

THE JEWISH ANNOTATED APOCRYPHA

New Revised
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Bible Translation

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Editors



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of Israel. Tobit 13 contains a long hymn of blessing that speaks of the glorious return and the rebuilding of Jerusalem in splendor. After its penitential prayers, Baruch ends with a poem about the return (Bar 4.5–5.9; cf. also 2 Macc 1.27). Sirach 36.1–22 of-

fers a moving prayer for the hope of the gathering of the scattered people and their return to Jerusalem. The return would display God's power, holiness, and mercy, and this would confirm the words of the prophets, who promised a restoration.

HANUKKAH IN THE APOCRYPHA

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The eight-day Jewish holiday of Hanukkah ("Dedication" or "Initiation") is remarkable in a number of ways. According to the Jewish conception of scripture, it is decidedly postbiblical, the earliest significant holiday with no basis in the Tanakh. It is unambiguously political, commemorating both a staunch uprising against a Syrian-Greek tyrant and a spirited attack on those Jews sympathetic to the Greek way of life. It is unrelentingly religious, valorizing the struggles of priestly leaders who protect a particular interpretation of their faith at all costs under the grimmest of circumstances. It is also unceasingly interpreted, as scholars, communal leaders, and practicing Jews have applied many innovative new frames (including economic, territorial, military, consumerist, and Zionist) to the holiday, allowing it to evolve with the times while retaining its relevance and remaining one of the most widely observed Jewish celebrations.

Scholars of the past two centuries have sought to locate the origins of Hanukkah in foreign practices drawn from surrounding cultures. Since Hanukkah occurs during the darkest time of the year, around the winter solstice when the night is longest in the Northern Hemisphere, they posit various sources for the holiday in contemporaneous local observances. Major candidates include the Greek Dionysian festival and the Roman Saturnalia, weeklong bouts of celebratory drinking and wild celebration coupled with grand processions designed to both praise the gods and enliven a dark winter. Some find closer ties to Zoroastrian fire ceremonies, which share an emphasis on miraculous flames that appear in rabbinic descriptions of the holiday (in *b. Shabb.* 21a and thereafter). Ultimately, while these foreign festivals do share some similarities with Hanukkah and may even have contributed the occasional element to its observance, the linkage is tenuous at best, and the conclusion that Hanukkah developed wholesale

from them is unsustainable. At the same time, many unrelated cultures observed fire or candle ceremonies at the darkest time of the year, which suggests a broad popular appeal to such celebrations.

First and Second Maccabees constitute the core historical witnesses to events at the time of the origin of Hanukkah, making the Apocrypha of vital importance in tracing the origination and development of the holiday in a way unique among the Jewish holidays. The depiction of Hanukkah in these works draws directly from a tapestry of preexisting biblical ideas and narratives. The very name "Hanukkah" builds on earlier biblical sources where the Tanakh describes the dedications of the altar in the Tabernacle (Num 7.88), the walls of Jerusalem (Neh 12.27), and the dedications of the First and Second Temples (1 Kings 8.63 and Ezra 6.15–17), all of which use the verb *h-n-kh* ("to dedicate" or "to initiate"). To rededicate this verb in the service of the holiday is an inspired choice that boosts the import and authenticity of the acts of the Maccabees by linking them back to revered religious roots. Recognizing their military victory and rededication of the Temple with an eight-day holiday makes Hanukkah longer than any other biblical celebration except the combined Sukkot / Shemini Atzeret / Simchat Torah complex (biblically, and in Israel today, Passover lasts only seven days). Also, the Hasmoneans' establishment of an eight-day festival recalls Solomon's eight-day initial dedication of the First Temple (1 Kings 8.66). Such choices speak volumes about the perceived import of the holiday in its initial phases.

The accounts in the Apocrypha are not without their complications. First and Second Maccabees differ substantively in their treatment of the events that led to the revolt of the Maccabees, the origin of Hanukkah, the holiday's initial observance, and the spread of its influence. The relevant narrative in 1 Macc begins in or about 169 BCE, when the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes attacked Jerusalem,

entering the Temple and plundering its valuables. In 167 BCE, his forces waged an even more vicious attack, resulting in much bloodshed, the taking of captives, and the wanton destruction of property. There then followed decrees (1 Macc 1.41–53) requiring strict religious and cultural homogenization across his entire empire, which included prohibitions against core Jewish rituals: outlawing sacrifices in the Temple; public reading of biblical texts; and the observance of the sabbath, circumcision, and dietary laws, all of which began to drive Jews into hiding in places of refuge. For those caught refusing to follow these decrees, the result was often forced public eating of forbidden foods or worshiping of idols under the threat of immediate death. On the fifteenth day of the Jewish month of Chislew in 167 BCE, Antiochus's forces erected an abomination in the Temple in Jerusalem, and on the twenty-fifth of Chislew those same forces offered an idolatrous sacrifice atop Judaism's sacred altar. Further prohibitions, desecrations, and attacks followed, and their violence took a horrid toll on both the sacred objects and the noncompliant members of the Jewish community (1 Macc 1.54–63).

Among the Jews, such actions spurred a broad range of reactions. Some Jews (often called "hellenizers") gladly adopted the anti-Jewish Greek activities thrust upon them (1 Macc 1.43), while others (referred to as "zealots" or the "pious Jewish opposition," depending on one's viewpoint) stood firm against such behaviors (1 Macc 1.62). This upheaval in religious and political leadership, combined with Antiochus's vicious persecution and the resultant societal disruption, gave rise to a new form of grassroots rebellion. Mattathias, from a small town northwest of Jerusalem called Modi'in, and his five sons, especially Judah Maccabee ("the Hammer"), led a guerrilla uprising against their nation's tormentors that would eventually throw off the yoke of foreign rule. The rebellion as described in 1 Macc started with Mattathias's declaration of loyalty to God, his public slaying of a Jewish idol worshiper and one of Antiochus's officials, and the destruction of a pagan altar (1 Macc 2.19–26). Before Mattathias died, he blessed his sons in the manner of a biblical patriarch (cf. 1 Macc 2 and the biblical testamentary form surrounding Jacob's death in Gen 49–50), whereupon the campaign expanded into a heroic three-year Maccabean guerrilla uprising against the Syrian-Greeks led by Judah.

The Hanukkah narrative of 1 Macc, focused keenly on the acts of the Maccabees, reached its stunning

denouement in ch 4. In 164 BCE Judah's army climbed Mount Zion to the Temple precincts, fought off the final Greek soldiers stationed in the Citadel/Akra (a fortress Antiochus built adjacent to the Temple Mount), and retook the sanctuary. Seeing their sacred place in ruins, they piously rent their garments, bowed low before God, and covered themselves in ashes (1 Macc 4.39–40). Judah appointed unblemished priests to remove what they had to and restore what they could (1 Macc 4.42–51), thus repairing the accoutrements of the Temple in as faithful a manner as possible. Once the restoration was completed, they rose early on the twenty-fifth of Chislew to offer their sacrifices precisely three years to the day after Antiochus's idolatrous sacrifice in the Temple, rededicating the renovated Temple to the sound of singing, harps, lyres, and cymbals (1 Macc 4.54–58).

The reinitiation festivities in 1 Macc draw heavily upon prior biblical accounts of consecration of sacred space, including the elements of construction/restoration, anointing with oil, numerous sacrifices, singing and music, broad involvement of leadership, and, perhaps most importantly, the celebration of an extended festival at a propitious moment in the calendar (see the various accounts of initiation of the Tabernacle in Ex 40 and Num 7; the Temple in 1 Kings 8; 2 Chr 7:1; Ezra 3; and the rededication in 2 Chr 29). First Maccabees concludes its account with Judas decreeing that the "days of dedication of the altar" be observed at their time of year annually for eight days with joy and gladness on the twenty-fifth of Chislew. From this point on, the remainder of 1 Macc contains no further mention of the holiday or its observance.

Second Maccabees presents itself as a one-volume work of history abridged from the longer work of Jason of Cyrene, a North African historian who penned a lost five-volume opus in Greek (2 Macc 2.19–32). While the events it covers are broadly similar, with respect to Hanukkah it is a far more suspect history, claiming from the start: "we have aimed to please those who wish to read, to make it easy for those who are inclined to memorize, and to profit all readers" (2 Macc 2.25). Such a statement immediately suggests a focus on the reader's pleasure and ease, rather than tight adherence to historical accuracy. Such a tendency aligns with many similar Greek works, where history is often reshaped to entertain, educate, and inspire.

Two epistles provide an introductory frame at the start of 2 Macc—letters sent by Palestinian Jews to the Jewish community in Egypt—with the intent to encourage proper observance of Hanukkah.

Scholars have debated the authenticity of these two letters, suggesting them to be forgeries, late additions to the work, or in rare cases actual authentic sections. Whatever the case may be, their inclusion suggests two important aspects about the holiday of Hanukkah in the late second to early first century BCE. The Palestinian Jewish community is shown to be deeply invested in the broader observance of Hanukkah, having adopted it early on and with enthusiasm. The presence of these letters suggests they were in search of validation from Egypt—the largest Jewish community after their own—as a way of bolstering the memory of their heroes, the legitimacy of their Temple, and the continuity of the postbiblical practices they had initiated. It also suggests that the observance of Hanukkah may not have been spreading very effectively in diasporan settings, for such epistolary encouragement would have been necessary only in the absence of its observance. This may have been due to the presence of Jewish sacrificial temples in Egypt that diminished the uniqueness of the Temple in Jerusalem, whether because of Egyptian Jewish questions about the purity and authenticity of the rededicated Temple or for simple reasons of political and military competition in the wake of the rise to power of the Hasmoneans after 164 BCE. Whether authentic or not, the inclusion of these pleas for observing Hanukkah provides a window into the slow warming of the diasporan community to the Palestinian Jews' revered new observance.

The description of Hanukkah's origin in 2 Macc generally parallels 1 Macc, with some significant differences. The name of the holiday differs from 1 Macc ("the days of dedication of the altar" in 4.59) to 2 Macc ("the purification of the Temple" in 10.5–8), suggesting a broadening of the role of the Maccabean actions of 164 BCE. Second Maccabees is rife with references to miracles and divine intervention absent from 1 Macc, including the gruesome demise of Antiochus in a divinely administered combination of worms and intestinal pain (2 Macc 9) and his seeming repentance expressed in a deathbed supplication (2 Macc 9.18–27). Supernatural "resplendent men on horses" appear from heaven, showering arrows and thunderbolts on Judah Maccabee's enemies at a particularly challenging moment of battle (2 Macc 10.29–31), from which, unsurprisingly, he emerges victorious. A similar miraculous horseman aids Judah in his victory against Lysias (2 Macc 11.8), an incident which is in an entirely different place in the sequence of the story in 1 Macc (4.28–35).

A few other variances appear between the accounts. Geographical mistakes in 2 Macc contrast with routine precision in 1 Macc. The military statistics found in the volumes also differ constantly. There is added focus on the execution of faithful Jews during the Maccabean revolt, with the poignant addition of a famous incident of the martyrdom of a mother and her seven sons that has come to symbolize the suffering of righteous Jews during this time (2 Macc 7). Such telling inclusions suggest a far freer hand in the composition of 2 Macc, with less complete adherence to the actual history because of distance or embellishment. It also bespeaks a broader view of religious leadership that now includes celebrated martyrs and courageous average Jews, as opposed to the intense focus on military action and the Maccabees themselves in 1 Macc.

The first epistle connects Hanukkah to the biblical festival of Sukkot ("Booths," also known as the festival of Tabernacles) as a new justification for its observance. In 2 Macc 1.9, Hanukkah is termed "the festival of booths in the month of Chislev." In 2 Macc 10.6–7 it is noted that the holiday was observed "for eight days with rejoicing, in the manner of the festival of booths, remembering how not long before, during the festival of booths, they had been wandering in the mountains and caves like wild animals. Therefore, carrying ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own holy place." Any number of challenges arise from this passage. Sukkot is a seven-day festival (or eight, counting the additional day of Shemini Atseret / Simchat Torah) while Hanukkah is eight days long. One may not generally delay the observance of the biblical holiday of Sukkot to observe it later, although the emergent nature of events could argue for a legitimate reason in this unique case. Ivy-wreathed wands may signal an added Greek influence, as the Greek thyrsus was a popular symbol of hedonism and fertility associated with Dionysus and his adherents. Finally, the subsequent observance of Hanukkah through the generations does not incorporate any of these specific activities that are clearly commanded for annual repetition in the prescription in 2 Macc 10.8.

What, then, can be made of this reference to Sukkot? It is meant to offer a stronger biblical underpinning to a weakly accepted postbiblical holiday to enhance its acceptance among the broader Jewish community. Why Sukkot? Ancient sources called Sukkot *he-hag*, "the Festival," because it attracted

the most celebrants, offered the most sacrifices, and remained a focal point of the Jewish festival pilgrimage cycle that was unsurpassed. Linking Hanukkah to this most important festival was a legitimization strategy intended to bolster its observance and help expand it to the Diaspora. Rabbinic texts also utilize Sukkot-related precedents, including Shammai's justification for decreasing the number of lamps each night because of the number of bullocks sacrificed during Sukkot (Num 29 and *b. Shabb.* 21b–22a) and the recitation of the full Hallel (Pss 113–18) during Hanukkah (*t. Sukk.* 3. 2).

Another element appears in the second letter in 2 Macc 1, where we find a recalled narrative of a miraculous fire that burned in the time of Nehemiah's rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, during the mid-fifth century BCE after the Babylonian exile. The fire ignites from a viscous liquid secreted away by the high priests when the Babylonians destroyed the Temple in 586 BCE. Despite the passage of time, that liquid, likely modeled on a petroleum derivative, still miraculously caught fire from the direct heat of the sun. The point of this narrative in its original form is to illustrate that the purity and sanctity of the First Temple now forms, at least symbolically, the foundation for the Second Temple. The inclusion of this tale in 2 Macc suggests an author concerned not just with the continuity of the current Temple with its prior manifestation but also with an interest in sacred fire. While the evidence is not entirely conclusive, this story represents an early linkage between Hanukkah and fire, a theme entirely absent in 1 Macc, but one that will develop and expand to become a core feature of the holiday in later evolutions. These elements show substantive dissimilarities between the two accounts that suggest different approaches by their authors and suggest the development of the holiday over its first century of existence.

A complete picture of the holiday of Hanukkah cannot be gleaned from these texts alone. Writing in the first century CE, Josephus adds the name of "Lights" (*phota*) to the holiday, focusing on freedom and liberty, facets that remain at the core of its ideological construction until this day (*Ant.* 12.316–26). Rabbinic literature, written in an age when the military might of Romans and other overwhelming powers made resistance futile, shifted the locus of responsibility from Maccabean human action to divine intervention and from the military field to the religious realm, refocusing the holiday around the divine provision of a miracle of one day's oil that lasted eight days (*b. Shabb.* 21b). Regular ritualized lighting

of Hanukkah lamps is described as early as the Tannaitic period (*m. B. Qam.* 6.6), with a wide, pluralistic variety of rules for different acceptable lighting practices (*b. Shabb.* 21b). Specific placement of the Hanukkah lamp in plain sight was meant to publicize the miracle, though this requirement could be altered in times of danger (*b. Shabb.* 21b). Blessings over the lighting were created using the formula *asher kiddishanu bemitzvotav* ("who sanctified us with God's commandments"), a formula generally reserved for commandments from the Torah; the sanctity of the lamps was elevated by prohibiting their usage for mundane activities and the disallowing of certain lighting practices that demeaned the observance (*b. Shabb.* 22a–23a). Further liturgical additions include *Al-HaNissim* ("A Prayer for Hanukkah," p. 275), a text that grew over the centuries to outline the story of the Maccabean revolt (*Soferim* 20.6; *Seder Rav Amram Gaon, Hanukkah*) and the probable thirteenth-century creation of *Maoz Tsur* ("Rock of Ages"), the most popular of Hanukkah songs.

Medieval Europe provided new ways to observe the customs of Hanukkah. The *Shulchan Aruch* (an important sixteenth-century legal code; see the Rema to *OH* 670.2) mentions the eating of cheese during Hanukkah as reminiscent of Judith's slaying of Holofernes (*Jdt* 12), attributing her success to the cheese she fed him, which presumably made him thirsty and caused the terminal alcoholic overindulgence that permitted his assassination. In northern Europe, where long, cold winter nights and limited food supplies conspired to make celebration difficult, latkes (potato pancakes) cooked in goose fat, dreidels (spinning tops for games of luck), small monetary gifts (*gelt*), and pageants helped bolster enjoyment of the holiday. Candles, first mechanically manufactured in the nineteenth century, offered convenience and ease of use and became quite popular, although some purists still view the burning of olive oil lamps as superior. Consumerist holiday merchandising strategies first coalesced around Christmas, then migrated to Hanukkah, and the concept of gifts each night arose in the first decades of the twentieth century. Early Zionist interpreters reveled in the military prowess of the Maccabees, as they founded and defended their own fledgling state and searched for models of prior Jewish heroism and courage. While Hanukkah surely begins with the narratives of the Apocrypha, its development is an ongoing saga that spans generations and communities in every corner of the globe and continues to this day.