the night every night. **The story goes that one flask was found with only enough oil to burn for one day, yet it burned for eight days, the time needed to prepare a fresh supply of kosher oil for the menorah. An eight-day festival was declared by the Jewish sages to commemorate this miracle.**

The version of the story in 1 Maccabees states that an eight-day celebration of songs and sacrifices was proclaimed upon re-dedication of the altar.



Hanukkah Candelabrum, with Latke Cakes, Dreidel, gold-foil covered chocolate money, and gifts.

The festival is observed by the kindling of the lights of a unique candelabrum, the nine-branched *menorah* (also called a *Chanukiah/Hanukiah*), one additional light on each night of the holiday, progressing to eight on the final night. The typical menorah consists of eight branches with an additional visually distinct branch. The extra light, with which the others are lit, is called a **shamesh** (Hebrew: שמש, “attendant”/“servant”) and is given a distinct location, either above or below the rest. Other Hanukkah festivities include playing dreidel (a top for spinning) and eating oil-based foods such as doughnuts and latkes (potato cakes).

III. The Significance of Hanukkah and the context of John 10:22

From the foregoing we've noted that Hanukkah throws light on **A**, The “**Jews’ Dedication**”!

B. In turning next to the only reference to Hanukkah in the Bible, something of further dramatic significance may be discerned, viz., **Hanukkah throws light on “Jesus’ Deity”!**

Consider the context carefully:

- Jesus claimed to be the “**True**” **Shepherd** (vss. 1-6)
- He further insisted that He was the “**Good**” **Shepherd** (vss. 7-18)
- Such claims caused “**division**” among the **Jews** listening to Him (vs. 19).
- Some then claimed He was **demon possessed; others disagreed** saying that

His miracles attested to something greater than a demon possessed man (vss. 20-21)

The Jewish Tenach (the “Old Testament” for Christians) spoke much of a Coming One who would be a “True” Shepherd and a “Good Shepherd”. To cite just two instances, the prophets Ezekiel and Zechariah revealed that God would send His Messianic Shepherd to His people to save them (Ezek. 34, especially verses 11 and 22 and Zec. 9-12). Religious Jews of Jesus’ day would have been well *au fait* with these prophecies, yet they were blind to the fact that in Jesus, the prophetic words of their forefathers were being realized in the One now confronting them. He was their promised Messiah!

But the scriptural record rises to an even greater crescendo as to His messianic claims. Dramatically, the next section of John 10 opens with the telling words of Hanukkah: “Now it was the **Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the Temple, in Solomon’s Porch.**” (verses 22-23). **This Messianic Shepherd knows His sheep!** (vss. 24-30)

Jesus’ critics were infuriated! “How long do you keep us in doubt?” they retorted, “if you are the Christ (Messiah/Anointed One), tell us plainly!” (vs. 24).

With the historical context of Hanukkah firmly fixed in our minds, consider the significance of Jesus’ incisive words, in reply:

²⁵ *Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father’s name, they bear witness of Me. ²⁶ But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you.”*²⁷ *My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. ²⁸ And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand. ³⁰ I and My Father are one.”* (Jn. 10: 25-30, emphasis added).

Here indeed is another of Jesus unequivocal claims to “**Deity**”! He is One in essence/ substance with the Father and not only in “*purpose*” as modern day False Cults erroneously interpret this text. The traditional Feast of Dedication would have been clearly in the minds of those critical Jewish listeners. Antiochus IV, “Epiphanes” (God’s manifestation, as his self-acclaimed designation proudly announced) had usurped “Deity” - a blasphemy to monotheistic Jews of his day, and to their physical descendants today. Here was (and is) another “imposter” also following in the train of the one all pious Jews had deliberately renamed “Epimanes” –

the Madman! – and they were not going to let Him get away with such blasphemy. The next verses reads:

³¹ *Then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him. ³² Jesus answered them, “Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you stone Me?” ³³ The Jews answered Him, saying, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God.”*³⁴ *Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, “You are gods!”’ ³⁵ If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), ³⁶ do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?” ³⁷ If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; ³⁸ but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him.” ³⁹ Therefore they sought again to seize Him, but He escaped out of their hand. (Jn. 10:31-39, emphases added).*

The chapter closes with Jesus withdrawing to “Bethany beyond Jordan” where, in direct contrast, many “believed in Him, there” (vss. 41-42).

C. Hanukkah continues to throw light on **The Messianic Shepherd’s salvific “Deliverance”**. Well may we conclude from John 10:1-39 that Jesus is the Messiah! This truth is collaborated by other numerous, corollary Bible verses. Messiah is not only the “*Good Shepherd*” who gives His life in atoning sacrifice for His sheep (Jn. 10:11; 1 Pt. 1:18-20), but He gives (eternal) “*Life in all its fullness*” (Jn. 10:10; 17:3). Moreover, His self-sacrifice in atoning, substitutionary death was not only for the Jewish people, but for “other sheep that are not of this fold” (verse 16; 1 Jn. 2:2). Jesus atoned for the sins of Gentiles, too! Messiah is also the “*Great Shepherd*” in resurrection power (Heb. 13:20-21) and as the “*Chief Shepherd*”, He “*shall appear in glory*” at His Second Advent (1 Pt. 5:4). Meditate on those three messianic designations – all relative to His death, resurrection and Second Coming – and solidly connoted in the original context of Hanukkah – and you have the good news of the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:1-3)!

Conclusion: Whoever may be reading this article – whether Jewish or Gentile friend – there’s no escaping the fact that Hanukkah sheds “light” on messianic and eternal issues. The primary one, of course, is that Jesus is the Divine, Messiah-Shepherd - the “*Light of the world*” (Jn. 8:12).

Maybe you will be singing the happy songs of Hanukkah and enjoying all the associated

festivities again this year, but the question still remains: **Have you really seen “The Light” of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’s Messiah, Jesus?** Perhaps your music preference is still that of Maoz Tzur (as Kevin’s next article will mention) and not be that of the Country & Western genre. It seems to this writer, however, that Hank Williams old gospel song fittingly concludes our first study of Hanukkah. Williams’ song challenges us, as he testified:

I wandered so aimless life filled with sin
I wouldn’t let my dear Savior in;
Then Jesus came like a stranger in the night
Praise the lord I saw the light!

*Chorus: I saw the light I saw the light
No more darkness no more night
Now I’m so happy no sorrow in sight
Praise the Lord I saw the light!*

Just like a blind man I wandered along
Worries and fears I claimed for my own;
Then like the blind man that God gave back
his sight
Praise the Lord I saw the light!

Essentially that’s why Christians and Believing Jews who’ve acknowledged Jesus as the Promised, God-Messiah, celebrate Christmas. The Light of “Emmanuel” came into the world as the Incarnate Being at Bethlehem, and shone in the darkness to dispel “sin and nature’s night” at Calvary. After all, He is depicted in the 9 branch Candelabrum as the “*shamesh*”, the “*Servant*”. If “*lower*” than



Jesus, the Messiah, is THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD! Through His atoning death, He brings LIFE & LIFE to all who believe and receive Him. For this to happen, “the entrance of (His) Word brings light” (Ps. 119:130)

the other 8, then believers see Him as the “*Servant*” (Mk. 10:45; Phil. 2:5-9); if positioned “*higher*”, then this boldly ascribed His “*Exaltation and Glorification*” (Is. 53:1-12; Acts 2:36ff; Phil. 2:9-11)! He is the “*light that lights every man*” (Jn. 1:9). Remember, the Light of Resurrection’s Dawn proclaimed a “*New Day*” for all who believe in Him!

Dear Jewish or Gentile Friend: Come! See “*The Light*” – in all its effulgent glory – in the Person of Jesus!



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Part Two: Hanukkah Music and Messiah - The “Rock of Ages”! Kevin Vigus

Music is at the heart of all good Hanukkah celebrations! It is an integral part of the occasion, communicating both lyric and emotion through song. So, what can we learn from the songs of Hanukkah? I particularly want to look at the most significant song of Hanukkah. It has stood the test of time as the uncontested essential song to any Hanukkah celebration. But first, a scan of the popular songs of Hanukkah...

There are many of what I would call “Fete songs” - which is not surprising since Hanukkah is celebrated very much like a Fete! There are stalls of delicious, *oily* foods such as donuts and latkes; lots of kids’ games and activities - especially the spinning of the dreidel and the winning of chocolate coins. Notice in the photo of the dreidel. It is a four-sided spinning top used especially at Hanukkah. Each side of the dreidel bears a letter of the Hebrew alphabet: נ (Nun), ג (Gimel), ה (He), ש (Shin), which together form the acronym for “נס גדול הוה שמ” (**Nes Gadol Hayah Sham** – “**a great miracle happened there**” - referring, of course to the story of the “*miracle of the oil*” at the rededication of the Temple in 165 BC). Along with these party games, songs aimed to convey the pageantry of such a celebration are joyous and exhilarating! Even the Rabbi’s brief message is presented in the carnival atmosphere at the end of the evening as the *Hanukiah* is lit (the special 9-branch menorah for Hanukkah). Everyone enjoys the light it brings before the darkening sky of evening – like the “*fireworks*” (candle-works!!!) that finish the show.

Thus, there are a good number of songs about spinning dreidels and lighting candles and eating latkes. Many are children’s songs but there are also ones for Jewish dancing (“*Hora Dancing*”), and many for adults also. All tell the story and celebrating the historic occasion when God used the Maccabees to rededicate the temple to the LORD after the horrific desecration of the Greeks.

Pop Music!

Hanukkah songs have also grabbed the

imagination of pop-culture. Hanukkah song-sensations include *Light One Candle* (by Peter of Peter, Paul & Mary fame ...) which is still sung in synagogues and schools across America. It picks up the theme of light in a world of darkness. Michelle Citrin’s “*Pass the Candle from Left to Right*” had over 65,000 hits on Youtube. The Maccabeats (a group of New York Yeshiva students) have done many parodies of popular songs, rewriting the lyrics to tell the historical story of Hanukkah as well as passing on via video the traditions and sights and sounds that make up Hanukkah commemoration. It has become a tradition for them to write a new parody each year!

Then there is Jewish comedian Adam Sandler’s famous “*Hanukkah Song*”. It finds more words that rhyme with Hanukkah than the English language should allow (!) while running through reams of famous Jews who have blessed the world in film and music and science and all over. And though he has the audiences in stitches, he is highlighting a crucial point at the heart of the season - **“WE ARE STILL HERE!”**



The Jewish Festival of Hanukkah is a time of singing, merriment and joy. The Feast commemorates the “Rededication of the Temple” in 165 BC.

Image source:
<https://kiddphilly.org/chanukah>

This is the testimony of Hanukkah! Despite being the only people who have a specific word for racism against them, despite neighbouring national leaders calling repeatedly for their destruction, Sandler can rattle off name after name of famous and significant people known globally who are Jewish. The first version came out 13 years ago, he is now up to the fourth version, adding new Jewish names as the years progress. With classic Jewish humour, it presents the ever-present truth of the ongoing presence of the Jewish people.

God has preserved. They continue to bless. And it continues to be sung around the globe.

Could it be that God who was able to miraculously rededicate the temple, is also able to rededicate His people for His purposes

as well? This is the meaning of the word “Hanukkah” – **dedication!**

Rock of Ages

This leads to the ultimate Hanukkah song. Far above all the others in significance is “Maoz Tzur”. It is the unrivalled essential for any Hanukkah celebration!

Its title in English is “Rock of Ages”. And yes, it is a hymn! Musically it would fit very snugly in any hymn service in any church. The theme similarly is recognising God as the “Stronghold of Rock” that will both accomplish His purposes and be a place of refuge throughout history.

Not surprisingly, Maoz Tzur’s focus is on historical Jewish events. It describes historical figures - Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Haman, Antiochus – all of whom have tried to eradicate the Jewish people and but have ultimately been defeated. It reminds that Hanukkah is just one of these times, yet a great display of the God’s preservation.

So, what can we learn from all this?

Stop and think for a moment of the significance of this. Think of your own experience of family celebrations, Christian celebrations, even national celebrations. Can you think of songs or occasions dedicated to people wanting to destroy you? Can you put yourself in Jewish shoes and imagine how our Jewish friends must feel?

For the Jewish people Hanukkah is but one of many occasions that commemorate their persecution and hatred by “goyim” (Gentiles - non-Jews) – including Purim and the famous line from Passover, “for in every generation they arise to destroy us.”

Maoz Tzur – and Hanukkah - is a sobering acknowledgment of the world’s rebellion against God’s chosen plans.

Maoz Tzur – and Hanukkah - is also an acknowledgment of the LORD’s faithfulness

to accomplish His plans. While brutal Jewish persecution is the content of each verse of *Maoz Tzur*, the strong central theme is highlighted in the title itself: “Rock of Ages.”

Here are some the stanzas of Maoz Tzur:

My soul had been sated with troubles,
my strength has been consumed with grief.
They had embittered my life with hardship,
with the calf-like kingdom’s bondage.

But with His great power
He brought forth His treasured ones.

Greeks gathered against me
then in Hasmonean days.
They breached the walls of my towers
and they defiled all the oils;

And from the one remnant of the flasks
a miracle was wrought for the roses.

Men of insight - eight days
established for song and jubilation.

Bare Your holy arm
and hasten the End for salvation -
Avenge the vengeance of Your servants’ blood
from the wicked nation.

For the triumph is too long delayed for us,
and there is no end to days of evil.

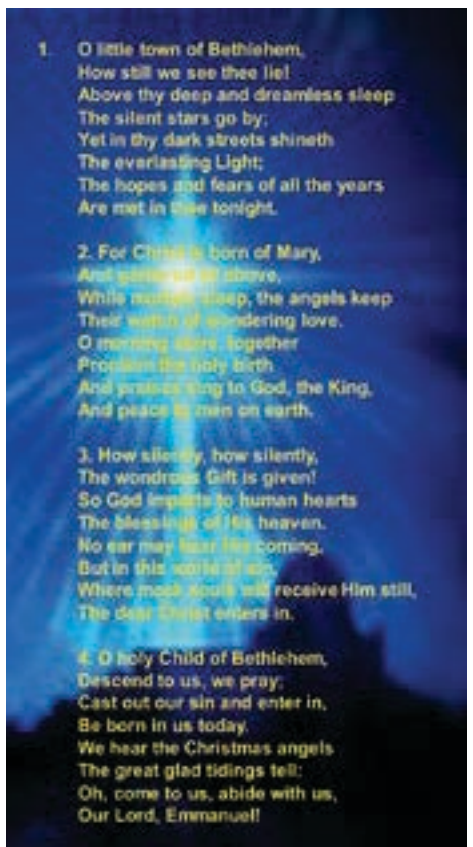
Thus, the song also expresses the longing for the final redemption. That time when God will fulfil His final salvation and end the days of evil.

Let’s finish with the beginning of the hymn. It acknowledges God as the **“Rock of Ages”**: the One who will bring justice for those who find refuge in Him, and judgment for those who refuse:

O mighty stronghold of my salvation,
to praise You is a delight.
Restore my House of Prayer
and there we will bring a thanksgiving offering.
When You will have prepared the slaughter
for the blaspheming foe,
Then I shall complete with a song of hymn
the dedication of the Altar.

Thus, the music speaks of the longing for the literal meaning of Hanukkah – of “dedication”. Where God shows Himself as the “Rock of Ages”. Where His chosen places are restored as a “house of prayer” and a place of “thanksgiving offerings.” Where the wicked are removed and salvation will be completed with a “song of hymn of dedication.”

Perhaps next time you sing the Christian hymn “Rock of Ages, cleft for me; let me hide myself in Thee” you will let it remind you of the Jewish hymn of the same name – and remember to pray for the Jewish people, that they also may hide themselves in the LORD, their Messiah!



We send our warmest GREETINGS, heartfelt THANKS, and LOVE to all our PRAYER PARTNERS & FRIENDS for your fellowship, encouragement and support throughout 2016. We wish each one of you

A BLESSED & HOLY CHRISTMAS

&

**A NEW YEAR FILLED WITH HIS
ABUNDANT BLESSINGS!**

From all the Ministry Representatives and Staff
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