

The Hanukkah Hang-up

By PAUL J. SCHARF

In my service for The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, one of the things I set out to accomplish this fall was to study the subject of Hanukkah in order to bring special messages on that topic.

With God's help, I was able to do so in three churches, along with sharing the material in a Bible study group that I teach regularly—and I have greatly enjoyed the experience!

As I strive to make clear when I present educational Passover Seder demonstrations, as well, I am not Jewish by heritage, nor do I claim to have any personal background that bestows expertise in the historical, religious and cultural aspects of these issues. But, as I always say, I am a Bible teacher, and thus I have the ability to research and speak before congregations in these vital areas.

As I have studied and taught on the origin, meaning and significance of Hanukkah this year, however, I have become overwhelmed with the reality that the events of the Hanukkah story are absolutely essential to our understanding, as Christians, of the New Testament, the gospels and the life of Christ.

But this revelation has also left me pondering on a question.

Why do we seem to know so little about Hanukkah—when the elements behind it are ultimately foundational to the storyline of the Bible? It is really quite remarkable—almost shameful—that we are not exceedingly familiar with them for that reason alone. This is to say nothing of the need to learn about Hanukkah for the purpose of relating to our Jewish friends at one of their most important seasons of the year.

So, what prevents Christians from knowing this rich history, which is so fundamental to our understanding of the world into which Jesus walked?

The events behind the Hanukkah story were clearly foretold by predictive prophecy in the book of Daniel (8:9-26; 11:21-35). And it is so important for us to grasp the truth that God was at work during those “400 silent years” that followed the close of the Old Testament canon.

He was working “all things according to the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11). He was working “all things ... together for good to those who love” Him (Rom. 8:28). He was working to propel history toward “the fullness of the time,” at which point He “sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal. 4:4). He was working to move the world to that stage at which “the people were in expectation” (Luke 3:15).

Notice precisely how God was superintending above the events of His creation during those “silent years”:

- He was moving history toward “the time of the end” (Dan. 8:17) and “the appointed time” (Dan. 8:19).
- He gave specific revelation regarding “the latter time of their kingdom, When the transgressors have reached their fullness” (Dan. 8:23).
- In spite of all nefarious attempts to the contrary, we realize that “the end *will still be* at the appointed time” (Dan. 11:27).
- Regardless of all the machinations of man, God’s plan for “the time of the end” was “still for the appointed time” (Dan. 11:35).
- Finally, the events of the Hanukkah story foreshadow the prophetic future, when “what has been determined shall be done” (Dan. 11:36).

Jesus Himself celebrated Hanukkah during His last year of Earthly ministry—and made the most amazing announcements during His participation—in John 10:22-39.

Yet, somehow it seems that we have neglected these necessities to understanding the world of the New Testament. We have replaced concepts of such ancient importance with modern questions and extra-Biblical trivialities. Could this actually be the result of a latent anti-Semitism that continues to plague our thinking in the Western, Christian world?

You really cannot celebrate the resurrection if you do not understand how and why Jesus died. Likewise, the most glorious Christmas production—even if has actual sheep and a real live baby—may not prove to be as helpful toward growing our understanding of His first coming as it would be to take the time to understand more about the world into which He was truly born.

Hanukkah will take place next year from Sunday, Dec. 18, to Monday, Dec. 26, sundown to sundown. It will again cover two Sundays, and will overlap perfectly with Christmas.

Now would be a wonderful time to think ahead about how you will prepare to have a meaningful outreach to the Jewish people—and also educate those within your own circle of influence about the importance of Hanukkah—during this season which is so significant to both Christians and, especially, all of our Jewish friends.

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