As you’ve probably noticed, Hanukkah moves around the calendar quite a bit. This is due to the Earth’s orbit and the differences between the Hebrew and Gregorian calendars. This year, we have both Chrismukkah (the first night of Hanukkah falls on Christmas Eve) and “Jew Year’s Eve” (okay, not the best pun—the last night of Hanukkah falls on New Year’s Eve). Apart from the calendar, is there a spiritual connection between Hanukkah and Christmas? Between Judah Maccabee and Yeshua (Jesus), who celebrated Hanukkah? We think so. Read on . . .
Hanukkah’s Historical Dilemma by Stan Meyer

Who can retell the things that befell us,
Who can count them?
In every age a hero or sage
Came to our aid.¹

When most people think of Hanukkah, they recall the story of how the menorah remained lit for eight days on just one day’s worth of oil. Or they think of dreidels, latkes and gifts. However, the greater narrative of Hanukkah is how the events surrounding it were predicted hundreds of years earlier by the Jewish prophet Daniel.

The fact that Hanukkah was foretold centuries before the events surrounding it transpired creates for historians Hanukkah’s historical dilemma. How can they explain that the events surrounding this popular Jewish holiday were clearly predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures? Many scholars admit it is rationally inexplicable apart from accepting the Bible as supernatural. As a result, they have wrestled with Hanukkah’s historic dilemma, especially since the eighteenth century.

Hanukkah celebrates the Maccabean victory over the Syrian general Antiochus IV (Epiphanes). When Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C., his Greek empire was divided into four parts. The Antiochian dynasty ruled Judea up until the second century B.C., when Antiochus tried to forcibly convert the Jews to the Greek religion. The tyrant went so far as to place a statue of Zeus in the Temple and establish a puppet priesthood to lead converted Jews in a Hellenistic perversion of Judaism. However, the Maccabees defeated the general and rededicated the Temple in 165 B.C. Hanukkah is the Hebrew word for dedication.

The Hanukkah Story Foretold

Who first recorded the story of Hanukkah? Most of the account is found in the apocryphal books of I and II Maccabees, written around the middle of the second century.² Flavius Josephus, writing in the latter part of the first century, described its celebration.³ The earliest description of the celebration of Hanukkah is found in the first century A.D. in the New Testament, when Yeshua (Jesus) celebrated it:

At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” (John 10:22–24)

The earliest reference to the miracle of the lights is found in the Talmud, over 500 years after the events: “Yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit [the lamp] therewith for eight days. The following year these [days] were appointed a Festival” (b. Shabbat 21b).⁴

The dilemma modern historians wrestle with is that the earliest description of Antiochus IV and the Maccabean revolt is found in a document predating Hanukkah by 365 years! In Babylon, the Jewish prophet Daniel described in detail the emergence of Antiochus IV, his campaign to convert the Jews, his desecration of the Temple, and the heroic revolt that overthrew his regime. Written three centuries before Alexander the Great was born, it defies rational explanation that Daniel could foretell that Alexander would conquer the Middle East and that his empire would be divided into four kingdoms after his death:

And the goat is the king of Greece. And the great horn between his eyes is the first king [Alexander]. As for the horn that was broken, in place of which four others arose, four kingdoms shall arise from his nation. (Daniel 8:21–22)

Equally perplexing is how a Jew in Babylon could foretell that Antiochus IV would ascend to power and oppress the Jews:

And at the latter end of their kingdom, when the transgressors have reached their limit, a king [Antiochus IV] of bold face, one who understands riddles, shall arise. His power shall be great—but not by his own power; and he shall cause fearful destruction and shall succeed in what he does, and
destroy mighty men and the people who are the saints [the Jewish people]. (Daniel 8:23–24)

Daniel even described the way in which Antiochus would desecrate the Temple, prohibit Jewish worship and place a foreign deity in the Temple:

He shall . . . be enraged and take action against the holy covenant. He shall . . . [favor] those who forsake the [Torah]. Forces from him shall appear and profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the regular burnt offering. And they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate. (Daniel 11:30–31)

Finally, Daniel foretold that many Jews would be deceived and practice a Greek perversion of Judaism: “He shall seduce with flattery those who violate the covenant.” However, a band of Jewish freedom fighters would remain faithful to God and repel the oppressor: “But the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action” (Daniel 11:32). His historic detail of the Hanukkah story in the Jewish Scriptures centuries before the births of Alexander the Great, Antiochus, and Judah the Maccabee has perplexed contemporary scholars.

A German scholarly critic of the Jewish Bible, Johannes Bleek, argued in 1875 that the only rational explanation for the Hanukkah dilemma is that the second half of Daniel must have been written at the time of the Maccabees and quietly inserted into the book. His theory emerged at a time when many German critics of the Jewish Scriptures were making similar assertions. He wrote, “This phenomenon . . . presents the greatest difficulties under a supposition of their genuineness, and cannot easily be explained in a natural way.”

Rabbi Emil Hirsch, professor of rabbinic literature at the University of Chicago, came to agree with Bleek. He reasoned that it was impossible for Daniel or any sixth century B.C. writer to have known such detail about Antiochus Epiphanes and the Maccabees centuries before they lived.

But not all historical scholars came to agree with Bleek and the German higher critics. Cyrus Gordon (1908–2001), professor of Near Eastern studies and chair of Mediterranean studies at Brandeis University, protested that these scholars made subjective assertions based on their own biases. He particularly objected to the way in which German scholars “chopped” up the Jewish Bible into a tapestry of pieces, ascribing multiple authorship to single books: “The urge to chop the [Jewish] Bible and other ancient writings up into sources is . . . due to . . . false assumption.” Did Daniel miraculously describe the events of Hanukkah before they happened? Or were chapters 8–11 Maccabean propaganda covertly inserted into the Jewish Bible?

Consider these facts: First, Daniel identified himself as the author of chapters 8–11: “In the third year of the reign of King Belshazzar a vision appeared to me, Daniel” (Daniel 8:1). The writer identified the reign of King Belshazzar, whose rule ended in 539 B.C.

The writer who identifies himself and gives his own dateline? Isn’t he innocent until proven guilty? In chapters 8–11, the author identified Babylonian geography that an exilic writer such as Daniel would be familiar with, whereas the Maccabees and their community resided in Judea, 550 miles away.

Second, the texts of the book of Daniel were discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1949. In 1989 they were published, including chapters 8–11. Scholar Peter W. Flint dates the fragment 4Q114 containing Daniel 10:1–11:29 to the late second century B.C., placing the document before the Maccabean revolt in 165 B.C.

Historians realized that the entire book must have been circulating as one volume among the Qumran community at the time of the revolt. These discoveries forced historians to date Daniel before the Hanukkah story. Old Testament scholar Gerhard Hasel explained:

Photo ©Getty Images
The Destruction of Jerusalem Foretold

Third, a first-century Jewish rabbi living in Judea publicly identified Daniel as the writer of the second half of the book. Yeshua cited Daniel as the author of the prophecy of Antiochus when he made another prophecy pertaining to Judea. He referred to Daniel’s prior prophecy of Antiochus’ desecration of the Temple when he prophesied the future destruction of Jerusalem, which came to pass in 70 A.D. Once again, historians were forced to wrestle with a prophecy. They had to explain how Yeshua could have known, decades before the event, that the Romans would destroy the Temple.

Yeshua said: “When you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains” (Matthew 24:15). He more specifically stated, “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart” (Luke 21:20–21). As Yeshua foretold, 40 years later the Romans besieged and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple.

Once again, historians sought to explain away predictive prophecy in a rational way. Many argued that this passage was redacted into the Gospels by Christians in the second century. The weakness of that argument is that when the Roman armies surrounded Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Jewish followers of Yeshua living in the city recalled his prophecy and fled, as he had instructed. The historian Eusebius, writing in the third century A.D., recounted that the Jewish followers of Yeshua remembered his prophecy and fled to the city of Pella, on the east bank of the Jordan River:

But the people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by a revelation, vouchsafed to approved men there before the war, to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea called Pella.12

The Verdict

Yeshua’s citation of Daniel, its discovery among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the internal evidence within the book all testify to a single authorship of the book. A secondary challenge to historians who reject predictive prophecy is that the Gospels contain Yeshua’s foretelling of the destruction of Jerusalem. These facts defy rational historiography and are the source of Hanukkah’s historic dilemma.

Hanukkah celebrates the end of Syrian tyranny, the hope of religious freedom and the Jewish will to survive. But it also points to a greater miracle than a candelabra, to a God who granted us a glimpse at events that would transpire and assured us that He oversees the course of history.

Hanukkah’s historical dilemma can only be explained by embracing that an all-powerful God of history gave us His book, the Scriptures, which foretold these events and explained their meaning. God cannot be naturally explained, nor can the events of Hanukkah, nor its message to us today. By knowing the God of history personally through His son, Yeshua, we can know His purpose in our own lives and discover true hope in a hopeless world.

Endnotes

3. Ibid., 239.
Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication, was approaching, and all the children of Vaysechvoos were excited. All, that is, but one.

Heshie was upset. Very upset. All the children were rehearsing for the Hanukkah play that was to be presented in the synagogue. Yes, there would be a play, and then a meal of delicious latkes, with plenty of garlic and onions fried in oil for all to eat. And of course, dreidel games for the children.

Now, one would think that there was little cause for Heshie to be sad. But he had his reasons. The play was very important to him.

Yonkel had the part of Mattathais and Yitzhak was to be the mean Syrian king, Antiochus. But the real honor went to Mendel in the role of Judah Maccabee.

That’s what upset Heshie so much!

“Mendel’s a rotten actor and he gets to be the hero? Just because I’m short and heroes are supposed to be tall, I didn’t get the part,” he wailed to his parents.

“Shhh!” his father responded impatiently.

“But Papa, I know I could do it, and much better than Mendel.”

“Enough, son!”

Heshie’s father, Ezra ben Yosef, was a pious man. Though a carpenter by trade, he spent long hours studying the holy books. He so wanted to see his son share his love of the Torah and the scholarly works of the ancient rabbis. But Heshie would instead find ways to excuse himself from study.

“I need to be out in the fresh air, Papa! That way I’ll grow tall and strong! Reading and studying the holy books will only distract from what is important.”

Eshka, his mother, said, “Shhh! Be quiet Heshie. Your whining will only upset your father. He has little patience for worldly matters like plays and festivals.”

Getting no sympathy from his parents, Heshie retreated to the loft. “They don’t understand,” he moaned to himself. He sobbed and sighed until he was overtaken by merciful sleep.

Dinner was ready and Eshka climbed to the boy’s loft to let him know. She found Heshie asleep and gently shook him. He didn’t stir. Eshka shook him with some force the second time. But still, the boy would not wake.

“Ezra!” screamed the frightened woman. “Heshie, I think he’s dead!!!”

Her husband rushed up the wooden ladder and grabbed the child, “Wake up, wake up!” he pleaded.

“Ezra sighed with relief. “Dear, he’s not dead. His body is warm and he’s breathing.”

“Then why won’t he awaken?”

“I don’t know. We’ll ask the sage of Vaysechvos. He’ll know how to help our Heshie.”

The wise man arrived shortly, but after examining the child, he could offer no explanation other than saying, “He is living, but he seems to be in a trance, like he was

Illustration by Amer Olson

(continued on page 8)
If you are Jewish and already a bit uncomfortable with the Christmas season, then, as the song says, “You’d better watch out, you’d better not cry, you’d better not pout, I’m telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town”¹—on the first night of Hanukkah!

Most Jewish people—and, I hope, most gentiles—know that Christmas is not about Santa Claus. It’s about Jesus (Yeshua, in Hebrew).

As the first night of Hanukkah and Christmas Eve coincide this winter, the “December dilemma” will be almost unavoidable for interfaith families—specifically, Jewish-gentile couples and their children.

It can all get a bit confusing. Check out this feature of a Disney cruise:

**Holiday story time** beneath the giant tree, where children gather to hear classic tales of Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanza, including a cozy and intimate storytelling with Mrs. Claus as she shares some of her favorite Christmas stories.²

Does it strike anyone else as a bit strange for a Jewish kid to be sitting under a giant tree with Mrs. Claus on Hanukkah?

The dilemma: What shall we celebrate? How shall we celebrate?

Let’s get to the heart of the matter: is there any connection between Hanukkah and Christmas?

On the surface—on the basis of tradition—one would say, “No way!” Christmas celebrants decorate trees, sing carols, stuff stockings, eat fruitcake, wait for St. Nick and give gifts. Other than the gifts (and eight nights of them!), Hanukkah seems to bear little resemblance to Christmas, as children play **dreidel**, eat **latkes**, light the **menorah**, and dance the **hora**.

But let’s dig a little deeper—at the roots (pardon the pun) of the Christmas tree, for a start.

The modern Christmas tree originated in western Germany as the main prop of a popular play in medieval times about Adam and Eve. Known as a “Paradise tree,” a fir was decorated with apples, representing the Garden of Eden.³

So what do Adam and Eve have to do with Christmas? According to the biblical account, they listened to Satan, disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit. God told Satan (who was in the form of a serpent): “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Genesis 3:15).

Many Christians⁴ understand the seed of Eve to be the Messiah, Yeshua, who defeated Satan (“bruise your [Satan’s] head”) through his death and subsequent resurrection.

Another Jewish-Christmas connection takes us to Israel. The Hebrew Scriptures prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem:

> But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from old, from ancient days” (Micah 5:2, 5:1 in the JPS).

Can you think of anyone associated with Christmas who was born in Bethlehem? (Hint: It wasn’t Santa Claus.) But what does any of this have to do with Hanukkah? The Hanukkah story took place during the 400-year period between the writing of the last book of the Hebrew Scriptures and the first book of the New Testament.

The Jewish people were under Persian rule until Alexander defeated the Persians in 331 B.C. When Alexander died, his kingdom was divided among his generals. Syria was under the Seleucids, who ruled over Judea and tried to indoctrinate the Jewish people with Greek culture. Antiochus IV (the “Madman King”) came to power in 175 B.C. He decreed, “Whoever refuses [to renounce Judaism] should be put to death.” And many were. Antiochus desecrated the Holy Temple, offering a
pig on the altar to honor the Greek god, Zeus.

Mattathias, an elderly Jewish priest, and his five sons gathered a band of guerilla fighters. After three years of combat, they defeated the Syrians in 165 B.C. under the leadership of one of the sons, Judah, called “Maccabee,” which means “hammer.” He reclaimed and purified the Temple.

At the time of Jesus’ birth, the Jewish people were expecting the Messiah to be a political hero like Judah Maccabee and to deliver them from Roman rule. (This is one reason why the majority of our Jewish people at the time felt that Jesus could not be the Messiah.)

But years earlier, the prophet Isaiah spoke of a Messiah king who would rule eternally but come as a child: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). Isaiah said that this Messiah would be born of a virgin: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” [Immanuel means God is with us] (Isaiah 7:14). And Isaiah also said that this Messiah would die for the sins of the people: “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5).

Judah Maccabee gained a great victory for the nation from religious persecution. Isaiah spoke of a Messiah who will rule and reign in the future, but who first would give his life as a ransom. For this to happen, the Messiah would need to be resurrected. Isaiah confirms this: “When his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days” (Isaiah 53:12).

Yeshua (Jesus) meets all these criteria.

Legend says that, although Judah Maccabee only found enough oil in the Temple to burn for one day, it miraculously lasted for eight. Today, we commemorate this by kindling the lights of the menorah, and Hanukkah is known as “the Festival of Lights.” Jesus said this about himself: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). It is traditional to have a shammos candle as part of the Hanukkah menorah to light the other eight candles. “Shammos” means servant. The writer of this article believes that the shammos can be regarded as a visual symbol of Jesus, who came to bring the light of salvation to the world.

So at this season of Chrimukkah, how can Jew and gentile celebrate together?

If you are a gentile who has never explored the Jewish roots of Christianity, why not open up the first “two-thirds” of your Bible and take a look? If you are Jewish and have never opened that “forbidden” book, the New Testament, take the time to read it for yourself. You will discover that the New and the “Old” Testaments are not two books, but one. You will come to see that Jesus is the reason for the season—for Jew and gentile alike.

Happy Hanukkah and Merry Christmas!

Endnotes

1. Haven Gillespie and J. Fred Coots, “Santa Claus is Coming to Town.”

Illustration ©Getty Images (modified)
in the presence of angels. I don’t know how to waken him. Or even if I should try.”

The pious carpenter and his wife were bewildered. Their son lay still before them. Yet, he wasn’t in Vaysechvoos; it seemed that he was thousands of miles and thousands of years away.

Indeed, Heshie was in another time and land. He was on the rocky hills of Judea and he was a man, not a boy. And tall! Why, he stood half a length higher than his father! Another young man approached him. “Why are you not with the others?” he asked with some authority. “Well, I er, um . . .” “Come with me now. We will never prevail in ridding our land of the foreigners if we are not moving as one unit, one army, one force, under the one true God!”

Heshie was bewildered. One army? Judea? Could it be? Could I be transported to the days of old? And this fellow none other than the Maccabee, Judah?

His eyes and his heart knew beyond any doubt.

The two men approached a cave where a hundred others stood. The Syrian patrol could be seen coming, and though they were distant, their emblems clearly identified the destroyers.

The man who had led him to the others began to speak.

“This is one more battle we must fight to force the oppressors out of the land, that we might cleanse it from wickedness and recover Jerusalem, the holy Temple and all that is the Lord’s.”

This is not a play, thought Heshie. I’m really here. And while I’m not Judah, the Hammer of God, I am one of his band of guerilla fighters. If only Mendel and my parents could see me now!

Heshie was handed a large bow and a quiver full of arrows. He’d never handled a weapon before. He managed to extend the bow string a bit, but it took all of his strength.

The men began chanting in unison psalms of protection.

“Guard my soul and deliver me . . . Redeem Israel, O God, out of his troubles.”

The voices were strong and melodic. And indeed, the psalms of protection seemed to impart an invisible armor that was much sturdier than that worn by the Syrian patrol. Heshie had paid so little attention in cheder* that he did not know the psalms by heart as these valiant soldiers did.

Next, the Maccabees began chanting the battle psalms:

“Oh, give us help against the adversary, for deliverance by man is in vain. Through God we shall do valiantly, and it is He who will tread down our adversaries.”

Heshie realized that the strength of the Maccabees was not in their weapons or in their brawny biceps. He began crying because he truly was not one of them. He didn’t have their zeal for God, their love of Torah, their sense of prayerful purpose.

Then Heshie heard a voice. It wasn’t the Maccabees chanting nor was it the wind. It was a still and gentle whisper meant only for him: “A wise man is strong; yea, a man of knowledge increaseth strength.”

The words pierced him in a way that was both painful and sweet. He opened his eyes to see his loving parents beside him.

“He’s awake, he’s back!” they simultaneously exclaimed.

Heshie gazed into the wise eyes of his father. Here is a man who has tasted, no, devoured the holy words of God all his life. What strength such devotion to the things of God produces, Heshie thought. It was the same strength and confidence he had seen in Judah and his men.

“Papa,” the boy lifted his head. “After supper, can we read together from the psalms of David?”

* Hebrew elementary school

Watch “Hanukkah in 60 Seconds,” view “On the First Day of Christmas My Rabbi Gave to Me,” and enjoy other Hanukkah features (including our latke recipe), all at j4j.co/issues21v08

What about other Jewish people who have been challenged with this same issue? Check out ShoutOut to find out. Jewish journeys of faith, streaming now at jewsforjesus.org/shoutout