

## The Feasts of the Lord – Hanukkah

by Rufus Barnes



If you were asked which Jewish Feast that Jesus celebrated is referred to in the Christian New Testament, but not in the Old Testament, would you know the answer? I suspect that for most readers, the answer is 'no'. In fact the answer is the last Feast in the year, *Hanukkah* and we are told in John 10 verses 22/3 that Jesus celebrated this Feast in Jerusalem.

How then can a Feast of the Lord, celebrated annually by the Jewish people, not appear in the Old Testament? The answer is that it was inaugurated in the inter-testament period, between the time that the last book of the Old Testament was written and the birth of Jesus, and the writing of the books of the New Testament. The details of why the Feast was inaugurated are to be found in chapter 10 of the second book of Maccabees in the Apocrypha. This is a set of ancient books no longer included in most Bibles, although they were included in early versions of the King James Bible.

The background is that in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC the Greeks had become a world power under Alexander the Great and the ancient world had been unified into a culture known as Hellenism. After Alexander's death the Hellenistic empire was divided into two and the area covering the Holy Land came under the control of a group known as the Seleucids, whose leader was Antiochus IV, or Antiochus Epiphanes – a word which translates to 'god manifest'. Antiochus sought to unify his realm by imposing a single language, culture and religion. When some Jews rebelled against this policy Antiochus marched his troops into Jerusalem and desecrated the holy Temple by

sacrificing a pig on the altar and erecting a statue of the Greek god Zeus in the Temple. This was too much for a group of zealous Jews who started an uprising. Against all odds, the heavily outnumbered Jews led by Judah, known as Maccabee, or the Hammer, beat the Seleucids and re-took the holy Temple. This took place in what we now call December.

Since the Temple had been defiled it could not be used until it had been re-consecrated. For it to be re-consecrated, it was necessary to prepare special oil, which took eight days to produce. Only a single unbroken phial of oil was found dating from before the desecration, enough to light the 7-branched candlestick or Menorah, for a single day. This oil was poured into the candlestick and was lit to signify the Light of God. Miraculously, it proved sufficient to light the candlestick for the full eight days until the new oil could be prepared. The eight-day festival of Hannukah was inaugurated to mark this miracle.

At Hannukah a special nine-branched candlestick, known as an Hanukkiah, is lit – one candle on day one, two on day two etc., culminating with eight on day eight. The ninth candle is called the servant and is used to light the other candles. In addition it is traditional to eat food cooked in oil, such as doughnuts and potato pancakes, to remember the importance of the oil in the miracle.

There was a debate as to whether this festival should be treated in the same way as the other Feasts. However, the sages referred back to Daniel 8, which prophesied the rise and fall of a king in such detail that it was easy to compare the prophecy to what actually happened in respect of Antiochus. It was, therefore, agreed that the event was worthy of being celebrated as a Feast in the same way as the others I have written about.

For Christians we can see that Hannukah commemorates the cleansing of the Temple to allow the true worship of God to take place again in Jerusalem. As believers our bodies are the Temples in which the Spirit of God dwells. We need to ensure that our hearts are not defiled and that we keep them clean for God to dwell in us.

### **Rufus Barnes – May 2020**

*After becoming a Believer and getting married, Rufus Barnes went to Bible School in Jerusalem where his eyes were opened to the Hebraic root of the Christian faith. He is currently Vice-Chair of **CMJ UK**, is on the leadership team of **Hephzibah Cambridge** and leads an Israel prayer meeting in his home town in Essex UK. He has led a number of study tours to Israel and was Chair of **Love Never Fails**.*