

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

72 What Is the Difference Between Hanukkah and Christmas?

Scripture: Romans 11:11-27

Recently I read an interesting story about Art Linkletter. Several years ago he interviewed a number of children on a particular television program. Christmas had just past and he was interested in finding out what his guests had received for Christmas. One child he asked was a little Jewish girl. When she was asked what she had received for Christmas she replied with the words, "I am not a Christmas girl; I am a 'Hanukkah' girl." There seemed to be no doubt in her mind that her celebration was not related to Christmas. To this 'Hanukkah' girl Christmas was a meaningless celebration. As I read this story I thought how much the same it is for 'Christmas' people. The Jewish festival of Hanukkah has little or no significance for them.

This year Hanukkah and Christmas are celebrated on the same day, Dec. 25. I thought it would be interesting for us to think about the meaning of these observances as well as the implications and truths which surround them.

I. THE CELEBRATION OF HANUKKAH HAD ITS ORIGIN BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS:

The story of Hanukkah has roots which go back to the beginning of recorded history. It is the Book of Genesis which sets the stage for what is to follow in the narrative which eventually leads to Hanukkah and even the Christmas event. Let us briefly think our way through the Old Testament. The Biblical teaching is that there was a time when the nations of the world were formed of the descendants of Noah's three sons: Ham, Shem and Japheth. (Genesis 10:31) Rebellion on the part of these peoples moves God to begin a new nation. God chooses a man, Abram, to originate this nation. Every book in the Old Testament is connected to part of the history of that nation. Up to the time of Abram all of humanity was treated as one by God. When the promise recorded in Genesis 12:1-3 was given to him and his posterity, clearly, a race of people was set apart. By that separation, all other nations of the world immediately became the **goyim**, or Gentile nations. It was the call of Abraham which made all other Peoples, Gentiles.

The question is sometimes asked if Abraham was the first Jew. Technically, he was not although in Genesis 14:13 he was called the "Hebrew." God called Abraham when he was an Assyrian and he was given the name or he became a Hebrew when he went from Ur of the Chaldees to Canaan. The word "Hebrew" means "one who crossed over." Abraham's descendants are Hebrews. Later the name of "Israel" was given to one of Abraham's grandsons. We read about Jacob in Genesis 32:28, *"And he said, Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and have prevailed."* Israel was the name which came to be used for all of the Hebrew people. All of Jacob's descendants are both Hebrews and Israelites. Jacob's twelve sons became the founders of twelve tribes, and from the tribe of Judah came the word "Jew" which meant a "Judaite." The title applied particularly to the remnant who returned from the Babylonian captivity. All Jews are Hebrews as well as being Israelites.

Another question has to do with the reason why God elected to set the nation of Israel apart as His chosen people. God's choice of Abraham was not based upon human attractiveness. It is the wisdom of God to choose the weak and foolish things of the world according to I Corinthians 1:26-29. Neither were the Israelites picked of God because they were great among the nations of the world. In Deuteronomy 7:7 we read, *"The Lord did not set his love upon you nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people."*

After Abram leaves his home in Ur of the Chaldees, an idolatrous but highly advanced civilization, he goes to Haran and eventually on to Canaan. A famine comes into the land causing him to go to Egypt. It was during the sojourn in Egypt that the Israelites grow from a small band of people to number many thousands. God delivers them from the slavery they have been reduced to and further reveals His purpose for them in the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai. This is the basic document of Judaism today. The Old Testament goes on to outline the history of the nation in considerable detail. The record of the conquest of Canaan under Joshua is given, the period of the Judges is described, and there is a united monarchy under Saul, David, and Solomon.

History then records a division in the nation of Israel. A Northern Kingdom of ten tribes is formed, and there is a Southern Kingdom known as Judah consisting of two tribes. The Northern Kingdom is taken captive by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. The Southern Kingdom is overcome by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Fifty years later the Babylonians themselves are taken over by the Media-Persian

Empire. Cyrus, the Persian, issues a decree which causes some fifty thousand Jews to return to Jerusalem and Judaea. About twenty years later a new temple is built. The year is 515 B.C. In 458 B.C. Ezra the scribe comes to Jerusalem with about two thousand Jews and their families. In 446 B.C. Nehemiah arrives to rebuild the walls and serve in the capacity of governor. A Jewish community exists in Judaea although it is under Persian rule. It is only a remnant. The bulk of the people remained in Babylonia and Assyria under Persian rule.

Until the time of Christ the history of Israel is absorbed by many powers which successively hold the control of Palestine. There is the Persian period from 536-333 B.C. This is followed by the Greek period from 333-323 B.C. Next came the **Egyptian** control from 323-204 B.C., to be followed by the Syrian (204-165) and **Maccabean** times (165-63). The Maccabeans were followed by the **Romans**, (63 B.C.) It was during the Maccabean period that a revolt takes place and independence is achieved. We must go to the Apocrypha to find out what Hanukkah is really all about. As you know, The Apocrypha is the name given to ancient writings which form fifteen books. They are a collection of Jewish literature from the period between about 300 B.C. and A.D. 100. They were not considered part of the Hebrew canon. The word "Apocrypha" means "the hidden" and was first used by the biblical scholar Jerome who died in A.D.420.

When Malachi, the last writing prophet of the Old Testament, finished his message, Judea was under a relaxed Persian rule. This was followed, as noted above, by the empire of Alexander the Great. When Alexander died his empire was divided. Palestine went to Syria, then Egypt, then back to Syria again. It was at this time that Greek culture and religion was forced upon the Jewish people by a hateful king, Antiochus Epiphanes. His persecution caused a godly Maccabean family, headed by Mattathias and his son who became known as Judas Maccabeus, to revolt. This turns out to be one of the most heroic periods in the difficult history of the people chosen by God. Jerusalem was captured, the temple was refurnished, and the victorious . Maccabean army brought an end to extreme religious persecution over a period of three years. Rather than rejoice over the victory won I Maccabees tells that the victors, "rent their clothes, and made great lamentation, and cast ashes upon their heads, and fell down flat to the ground upon their faces, and blew an alarm with the trumpets and cried toward heaven." (4:39-40)

Why did the victorious Maccabeens weep and mourn rather than rejoice? In I Maccabees 4:38 we read, "When they saw the sanctuary desolate, and the

altar profaned, and the gates burned up, and shrubs growing in the courts as in a forest, or in one of the mountains, yea, and the priests chambers pulled down..." The Temple of God, you see, had been desecrated. Many of the Maccabean soldiers were Hasidim (pious ones) Jews and agitation of soul overcame them when they saw the condition of the Temple. Their leader, Judas Maccabeus immediately set about to cleanse the Temple and restore it to its proper function and position.

On the twenty-fifth day of Kislev, the daily burnt offering was resumed on the new altar. The Book of Maccabees continues, "Judas and his brethren with the whole congregation of Israel ordained that the days of the dedication of the altar should be kept in their season from year to year by the space of eight days." (4:59) I have taken you a long way around; but this is the origin of Hanukkah. It is a gay festival instituted by Judas Maccabeus and his brothers in 165 B.C. There are many 'Hanukkah' people in the world today. Theirs is a rich and proud heritage.

Christmas is an annual celebration marking the birth of Jesus Christ. Sooner or later you will meet someone who will tell you that Christmas is only the Christianization of an old pagan festival known as Brumalia. This was held on December 25 following the festival of Saturn which lasted from December 17-24. We know about the Roman celebration. Chrysostom remarks, "On this day also the birthday of Christ was lately fixed at Rome in order that while the heathen were busy with their profane ceremonies, the Christians might perform their sacred rites undisturbed. They call this (Dec.25) the birthday of the Invincible One (Mithras); but who is invincible but the Lord? They call it the birthday of the Solar Disc; but Christ is the Sun of Righteousness." (John Chrysostom 347-407) It seems only natural for believers to reflect joyfully on that supernatural event from which their salvation stems, and they have been doing so ever since.

Another question which might arise at this point is "Why don't 'Hanukkah' people celebrate Christmas?" The answer is that they do not believe that the birth of Christ was all that important. In this belief they follow their ancestors who have gone before. Fiddler On The Roof begins with Tevye singing the famous, "Tradition! Tradition!" For him to consider the birth and death of Christ as personally significant would be a nontraditional act. For any Jew to think of Jesus as being any more than a teaching rabbi would be for him to oppose what Jewish leaders concluded at the time Jesus was ministering. There were many reasons for their rejection of Christ. A true spirituality had been lost among

them. Josephus tells us of the prevailing spirit of dishonesty and moral lapse. They had transferred their affections to a love of their own high place. The pride of the Pharisee was not much impressed with the doctrine of meekness and humility preached by Jesus. Nor did the prevailing love of praise and even sensuality respond to a teaching calling for self-denial. Also, they had substituted the idea of a magnificent temporal ruler for the idea of a spiritual Savior. They wanted deliverance from the tyranny of the Romans. Because Christ did not fit their notions and ambitions, the religious leaders rejected him. The majority of the people were dependent upon the Scribes and Pharisees for direction and leading. Thus, they obeyed those who rejected Christ. It is certain, however, that Christ was not put off because of lack of evidence. Evidence alone accounts for those many who did follow and believe. The first members of the Christian Church were Jews chosen by Christ. The modern Jew takes his religion for granted, without inquiring very deeply into the person and work of Christ,

II. THE HANUKKAH STORY IS A THRILLING AND MEANINGFUL ONE:

It is the story of a people who whose religion was not like those of surrounding nations. It was marked by an advanced ethical monotheism that is without parallel in ancient literature. A God of unlimited power and goodness, an infinite and personal Creator God was worshipped by this ancient people. They came to understand that their approach to God was by virtue of a sacrificial arrangement. They understood that sin needed atonement. This was in sharp contrast to the gods of other nations which were made no moral demands upon people. Their God repeatedly brought spokesmen known as prophets before them to call for reform in personal and political life. They were a people who honored the sacred Scriptures. Their basic creed was known as the Shema: *"Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord."* (Deuteronomy 6:4)

In the 12th century, a Jewish philosopher by the name of Maimonides laid down thirteen principles of the Jewish faith. This statement emphasized the omnipotence, omniscience, eternity and oneness of God. He held Moses to be the greatest of the prophets and the Law to be the highest revelation. He spoke of rewards and punishments, the coming of the Messiah, and the resurrection of the dead. Maimonides principles are as follows: **(1)** The Creator exists; there is one God. **(2)** The Unity of God; God is one. **(3)** The Incorporeality of God; God Is spirit. **(4)** God is eternal; God has no beginning and no end. **(5)** The Creator-alone is to be worshipped; there are no other and no secondary Gods. **(6)** There is such a thing as prophecy. There are men who had such moral, intellectual and

spiritual power that they reached a knowledge not attainable by others. **(7)** Moses is the greatest of all the prophets, greater than any before. **(8)** The Law is divine. The Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, were divinely delivered to Moses, both in their legal and their historical parts. **(9)** The Integrity of the Law. Nothing may be added to, or subtracted from this divinely given Law. **(10)** God knows the deeds and thoughts of men, and marks them. **(11)** God rewards those who keep his commandments and punishes those who transgress them. **(12)** The Messiah will come at a time when we cannot tell. He will be of the house of David and will have extraordinary wisdom and power. **(13)** The dead will be raised and the soul is immortal. **(The Jewish Religion;**
M. Friedlander)

Armed with these beliefs, it is little wonder that the godly Mattathias, centuries before, resisted the pagan Antiochus Epiphanes' erection of an altar to heathen deities in the Temple at Jerusalem. Hardly in the entire Old Testament or in the Christian period do we find greater concern for the honor of God.

III. JUDAISM TODAY DIFFERS FROM THAT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT PERIOD:

There is very little in the teaching of Maimonides which is not timeless and eternally valid. Our concern lies with the fact that the Messiah has come in the person of Jesus, and the Law has been superseded by grace. In the centuries which followed the Babylonian captivity, certain changes began to appear in the religious life of the nation Israel. Synagogues became the worship points for most Jews. When the temple was finally destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70, synagogues were the centers of worship. With the end of the temple came the end of the sacrificial system. Ritual, prayer and the study of the Law were thus substituted for sacrifices.

Judaism today, minus the temple, priesthood, and sacrificial system, teaches that access to God is the privilege of every Jew. A Cohen, in **Everyman's Talmud**, writes, "With the fall of the Temple and the cessation of the atonement offerings, the importance of repentance as a means of expiation became inevitably enhanced." Judaism today holds that sin is an act, but not a condition. The belief is that man has the ability to live by the law. Failure to do so may be compensated by repentance. With this view of sin, the need for a Savior is eliminated. Also considered to have atoning value are fasting, suffering, and the study of the law. Judaism today covers a wide range of beliefs and practices.

Three main branches can be noted: Orthodox, Reform and Conservative. Orthodox Judaism has changed little in the past twenty Centuries. It adheres to the Talmudic teachings about the Sabbath, dietary rules and marriage. The Reform Jew is a liberal form of Judaism which has discarded Sabbath observance and spiritualized doctrines such as the coming of the Messiah and the resurrection of the body. What remains is an ethical system with a monotheistic background. Conservative Judaism is an in between position. It holds to many of the Jewish traditions but interprets the Law in a way which makes it relevant to progressive thought.

IV. WHAT WE WOULD LIKE TO SHARE WITH THE HANUKKAH PERSON:

First:

We would like to identify with one another in our common belief that God exists and the fact that He has revealed Himself through the prophets and the Law. There is also the basic belief that life in this world points beyond to a future destiny. We make or mar it in this, world: We are able to further note the priority given to Israel by God. Theirs was the election. We are mindful of their triumphs, and wonders, all of which evidenced the fact that the nation of Israel was God's darling and the apple of His eye.

Secondly:

We would like to share with them the fact that the first Christians were Jews. Jesus was a Jew. Most of the New Testament was written by Jews, and it is unfortunate that Christianity has set forth as a Gentile religion. To become a Christian does not mean one has to abandon his heritage. The great divide in the world in the eyes of God is not between Jew and Gentile, it is between Christian and non-Christian.

Thirdly:

We would like to draw attention to the meaning of the Messiah's death on the cross of Calvary. Christ is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew word Messiah and a better word to use when speaking of the cross. The Old Testament makes it clear that God has chosen blood to be the means by which sins can be forgiven. Isaiah 53 tells about a suffering Messiah.

Fourthly:

We would want to forever be a friend of the Jew. Romans 11:17-25 speaks of the horticultural practice of breaking off branches from a tree and grafting in other branches. Three truths are set forth. First, that branches which were natural, namely, Israel, were broken off. Second that the branches which were unnatural, namely, Gentiles, were grafted in. And lastly, that the Gentiles would ultimately be broken off and the Jews grafted in again. Romans 9:4-5 speaks of Israel as God's vineyard which He pruned, and chastened in order that it might bear fruit. However, they rejected their privilege and are not now the people of God. Choosing righteousness which is by law (Romans 9:30-32), Israel opened the door to the Gentiles to be visited with the message of salvation. The purposes of God for the Jew nevertheless still stand and He has not cast His people aside. (Romans 11:26) We would therefore bring Christ to the Hanukkah person, and thank God for the blessing received through them at this Christmas time.

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