

CHRIST AND HANUKKAH

(Did Jesus Have a Dradle?)

by: Mark J. Kelly

SAINTE John's Gospel contains a multitude of links and strands blended together throughout its intricate tapestry. For now we will concentrate on one feast of the Beloved disciple's book. John mentions several of the Jewish Feasts, what is said by our Lord in word and simple presence at these feasts are seminal. We will look out of this pericope and see how it relates to the rest of the Gospel. By looking at a small section of John's Gospel we can view it "Inside-out" and see how it tells the much larger story.

AND THERE WAS LIGHT

A person raised with nothing but candlelight would certainly be impressed with the illumination given from an oil hurricane lamp. In a dark room it would draw our attention and become the focus of the thoughts of all present. If you could suddenly introduce a bright, modern, halogen flood lamp or stadium lights to a person from the 13th Century, a person with only a candle to illumine their way, their attention should be drawn away from the puny and now insignificant light, and towards this new and fantastic burnished spectacle before their eyes.

Such is the image John draws for us in his narrative of the Son of God. John wants us to look at Christ with new eyes. He would have us behold the glory of Christ who came to the people of his day. Jesus shone as a light that drew people to Him, like a moth to a warm and glowing flame on a long winter vigil. St. John delights to play with verbs of sight in his Gospel. There are over 170 uses of such simple but crucial words (many occurring in the first chapter) as "look, see, revealed, manifest, behold etc." These plain but pivotal verbs set a tone

and preach their own message in the theological Gospel of John. In other words, John is a Gospel of vision, and new sight. This is best illustrated in John's opening chapter.

John 1:29 The next day he (John the Baptizer) saw Jesus coming toward him, and he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

When John's disciples went to follow Jesus he answered their query of where he lived by saying, "Come and see." (John 1:39). As this revelation of Christ continues he is brought to meet Nathanael. When the doubting Nathanael queries if anything good can come from Nazareth. He is told by Philip, "Come and see." (John 1:46). The following interchange between our Lord and Nathanael will set a tone for the entire Gospel of John.

John 1:47-51 Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and said to him, "Behold an Israelite in whom there is no guile!" Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these. And he said to him, "Truly, truly I say to you, you will see heaven opened and angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of man."

Nathanael could not see much in this plain man from a backwater town like Nazareth. What good can come from there? Yet with our Lord's help, Nathanael will see Christ with new eyes. Suddenly this nobody, from nowhere is proclaimed the Son of God, the King of Israel! Nathanael saw our Lord as he truly is. For the rest of the Gospel, especially our text on the Feast of Purification, John constantly urges us to look with eternal eyes and see the fullness and beauty of the Lord.

THE MESSIAH HONORS THE MACCABEES

The Feast of Dedication has arrived and it is winter. The Feast of Purification or Dedication of the Temple is described in the book of the Maccabees (1 Mac. 4:36-59, 2 Mac 1:18-2:19, 10:1-8). These were

historic accounts written between the time of Malachi, the last prophet of the Old Testament, and the advent of John the Baptist in the New Testament. In the midst of this prophetic hush, about 140 years before the birth of Christ, the Greeks conquered and ruled over Palestine with an iron fist.

For a time the Greeks forbade the Jews from following the Mosaic Law, and the penalties for disobedience were harsh. They killed any child who was circumcised and hung him around his mother's neck. Then, killing the parents of the child and the priests who performed the circumcision. The Greeks, under the Ptolemies, desecrated the Temple by offering a sacrifice of swine on the altar of God. The sacrifice was made to Zeus, the chief Greek god. Then their captors forced pork down the throats of the priests.

These were truly dark times. This abomination of the Temple, the primary symbol of the presence of God to the people of the Old Covenant, could not be tolerated by the Jews. They revolted under the leadership of a family known as the Maccabees. After the Jewish victory they cleansed the old Temple re-dedicated the Sanctuary and re-lit the light that represented the presence of God amongst His people.

The famous story connected with this new feast says that our spiritual fathers, the Jews, had only enough oil for the lamp in the Temple to burn for one day, but Jewish Feasts lasted for eight days. Miraculously though, the Lamp burned for eight days, on its measly supply of oil. God had made His real presence known in a miraculous way. This feast is now called the Feast of Hanukkah or Lights. Our Lord being the observant Jew was honoring the Maccabees, yes, Jesus Christ was celebrating Hanukkah. The Jewish people, to this day, still celebrate this feast. They bring a piece of the Temple into their homes. On the 25th day of the Month of Chislev (their Dec. 25) this feast, dedicated in the time of the Maccabees, celebrates new light in a restored Temple. In other words, the Temple, which had been dead, was restored to the people of God.

MIGHTIER THAN THE MACCABEES

Our Lord enters the Temple on this feast day, The Feast of Dedication. The crowd bristles with expectation. The conversation begins: detractors surround Jesus. In their blindness and sin they are not seeking to celebrate this new light and absorb it into their souls, they are looking to stamp it out!

John 10:24 So the Jews gathered round him and said unto him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

It was commonly believed that the Messiah would be revealed during one of their major Feast days, they were right. Their belief was most true. The Messiah constantly "reveals" himself during their Feast days in the Gospel of John. It is important to see this story in the context of its Gospel. The Gospel of John centers on a number of themes. One of the major connected lines of thought is Christ's various visits to the Temple during major Jewish feast days. Jesus visited the Temple early in the Gospel and drove out the money sellers (John 2:13-25). This happened during the Feast of Passover. Jesus was already proclaiming to them that He was the ultimate Passover. It is during this visit that he compares himself the Temple and says it will be destroyed and raised up on the third day.

John 2:19-21 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days? But he spoke of the temple of his body."

By this Jesus has already shown that he is the true Temple of God, the paradigm of God's presence amongst His people.

In chapter five He visits the Temple and heals a Blind man on the Feast of Pentecost. Revealing his power over sickness and bringing light to the blind. Christ continues to display for all to see that the life in Him comes from the Father, and that all judgment will be accomplished by the Son (John 5:27)

In chapter Seven He visits the Temple on the Feast of Tabernacles. He declares at this feast that, "If anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink." (John 7:37). It is also at this time that Jesus declares that

he is the Light of the World (John 8:12). If they don't see "it" by now they never will. How can the unbelieving Jews possibly ask for him to declare himself now?

The crowds are drawn to Christ, almost against their will, every time he comes to the Temple. They are attracted to his light yet some do not wish to share in it. They prefer the light of the old dying Temple made with Herod's unclean hands. They are a people who prefer to go into the forest with an old flickering candle than with a new Halogen floodlight. In the darkness of their world they prefer their weak candle to a blazing torch. A torch that blinds us with its brilliance and chases all shadows away.

He declares and shows his glory and his fulfillment of those feasts every time he comes to the Temple. What a ludicrous statement, "How long do you make us doubt? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." They have no intention of entering into the True Temple of God and seeing the new light of the Tabernacle.

Christ appears on the Feast of Dedication, the Festival of Light, the Festival of God's renewed presence amongst his people. He declares himself to be equal with God. By doing this he shows himself to be, The True Light. The people reject Him. Most of the Children of Israel have become so obsessed by the structure of the earthly Temple, they forgot that it represented and pointed to God in Heaven. By saying that He and the Father were one, Christ declared Himself to be greater than the Temple, an object that had become too precious in their sight. The Temple had become their idol. They neglected to remember that the Tabernacle was merely a reflection of the true tabernacle in Heaven. Preferring the weak candle and the worldly Temple to the blinding bright, modern, stadium floodlight of God in human flesh, Jesus Christ, the true light of the World.

When Christ stood before them and declared that he was equal to the Father, Jesus declared that He was the new Light of the restored Temple. The Feast of Dedication was fulfilled in Him. All of our Lord's appearances at Feasts are declaring some facet of His glory to us. Jesus tries to show the people of his day that He is the new and better light of the Tabernacle. The old Temple flickers like an old dying candle and He shines forth as a flood lamp. Jesus is Hanukkah. He is the re-

stored Temple and the light that will not go out, He is mightier than the Maccabees, our Lord himself is the resurrected Temple, not the building made by men's hands. The new and better light should have attracted them; they should have traded in their old candle, no matter how pretty it might have been. Our passage ends with Christ leaving the Temple and going to the far side of the Jordan.

John 10:40-42 Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. Here he stayed and many people came to him.

Jesus left the old Temple behind and traveled to another place. His disciples, in search of God, came to Him, not to the old Temple made by human hands. The disciples who traveled across the Jordan found the true Temple of God. It was very easy to find Him. They simply followed the brighter light.

BY WHAT LIGHT

During the Easter Triduum and the reading of the Passion Gospel, it is the voice of the people, the great us, who cry out, "Crucify Him, crucify him!" In similar fashion we need to read ourselves into this passage and realize that we are the people looking at the wrong Temple. How many times have we been distracted by the bauble of this world, yes even "religious" things and not seen Christ. We live in a very visual age there is much out there to draw our attention away from the beauty of the Lord. Even the Temple made to worship God became an obstacle. In its essence it was holy and good, but when it was seen in the wrong manner it became an obstacle. By what light are we being guided in these days? What are the temples, in our lives, keeping us from crossing over the River Jordan and following our Lord to the fullest? May we, like Nathanael, look at Christ with the eyes of faith and truth, and never fail in our vision of Him.

"AFTER THOUGHT"

HANUKKAH, DRADLES, AND PRAYERS FOR THE DEAD

Besides our Lord showing Himself to be the Temple of God, several other things are of great importance here. In a sense our Lord did “play with a Dradle”. He was not only a good Jew he was the best Jew, he fulfilled the Law of Moses! So as every observant Jew of this time, our Lord is celebrating the Feast of the Purification. That means he is viewing the institution of this feast, initiated under the Maccabees, as part of the ongoing redemptive history of the People of God. Secondly to participate in this feast one naturally prays for the dead as the Maccabees so instructed.

Doctrinal development has a major place within Holy Scripture. Unfortunately for our Protestant Brothers and Sisters who do not view Maccabees, as Canon a great deal of true biblical understanding is lost. If our Lord and the Apostles honored the Books of the Maccabees as Holy Scripture, should not we? The story of our Lord at the Feast of Dedication is an affirmation of the development of doctrine within the Old Covenant people of God. A prophetic silence after Malachi does not mean God stopped dealing with the nation of Israel. God still dealt with His people under the terms of the Mosaic Covenant until the coming of Jesus Christ. There is no break. God was still revealing truth and Scripture was being written after the Prophet Malachi and before John the Baptist. The books of the Maccabees (and Judith, Tobit, *et al.*) were NEVER hidden from anyone (the word apocrypha means hidden). They were always there, plain as day. The feast founded during these days celebrated by our Lord on an equal par with those in the Pentateuch. Doctrine was still being developed. According to our Lord Jesus, the Old Covenant continued until John the Baptizer (Matt 11:11-13).

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