

Hanukkah and Yeshua

Clash of History and Theology

by Paul Sumner

Introductory Comments

The extended study below argues the case that Yeshua of Nazareth did **not** celebrate or endorse **Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication**.

His **non**-observance wasn't because it was a Jewish holiday, but because it was contrary to his mission and message of **redeeming** people (both Jew and Gentile) by extending God's offer of forgiveness to all who repented, sought deliverance from their sins, and longed for eternal life in Olam HaBa-ah.

Redemption from **sin** is not the core message of Hanukkah.

Hanukkah is an eight-day memorial to a Jewish revolt against an oppressive Gentile power in the **second century before Yeshua**. The revolt was led by a priestly family named Maccabee. In the end, the Jews drove out the pagans, recaptured the desecrated Temple, and rededicated the Altar to God. A modified 9-branch menorah is a modern symbol of this historical event. The biblical menorah has seven branches (Exod 25:31-35).



The Hebrew Bible does not mention the Feast of Hanukkah.

[\[Top\]](#)

Yeshua was not an armed Maccabean activist who filled the Jerusalem Temple with the divine flame of revolution. The Gospel of John reports that he was

walking on the grounds of the Temple during "the Feast of Dedication" (chap 10). But it doesn't say he **celebrated** Hanukkah.

In fact, Yeshua's character and teaching opposed it. His enemies knew that and they wanted to stone him.

One time, he did act like a zealous prophet when he "cleansed" the Jerusalem Temple of greedy commercial vendors because the house of God was meant to be "a house of prayer for all nations" (John 2:14-17; Mark 11:15-17). His anger was aimed at his countrymen — Jews — not Gentiles.

But he didn't kill them. Nor did he call for armed revolution against Gentiles for desecrating the Temple and Jerusalem.

[\[Top\]](#)

Some people see surface parallels between Yeshua and Hanukkah, the "Feast of Lights." In a symbolic vision he is seen as the heavenly Menorah who gives light through his seven branches (Rev 1:12-16). He called himself "the Light of the world" (John 8:12; 9:5). Yet, he didn't say this when he was at the Temple during Hanukkah.

There is no evidence in the New Testament that Yeshua's Jewish followers observed Hanukkah in memory of him.

Instead, he was remembered as **the Pesach, the Passover lamb**, who died as a sacrifice — at the hand of his enemies — in order to rescue people from God's judgment on sinful human beings. Yeshua's act of submission to rebellious Jews and pagan Gentiles was meant to redeem.

His resurrection by the Hand of God was the ultimate revolt against death. It was a declaration that the Kingdom of God will always, eventually triumph.

[\[Top\]](#)

Today, within the Hebrew Roots or Messianic Judaism movements we see efforts to purge Yeshua's congregation of **hametz** (leaven). That is, they reject Christendom's plethora of unbiblical and often anti-Jewish customs, celebrations, and theology.

Instead, they passionately embrace everything Jewish — whether or not the Jewish elements are biblical or if they

validate faith in the God of Scripture and the messiahship of Yeshua. Of course, around Christmas they especially assert "Jewish" imagery as an alternative.

But there can be Jewish **hametz** (leaven), too.

Some Jewish traditions, hymns and faith confessions evolved out of **rabbinic antipathy toward Yeshua** (and Roman Catholicism). Those who recite "[Adon Olam](#)" and Maimonides' [2nd Principle of Faith](#) don't realize the anti-Yeshua intent within them.

When Messianic believers appropriate these and other embedded anti-Yeshua traditions, without knowing their original purpose, they unknowingly denigrate Yeshua and mock their own faith — in the eyes of non-Messianic Jews.

[\[Top\]](#)

This doesn't mean I believe everything "Jewish" is antithetical to Yeshua. Many Christians in history have nurtured hatred for Judaism. I don't.

Nor do I think Hanukkah is a "pagan" celebration, as some anti-Semites on the web declare. I simply urge informed discernment and observation of what affirms biblical truths — without feeling obliged to observe community traditions as though they are divine commandments. They aren't biblical.

Based on that principle, I agree with the preference among Yeshua's followers to **discontinue** non-biblical, anti-Jewish, **Christian** traditions.

As cherishable as many ancient (pagan) symbols and customs can be, I see no value in engaging in revisionist interpretations of them (Tannenbaum), lying to children (Santa Claus), and worshiping Yeshua/Jesus in the presence of a Christmas tree (an echo of tree worship in Babylon; Jeremiah 10:1-5). That doesn't mean people should ignore the birth of the Messiah and Son of God.

I don't — as an alternative to Hanukkah — promote the celebration of Saturnalia/Christ-Mass on December 25, a holiday first observed in the 4th century by the Roman church. Instead, I view the "Christmas Story" from its original Jewish, Hebraic milieu:

[Israel's Tzaddikim Raised Yeshua](#)
[Virgin Israel: The Mother of Messiah](#)

The Hasidic Mother of Yeshua

Luke 1 and 2 are the best place to engage this background.

Paul Sumner

[[Top](#)]

Hanukkah and Yeshua

"At that time the [Feast of the Dedication](#) took place at Jerusalem.

It was winter, and Yeshua was walking in the Temple in the colonnade of Solomon."

(John 10:22-23)

In Hebrew the word *hanukkah* means "dedication." [Hannukah and Chanukah are common misspellings. Chanukkah is a valid alternative.]

hanukkah — חֲנֻכָּה

Hanukkah is used in the Hebrew Bible eight times (Num 7:10, 11, 84, 88; Ps 30:1; Neh 12:27 [2x]; 2 Chron 7:9). Its Aramaic equivalent (spelled the same) is used four times (Dan 3:2, 3; Ezra 6:16, 17). In all but two places, *hanukkah* refers to dedicating the **altar** in front of the Mishkan (the Tent of Meeting), or to dedicating Solomon's Temple, or to dedicating the **wall** of Jerusalem.

In Israel's historical memory, the noun *hanukkah* was primarily associated with the House of God (the Temple), either for initial dedication or rededication after its defilement.

The menorah is not mentioned in any of these biblical passages.

Note the title of Psalm 30 (v. 1 in Hebrew Bibles): "A psalm. A song of Hanukkah [dedication] of the Bayit [House]. For David."

When *hanukkah* is mentioned in Daniel 3, the reference is to dedicating the image of Nebuchanezzar — an idol before which everyone in Babylon was to "fall down and worship" (v. 7). (This leads into the story of refuseniks Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego in the furnace.)

[[Top](#)]

The First Official Hanukkah

Skip forward to the second century BC(E). By then the Syrians, the regional purveyors of Hellenistic culture, ruled over Israel, Jerusalem and the Temple grounds.

According to the books of the **Maccabees** in the Apocrypha, King **Antiochus "Epiphanes"** (Greek, "god manifest") had images and idol altars erected around Jerusalem, on which pigs were sacrificed to the Syrian gods.

A "desolating sacrilege" (or "abomination of desolation") was erected on the great altar in front of the Temple (2 Macc 6:2). Historians believe this was an image of Zeus, the Greek father-god.

Where is the Hanukkah Story Told?

The story of the Maccabean Revolt is found in **1 and 2 Maccabees** in the **Apocrypha** collection — found in Catholic, Orthodox, and some Protestant Bibles. But it is **not** in Jewish Bibles.

Antiochus then ordered Torah scrolls torn and burned, and he outlawed the practice of circumcision and any form of "Judaism." Jews who disobeyed were executed by sword or burned alive.

It was 167 BC(E).

These blasphemous actions were the last stone of offense for the priestly family of Mattathias. He and his five sons "burned with zeal" (1 Macc 2:24), and they ignited a firestorm against the sacrilegious image in the Temple and the whole pagan cloud looming above Jerusalem.

In just three years, the zealous Judah Maccabee and his Jewish warriors overthrew the Syrians and recaptured the Temple. On the **25th of Kislev** (Nov-Dec), they **dedicated** a new altar for sacrifice. They "celebrated the **dedication** of the altar for eight days" (1 Macc 4:56; cf 2 Chron 7:9). [[Note 1](#)] Then they re-dedicated the Temple to God.

[[Top](#)]

The Original Hanukkah Spirit Did Not Last

In time, the Maccabee family (aka the **Hasmoneans**) became drunk with power and turned corrupt and cruel.

Only 65 years after the great revolt and hanukkah dedication, one of their leaders, **Alexander Janneus** (103-76 BC(E)), put down a revolt by Pharisees and Hasidim ("righteous ones") who

challenged his corrupt regime. Over a six-year period, he killed 50,000 Jews.

At one point he ordered Jewish soldiers to crucify 800 of the Pharisees. While they were hanging alive on their crosses, he ordered the throats of their children and their wives cut in front of them (Josephus, Antiquities 13:14:2 [380]).

The idealistic Maccabean revolt in 167-164 was destined to last a short time. A statement by the prophet Daniel may be a prophetic picture of their uprising against the Greeks. Daniel says their effort would bring only "a little help" (Dan 11:34).

A century after the Jewish revolt, the Romans swept in to become Israel's new, worse, overlords.

[\[Top\]](#)

History-Altering Legacy

Eventually, the Maccabee Spirit was reborn in the persons of the **Zealots**, who in 66 CE/AD ignited another revolt against ruling Gentiles, the Romans. As before, this new fire turned inward and turned into a brutal *civil war* in which Jews committed atrocities against Jews. It produced no liberty for anyone, and it changed the course of Jewish history forever.

In 70 CE/AD the Roman Tenth Legion pulled the Temple down, burned Jerusalem and slaughtered thousands. The last Zealot stronghold at **Masada** ended in suicide three years later. Then Jews were thrown into exile from the Land until 1948 – an exile of 1,875 years.

A World Holiday?

For twenty-two centuries, Hanukkah has among Jews symbolized the overthrow of pagan Gentile influence, the cleansing of desecrations of Jewish spiritual life, and rededication to God and his Law. A sense of the joy of liberty pervades the festival.

But this air of freedom was born from pious zeal that led to murder and fratricide. And that put Israel on a dark path which led to future disasters.

Since then, in Western Jewish cultures Hanukkah has been tamed and commercialized. It's mostly a children's holiday, replete with ribboned gifts, gilded chocolates, and lighted "Hanukkah bushes" – all to compete with Christmas culture. In many cities giant hanukkiah stand next to Christmas trees in public squares.

[\[Top\]](#)

Yet beneath these assimilations to Gentile culture, there remains a wide gulf – a deep religious resentment.

Today some Jewish leaders declare that Hanukkah celebrates the "universal yearning of mankind for liberty." An American Reconstructionist rabbi recently anointed Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, and Martin Luther King Jr. as being "Maccabees" because they fought for human rights.

Instead, the rabbi should have said Yeshua of Nazareth was the Ultimate Maccabee who has liberated billions of human beings on earth, even to this moment.

A popular TV rabbi said people in Western democracies enjoy religious freedom today because of Jewish efforts to keep the flame of Hanukkah liberty alive. (He ignored the efforts of Gentile Christians to champion liberty, including on behalf of the Jewish people in and outside Israel.)

Such public pronouncements by modern Jews are **revisionist history** meant to mislead ignorant Gentiles (even Christians) about the original story.

In truth: **Hanukkah will always be a history-bound memorial to the war between Jewish faith and culture and those of the Gentiles.**

[\[Top\]](#)

Was Yeshua an Observer?

Did Yeshua observe Hanukkah? Let's examine the passage in John 10:

At that time the Feast of the Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Yeshua was walking in the

The Eight Days of Oil and the *Hanukkah*

Hanukkah today is symbolized by a 9-branch menorah or *hanukkah*. In Jewish tradition eight branches stand for the eight days that one jar of holy oil fed the seven branches of the Menorah in the rededicated Temple. (One jar should have lasted one day.)

The ninth or middle branch stands for that jar of oil. It's called the *shamash*, the attendant that served (fed) the other eight.



The books of Maccabees in the Apocrypha do not contain this miracle story. Historians say it is an old Talmudic legend (Encyclopædia Judaica 7:1283-84).

Temple in the colonnade of Solomon. (John 10:22-23)

This passage does *not* say he was celebrating the feast, only walking in the Temple grounds. The text does *not* warrant the conclusion that he observed Hanukkah. In fact, other texts strongly suggest that he did *not* observe the memorial. For example, note Mark's account:

He entered Jerusalem and came into the temple [grounds]; and after looking all around, he departed."
(Mark 11:11)

There is a difference between knowing about the Maccabean rededication and celebrating it.

The Full Witness of John 10

The larger context of chapter 10 in John's gospel centers around Yeshua's parable about sheep and the question of his identity. His parable contains these points that are pertinent to our discussion:

- Good shepherds protect the sheep, bad ones abandon them to wolves.
- God put Yeshua over his sheep as shepherd, and Yeshua will give his life for them.
- But not all of them belong to the Father—only those who obey the shepherd's voice.
- Some obedient sheep will be Gentiles, *not* of the Jewish fold. The Shepherd must gather them too, in order to form "one flock" of believing Jews and Gentiles.
- This is God's work. This is the essence of the Abraham Covenant (Gen 12:3).

This was the essence of Yeshua's *revolutionary torah* expounded at that Hanukkah time. The Temple city thronged with festival pilgrims, their minds on the Maccabee story. In this atmosphere, Yeshua's teaching was outrageous to the authorities. You can imagine them thinking:

"Bringing Gentiles into the holy House!
The whole point of our Festival was to throw them and their wicked influence out and celebrate Jewish distinctives! Where is this man's call to expel the Romans and liberate his people?"

"And what's this blasphemous language about some Jews not being authentic sheep? All Israel have a portion in the world to come. He can't be a true shepherd."

"This Yeshua of Nazareth is no Judah Maccabee."

And yet, it is vital to note that the Jewish people were **divided** about him. Some said he had a demon, some he was insane. Others said, "These are not the sayings of one demon-possessed." And, in fact, **many believed in him, including "many rulers"** (John 12:42).

But the majority of Jewish leaders pressed him about his identity. "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly!" He replied that he had already told them – through his works.

[\[Top\]](#)

The Final Outrage

That wasn't all Yeshua said.

When he explicitly announced that ***he and the Father God were "one"*** (in name, authority, purpose; John 10:30), the leaders had enough. They accused him of blasphemy and flew into righteous rage.

Here was a Jew telling his own people that he was God's shepherd (which meant king) ... that no one could get into the flock except by entering through him ... that he was going to bring non-Jews into the Temple to worship God ... and that he and God were united in the "good works" being done.

How could it be that the Eternal God was manifesting himself in this humble, pacifist, non-warrior standing in front of them? Impossible!

The Maccabean zealots three centuries before contended with Antiochus Epiphanes, whose name meant ***"God Manifest"*** (Epiphanes). Here was a fellow-Jew who presumed to speak uniquely in God's name and power. "You, being a man, make yourself out to be God" (John 10:53). Another time, they said he deserved to die "because he made himself out to be the Son of God" (John 19:7).

Simply put: **Yeshua sounded to them like another blasphemous Antiochus.**

Even though he answered their charge with Scripture to show that it wasn't blasphemous to call himself God's Son (John 10:31-39), they would have none of it. They would not accept him as shepherd king over their fold.

[\[Top\]](#)

Did He Endorse the Festival?

No, Yeshua did not enter into the festivities of Hanukkah.

Even though the Maccabees were courageous, they weren't the heroes of faith that Israel should look to for *lasting* liberation. Yeshua was.

Judah Maccabee, the warrior prince who slaughtered Gentiles and even apostate Jews in the name of God and Torah, was not a good shepherd – he didn't love people. Yeshua did.

I believe Judah Maccabee would have executed Yeshua in order to protect Jerusalem and the Temple from any further zealous cleansings of thieves from the Temple grounds – in the same "colonnade" where he walked during Hanukkah (Luke 19:45-48; John 10:22-23).

Judah didn't have the Abrahamic vision of blessing the nations (Genesis 12:3). He was willing to kill anyone who threatened his religion. Yeshua wasn't thus willing; he wanted to gather all lost sheep into the One True Faith.

Yeshua didn't ignite a revolt against Romans who were blasphemously defiling the city of God. He taught his disciples to pray for their enemies and "to be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). Winning an enemy to God will, alone, bring lasting peace.

Promoting repentance within Israel will also bring peace with God.

[\[Top\]](#)

Dedication of Yeshua's House

As Yeshua walked under the covered portico around the Temple plaza, he surely sensed another spirit hovering above the site, one that clashed with his mission to redeem.

Yes, he himself burned with zeal for God's House: to cleanse it of chauvanistic uncleanliness and to make it a "house of prayer for

Why Yeshua Didn't Observe Hanukkah

- Hanukkah was not a scriptural feast enjoined on Israel to observe.
- The historical essence of the festival was liberty through war and self-effort, not the life-redeeming, intervening power of God.
- The spirit of the festival was anti-Gentile.
- Yeshua refused to promote a Maccabean-type rebellion against Caesar.
- The spirit of the Temple leaders was unreceptive to a man who came as God's Son to liberate people from sin.

all the peoples" (Isaiah 56:7; Matthew 21:13). [[Note 2](#)] That was the ancient prophetic Vision.

Hanukkah did not – and does not to this day – promote that vision.

The "House" Yeshua was building – and would one day dedicate – consists of **people** who had been cleansed. They were the Temple of God. At one time they were dirty pagans. But in passing "through" Yeshua, the sheepfold door, they were washed and became new creations, renewed in the image of God.

All Israel must also pass through Messiah Yeshua and be cleansed of personal defilements. Contaminations come from inner, personal sin, not the mere presence or touch of a Gentile person. One of his Jewish disciples eventually learned this: "God has shown me that I should not call **any** man common or unclean" (Acts 10:28).

[[Top](#)]

Military victories and political liberty are short-term; they never assuage the soul. But there is everlasting hope in standing right and clean before God. That's the hope of the prophets and the light that attracts the Nations to come to Jerusalem and to her God – via her Shepherd.

Liberty and light. How are they to be accomplished and ignited? Who is the *Shamash* that will lead the final Dedication and spread the menorah glow to the ends of the earth?

- [Paul Sumner](#)



[The 7-branched menorah described in the Bible; Exodus 25:31-40]

[[Top](#)]

Notes

(1) Hanukkah is often called the "Festival of Light(s)." Originally it was called the "Feast of Fire," a name associated with Nehemiah's restoration of the Temple centuries before (2 Macc 1:18; Neh 12:27).

The Jewish historian Josephus is the first to use the title

"Lights." In the late first century CE/AD, he writes:

They [the Hasmoneans] made it a law for their posterity, that they should keep a festival, on account of the restoration of their temple worship, for eight days. And from that time to this **we celebrate this festival and call it *Lights***. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us [as light from heaven]; and that thence was the name given to that festival" (Antiquities 12:8:7 [324-25]). [[return to text](#)]

[[Top](#)]

The 9-branched hanukkiyah (hanukkah lamp).The miracle story of the one cruse of oil lasting for eight days to keep the menorah lit is not found in either book of the Maccabees in the Apocrypha.

Apparently it is a legend that appears in early Talmudic literature, particularly in a baraita (addition to the Mishnah) to Megillat Ta'anit, Shabbat 21b. According to the Encyclopædia Judaica, this baraita "states that on entering the Temple, the Hasmoneans discovered that the Greeks had defiled all the oil, except for one cruse, which contained enough oil to keep the candelabrum burning for only one day. A miracle, however, happened and they kindled from it for eight days; in its commemoration a festival lasting eight days was instituted for future generations" ["Hanukkah," EncJud 7:1283-84].

Other details on the Festival of Light are found in the medieval Megillat Antiochus or Sefer Beit Hashmonai (Book of the Hasmoneans), an 8th-9th century work recounting the times of the Maccabees. [Hermann Strack, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash (orig. 1931, Jewish Pub. Society), 226]. [[return to text](#)]

(2) The phrase "*a House of Prayer for all the peoples*" comes from Isaiah's sermon on welcoming the foreigners and castouts "who join themselves to the LORD" (56:6). Yeshua's comment about gathering the Gentiles into the flock (John 10:16) echoes Isa 56:8: "The LORD God, who gathers the dispersed of Israel, declares, 'Yet others will I gather to them, to those already gathered.'" [[return to text](#)]

Toward the end of the Tanakh, we read this prophecy:

"Sing for joy and be glad, O daughter of Zion; for behold I am coming and I will dwell in your midst,"

declares LORD. And many Gentiles [goyim, nations] will join themselves to the LORD in that day and will become my people" (Zech 2:10-11).

[\[Top\]](#)

[Directory](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Judaism](#) | [Hebrew Bible Studies](#)
[Hanukkah & Yeshua](#) [[PDF version of this article](#)]

hebrew-streams.org