

# The Good Word

PUBLISHED BY ST. SERAPHIM OF SAROV AND ST. JOHN OF KRONSTADT ORTHODOX CHURCH, LA MESA, CA  
WITH THE BLESSING OF BISHOP AUXENTIOS OF ETNA AND PORTLAND



**THE SOCIOLOGY OF CHRISTMAS: NATIVITY HOMILY**  
(DELIVERED DEC 25, 2017 / JAN 7 2018)

BY PROTOPRESBYTER JAMES THORNTON

Today is the Great Feast of the Nativity of our Lord, and God, and Savior Jesus Christ. Christians are primarily concerned with the spiritual sense of things, since these have eternal importance. However, since we must seek our salvation within this fallen world, let us consider today the momentous consequences of the birth, life, and teachings of Christ Jesus on human societies, on communities large and small, and on the manner in which men conduct their lives.

Historians tell us that mankind has witnessed many revolutions, each of which has greatly affected the way men live and the way human societies function. The world of the last two thousand years has seen numerous revolutions — political, economic, and technological — that, for better or worse, have brought dramatic changes to the world. If, however, we dispassionately review the whole of history we are compelled to acknowledge that the greatest of all revolutions was that wrought two thousand years ago by Jesus Christ.

Christ's earthly adversaries misread the nature of what they saw, and so, although they tried to halt Christ by crucifying Him, they failed to halt the expansion of a revolution that would, in due time, sweep them and their worldviews away forever. What they failed to comprehend was that this was not a revolution of externals, not a revolution seeking to overthrow types of governments or particular rulers, but an inward revolution, the only kind of revolution that really lasts, a revolution of minds and hearts and spirits, a revolution that would upend the way men perceive themselves as intelligent beings and the way they perceive their place in the universe *vis-à-vis* their Creator, their fellow human beings, and the world around them.

Man is not by nature a reclusive creature; he requires companionship, wishing to live in company with others. For that reason family, community, and nation are all organic entities, corollaries of human life. The desire to

live in community emanates from the Mind of God and was implanted in the human psyche from the beginning. And while it is true that Christ left these social entities intact they were nonetheless altered significantly, returning more closely to their original character.

In the pagan Roman Empire of Christ's time, families and communities were in a state of dissolution, leaving individuals like isolated little ships scattered across a huge, treacherous sea. Historian J.F.C. Fuller writes that in the social decay of the pagan Empire "money became the sole link between man and man."

Christ Jesus directed mankind along a new path. In the Christian view God — a very accessible God — is the Father of all mankind and mankind a family, united, at least at a spiritual and moral level, in the arms of its Father. Far from being linked only by some materialistic principle such as money, people are linked by the Fatherhood of God and by their duties toward Him, as well as by a web of reciprocal duties toward one another. These duties toward one another are epitomized by a few related concepts: charity, justice, love of neighbor, recognition of the innate dignity of every human being, recognition that all are made in God's image, and, most saliently, Christ's Golden Rule: *whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.*<sup>1</sup>

Such concepts as the Golden Rule aimed, among other things, at mitigating overly rigid distinctions between classes and orders of men. In ancient Egypt, common people were not only subject to Pharaoh, they were his property, his "cattle." In ancient Rome, at the height of the mighty empire, the ruler was considered a living divinity before whom ordinary mortals groveled and cringed. But while social stratification into classes and orders is necessary to human societies, Christ softened these social boundaries and made clear that all, from highest to lowest, are subject to the same laws and rules of conduct, that all share equally in God's love, and that all will be judged according to an identical moral standard. Therefore, whereas societies are organized in stratified fashion, a reflection of the heavenly order, there must nonetheless exist a living

1. St. Matthew 7:12.



bond that unites the various strata, that makes men brothers, spiritually speaking.

Fr. Georges Florovsky writes that,

“Christianity entered history as a new social order, or rather a new social dimension. From the beginning Christianity was not primarily a ‘doctrine,’ but exactly a ‘community.’ There was not only a ‘Message’ to be proclaimed and delivered, and ‘Good News’ to be declared. There was precisely a New Community, distinct and peculiar, in the process of growth and formation, to which members were called and recruited. Indeed ‘fellowship’ ... was the basic category of Christian existence. ...Christians felt themselves to be closely knit and bound together in a unity which radically transcended all human boundaries ...”<sup>2</sup>

Paganism emphatically rejected such notions, which is why life in its societies was usually torn by class tension, class hatred, and class warfare and dominated by a “dog-eat-dog” mentality. Moreover, pagan thought viewed the “lifestyles of the rich and famous” as the ideal towards which all classes should strive. Christ inverted that ideal, embracing poverty Himself and saying, *Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*<sup>3</sup>

Let us mark well the term *poor in spirit*, not just *poor*, for the kingdom of heaven is not closed to any class. To be *poor in spirit* is to be humble, as opposed to haughty, and to avoid ascribing great value to material things.

And if the rich are required to be humble, to admit dependence upon God, and to see the poor as their brothers, so the poor are admonished to be humble also, to resist the virus of envy, and to see the rich as “their” brothers. Thus the meaning of the term *poor in spirit* becomes evident. All men and women, rich and poor alike, are admonished to put the spiritual and the eternal ahead of the material and the temporal, and are admonished, furthermore, to love their neighbors.

During His public ministry, Christ visited and enjoyed the company and hospitality of poor and rich alike. A passage from *Proverbs* says, *The rich and poor meet together: the Lord is Maker of them all.*<sup>4</sup> And so, from the Christian perspective, poverty, rightly understood and lived, is a virtue, while wealth, rightly understood and handled, is a means to the acquisition of virtue.

Man, again, is a social creature and hence the crucial importance of the smallest of the concentric circles that surround each of us, the family. By His attendance at

the wedding at Cana, and by His teaching on the subject of the relationship of husband and wife, Christ honored, elevated, and ennobled the matrimonial union of man and woman far beyond the frontiers of mere sexual impulses or contractual legalism, raising it to the level of the sublime and the sacred. The family, according to Christian teaching, is a small version of what the Church is, a Christian community. This “house church,” the tiny sacred society that is the family, is regarded by Christians as an assembly belonging to the Lord and called or summoned by God. The result of this ennoblement of marriage and of the family was an immeasurable invigoration of an institution that in pagan antiquity had degenerated to the point where, as Fuller puts it so vividly, it had been “turned from procreation to recreation.”<sup>5</sup>

In any community, children are the weakest of all creatures. Pagan antiquity took advantage of that fact and so abortion and infanticide were accepted practices, commonplace in fact. And whereas in the pagan Empire abandoned children who survived were, in the words of one historian, “exposed to corruption and exploitation,”<sup>6</sup> Christ required of His followers that they protect all children and care for them, providing for their physical needs, their moral development, and their education.

We have considered the smallest unit in human societies, the family, let us now consider the effect of Christ’s teachings on the largest unit, the State. The State in the pagan scheme of things was theoretically all powerful by reason of its ruler, who was regarded as “divine.” Thus, religion, the State, and the divine were merged into one mighty, iron fist.

We have seen a return, during the last century, to this idea of the omnipotent State. In those instances, it has become the practice to erase genuine religion as a factor altogether, glorifying Statism as a secular religion and raising the State to quasi-divine status.

Jesus never preached the violent overthrow of any established government, even though the Imperial government, and its local Herodian puppet regime in Judaea, were harsh and corrupt. Instead of directing his followers along the route of futile violence, Christ bade them to, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things which are God’s.”<sup>7</sup>

That statement, which so stunned Christ’s contemporaries and confounded His adversaries, restricted for all time the extent of the legitimacy of the

---

2. Georges Florovsky, *Antinomies of Christian History: Empire and Desert, Christianity and Culture*, Vol. two in *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Company, 1974), p. 67.

3. St. Matthew 5:3.

4. Proverbs 22:2.

---

5. J.F.C. Fuller, *Decisive Battles: Their Influence Upon History and Civilisation*, Charles Scriber’s Sons, New York, NY, 1940, p. 88.

6. Igino Giordani, *The Social Message of Jesus*, Alba I. Zizzamia, trans. (Boston, MA: St. Paul Editions, 1977), p. 170.

7. St. Matthew 22:21.



power of government. Certain things, to be sure, are proper to the role of the State, but only those things. That which belonged to the province of God, however, must not be usurped by government but placed beyond its reach. The province of God means not only freedom to observe formal, outward religious practices, but includes such things as the sanctity of innocent life, the sanctity of the family, the sanctity of the individual's conscience, freedom for Christian charitable work, freedom to defend Christian morality, and the freedom, as well as the duty, to convey to each new generation the totality of the Christian faith and its high standards of virtue.

Springing forth from Christ's dictum setting sharp limits on the functions of the State came the ideas that governed Christian statecraft for the better part of fifteen hundred years. Kings are not gods but must obey God's law, exactly as the lowliest of a king's subjects. All, in other words, must bend their necks before the King of Kings.

Furthermore, although there exist separate domains proper to government and proper to God, God's domain is the higher one and the State is dependent upon God, deriving its authority and power from God. Government is admonished to stand clear of what is rightly God's, and those involved in God's work on earth, including all ordinary Christian citizens, are duty bound to assure that government respects religion and adheres firmly to God's law. Finally, in a Christian context, both spheres, government and religion, work harmoniously, to insure peaceable, orderly, God-pleasing communities and nations.

These are a few of the historical and social consequences of Christ's birth two thousand years ago and of the teaching that revolutionized the world, creating a new civilization that appeared gradually, that flowered in the opening decades of the fourth century, and that continues to this day.

Let us conclude by briefly exploring the question of perfection. Was the Christian civilization that arose from Christ's life and the work of His followers perfect in all of its characteristics and manifestations? Did it ever fully achieve its ideal? Of course not!

Despite the absolute perfection of the teachings, Christianity, at the level of fallen mankind and at the level of the cultures, civilization, and societies created or transformed by its inward revolution, never succeeded in producing a regime of perfection, with perfect justice, charity, liberty, and so forth.

Poet and essayist T.S. Eliot explains in his *The Idea of a Christian Society* that,

"we have to remember that the Kingdom of Christ on earth will never be realized, and also that it is always being realized; we must remember that whatever reform or revolution we carry out, the result will always be a sordid travesty of what human society should be — though the world is never left wholly without glory."<sup>8</sup>

Fr. Florovsky writes similarly, remarking that Christianity "did not succeed in unlocking the gate of Paradise Lost. Yet nobody else has succeeded either. The gate is still locked. ... And probably there is no earthly key for that ultimate lock."<sup>9</sup>

Indeed so, for so long as this fallen world lasts, there can be no earthly paradise, no perfect Utopia. Christ insisted that his Kingdom is not of this world, while the world we know is one in which the forces of God are ever struggling against the forces of darkness, and in which victories over evil are always tentative. Christianity's influence on patterns of human life will always be an ongoing process, incomplete until the End of the Ages.

---

## THE BIBLICAL FEAST OF DEDICATION

---

BY DR. SERAPHIM STEGER

In our Jan-Feb 2018 issue we discussed the Biblical Feast of Booths (Sukkot in the Hebrew) entailed in the in the *Gospel of St. John* 7:2-10:21. In the very next verse we observe that the beloved disciple, St. John, briefly mentions another Jewish feast: 10:22 *And it was at Jerusalem the feast of the dedication*<sup>10</sup>, and it was winter. Interestingly, this feast is not mentioned by Moses among the appointed feasts of Israel in the *Torah* nor found elsewhere in the Jewish Scriptures. Other than Jesus' encounter with the Jews in Solomon's porch in the Temple that day, there is no other information given about this feast in the *New Testament*.

*Gospel of St. John 10:22 And it was at Jerusalem the feast of the dedication, and it was winter. 23 And Jesus walked in the temple in Solomon's porch. 24 Then came the Jews round about him, and said unto him, How long dost thou make us to doubt? If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly. 25 Jesus answered them, I told you, and ye believed not: the works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me. 26 But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. 27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: 28 And I give unto them eternal life; and they*

8. T.S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940), p. 47.

9. Georges Florovsky, *Antinomies of Christian History: Empire and Desert*, p. 100.

10. Lit. *the dedication/renewal* (Greek: τὰ ἐγκαινία = "the renewal"). *St. John*.10:22-28 (pericope "mid 37") is read at the dedication of Orthodox Churches, and *St John* 17-28 (pericope 37) is read on Friday of the 5th week of Pascha (the week of the Samaritan woman).

shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. 29 My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. 30 I and my Father are one. 31 Then the Jews took up stones again to stone him. 32 Jesus answered them, Many good works have I shewed you from my Father; for which of those works do ye stone me? 33 The Jews answered him, saying, For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God. 34 Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods? 35 If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken; 36 Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God? 37 If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. 38 But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him. 39 Therefore they sought again to take him: but he escaped out of their hand, 40 And went away again beyond Jordan into the place where John at first baptized; and there he abode.

St. John Chrysostom (c. AD 349-407) considered this feast to be the rededication of the Temple after the Jews returned from the 70 years of captivity in Babylon;<sup>11</sup> St. Augustine (AD 354-450) -- as the solemn celebration of the dedication of the Temple;<sup>12</sup> St. Cyril of Alexandria (AD 378-444) -- as either of the above;<sup>13</sup> Blessed Theophylact Archbishop of Bulgaria (c. 1050/60-1108) -- as the original dedication of Solomon's Temple or its rededication after the Jews returned from Babylon;<sup>14</sup> and

11. "This feast was a great and national one [for the Jews]. For they celebrated with great zeal the day on which the Temple was rebuilt, on their return from their long captivity in Persia." St. John Chrysostom, *Homily LXI [1]*, in *Homilies on St. John, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol.14*, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Peabody, MA, 1994, p. 222.

12. "Listen to the Gospel: *And it was at Jerusalem the encænia*. *Encænia* was the festival of the dedication of the temple. For in Greek *καίνωος* means *new*; and whenever there was some new dedication, it was called *Encænia*. And now this word is come into common use; if one puts on a new coat, his is said *encæniare* (to renovate, or to hold an *encænia*). For the Jews celebrated in a solemn manner the day on which the temple was dedicated; and it was the very feast day when the Lord spake what has just been read." St. Augustine of Hippo, *Tractate XLVIII, Chapter X:22-42, [2]*, *On the Gospel of St. John, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1, Vol. 1*, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Peabody, MA, 1994, p. 266.

13. And we must suppose that the *feast of the dedication* here signifies, either the chief feast, in memory of that when Solomon performed the dedication; or, when Zorobabel at a later time, together with Jeshua, rebuilt the temple, after the return from Babylon. St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Interpretation or Comment on the Gospel According to John*, VII.x.22-23 [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyrl\\_on\\_john\\_07\\_book7.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyrl_on_john_07_book7.htm)

14. "What was this *feast of dedication in Jerusalem!* Some say that it commemorated the completion and dedication of Solomon's temple; others the rebuilding of the temple after the Babylonian captivity. On the latter occasion the people made a magnificent feast to celebrate the first beautification of the city after their long exile, and it became an annual day of rejoicing." Blessed Theophylact, *Gospel of John, Chapter 10:22-26, The Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to John by Blessed Theophylact*, Chrysostom Press, House Springs, MO

Archbishop Averky (Taushev) (1906-1976) -- as the rededication of the Jewish Temple by the Jews after Judas Maccabeus liberated Jerusalem from the Seleucid Emperor Antiochus Epiphanes IV in 164 BC.<sup>15</sup>

So what exactly was this Feast of Dedication? Interestingly, the Hebrew word for *Dedication* is *חג הדקדוק* *Chanukkah*,<sup>16</sup> or Hanukkah, the name that the Jewish people historically and universally have given to this winter festival. Indeed, the Messianic Jewish translation of *St. John 10:22* in the *Cepher* calls it "*Chanukkah*": *And it was at Yerushalayim the Feast of Chanukkah, and it was winter.*<sup>17</sup>

Current Jewish practices for the celebration of the holiday commemorate two very different events:

(1) First, there is the celebration of the remarkable military victories by the Jewish armies under Judas Maccabeus culminating in the liberation of Jerusalem from the Seleucid armies of Antiochus Epiphanes IV and the rededication of the Jewish Temple.

(2) Secondly, there is the "miracle of the oil." According to Jewish tradition after the liberation of the Temple, there was the discovery of only one cruse of holy oil bearing the seal of the High Priest which, although only containing sufficient oil to light the Menorah lamps for 1 day, miraculously lasted for 8 days. The 9-branched menorahs seen in the windows of Jewish homes during Chanukkah, whose lamps are sequentially lit over the 8 days of the festival, are reminders to them of that miracle.<sup>18</sup>

By the most ancient historical records, it would appear that the first event gave rise to the holiday! Although there is a minor reference to Chanukkah being called "*Lights*" by Flavius Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews* written c. AD 94, he says almost nothing

2007, p.170.

15. "The feast was established by Judas Maccabeus around 160 B.C. in honor of the renewal, purification, and blessing of the temple in Jerusalem after it was defiled by Antiochus Epiphanus. This feast took place every year for eight days starting on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev (near the middle of December)." Archbishop Averky (Taushev), *The Third Passover of the Lord Jesus Christ's Public Ministry: The Discussion During the Feast of Purification (John 10:22-42)*, *The Four Gospels: Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament, Volume 1*, Holy Trinity Seminary Press, Jordanville, NY, 2013, pp. 134-135.

16. *Chanukkah/ חג הדקדוק* means initiation, consecration or dedication (*cf. Numbers 7:10-11, 2Paraleipomena/2Chronicles 7:9*). <http://www.cepher.net/blog.aspx?post=4337&title=Again,-On-Chanukkah>

17. *Gospel According to John 10:22*, in *ספר Cepher* [Hebrew for the "*Book*"], Cepher Publishing Group, Eureka, MT 2014, pp.1401.

18. The main candle, the *shamash*, is used for sequentially lighting the 8 other candles, one additional per day as the 8-day festival proceeds. Also, during these 8 days children typically play with *dreidels*, a 4-sided spinning top inscribed with 4 Hebrew letters, the first letters of the 4 Hebrew words *Nes* נ, *Gadol* ג, *Hayah* ה, and *Sham* ש, which form an acrostic meaning *a great miracle happened here*.



about it. Indeed, it would be another 500 years before the rabbis first mention the miracle of the oil.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CHANUKKAH/HANUKKAH

Before we review the ancient Biblical and historical records, the Orthodox Old Testament books of *1 & 2 Maccabees* and the writings of Flavius Josephus on the origin of the feast, we need to understand a bit of the history of the Seleucid (Syrian) Empire in the 2nd century BC to place these source documents in the proper historical context. The following is paraphrased from H.H. ben Sasson's *A History of the Jewish People*:

The reign of Antiochus Epiphanes IV (175-163 BC) marked a significant turning point in the history of the Jewish nation. Rome's victory over his grandfather at the Battle of Magnesia in 190 BC had deprived the Seleucid empire of its wealth and manpower, so Antiochus sought to fill the deficits from the various peoples living within his kingdom by accelerating their hellenization, i.e., assimilating them into the Greek culture of their conqueror.

From the very first Antiochus displayed a great interest in all that happened in Palestine and a tendency to micromanage Jerusalem's internal affairs. He deposed the High Priest, Onias III and replaced him with his brother Jason, a man of hellenistic inclinations. who, moreover, had promised the king more tax revenues than his brother. With Antiochus' consent, Jason also introduced far-reaching changes in Jerusalem's politics and social structure. The aim of these changes was to convert Jerusalem into a Greek city (*polis*), which was to be named Antiochia. Establishing the new *polis* required the introduction of Greek political and cultural institutions into the life of the Jewish capital. The most important of these institutions was the gymnasium, one of the hallmarks of Greek life and the center of their social life. But because the traditions of the gymnasium were rooted in Greek paganism and connected with the cult of Heracles and Hermes, it gave great offense to those Jews who remained faithful to their religious traditions. Nevertheless, it didn't take long for the gymnasium to replace the Temple as the focus of Jerusalem's social life. Indeed, *2 Maccabees 4:13-15*<sup>19</sup> relates with implacable bitterness how the priests abandoned their Temple duties to attend the competitions in the gymnasium.

However, Antiochus Epiphanes realized that Jason wasn't sufficiently trustworthy as High Priest and civil leader for his future purposes, so in 171 BC he replaced him with Menelaus, who was not a descendant of Aaron as required by the Mosaic Law. On the other hand Menelaus' subsmissiveness and loyalty were unquestioned. The large amounts of money that he promised the king, could only be raised by cruelly extorting the people of Judea and robbing the Temple. Such zeal must have greatly impressed the chronically impoverished king.

19. *2 Maccabees 4:13 (NETS translation): There was such an extreme of hellenization and increase in the adoption of allophylysm [alien ways] because of the surpassing wickedness of Jason, who was impious and no true high priest, 14 that the priests were no longer intent upon their ministry at the altar. Rather, despising the shrine and neglecting the sacrifice, they hurried to take part in the unlawful distribution of the oil in the wrestling arena after the signal for the discus throwing, 15 distaining the honors prized by their ancestors and putting the highest value upon Greek forms of prestige.*

In 167 BC Antiochus took a fateful step -- he forbade observance of the Jewish religion in Judea, and later, in other districts, imposed the death penalty on any Jew who circumcised his children or observed the Sabbath. He forced the Jewish population to participate in pagan rites and eat forbidden foods, particularly pork. And lastly, the Jewish Temple was desecrated and rededicated to Olympic Zeus.

Antiochus' decrees and the indignation they aroused among those faithful to their God changed the entire course of Jewish history. Contrary to the king's expectations the large majority of the Jewish nation remained loyal to its religion, and at all social levels there were people ready to give their lives for the sake of their ancestral faith. The whole-hearted and uncompromising dedication of the Jewish masses to their beliefs was deeply rooted. Even in earlier times the Jews had proved that they would not hesitate to sacrifice their lives when religion commanded it. The deeds of the martyrs and the devout in these times of religious persecution were to become an example both for Jews and non-Jews. Thus, in the face of attempts to forcibly hellenize them, there arose among the Jews a renewed and strengthened loyalty to their religion.

In their conflict the Jews enlisted the support of foreign powers: the Romans, Egyptians, and Nabateans.

The Jewish faithful also had leaders of outstanding military talent and leadership in the Macabees -- Judah, Jonathan, and Simon, the sons of Mattathias the Hasmonean. And most importantly, the Macabees, a priestly family,<sup>20</sup> inspired the loyalty and admiration of the populace.

In the month of Kislev (December) in the year 164, shortly after the death of Antiochus, Jonathan regained control of most of Jerusalem from the Seleucids. The Temple was purified, the pagan cult abolished and the Temple service entrusted to priests of the Hasmonean camp. It was in memory of this purification of the Temple, by the Maccabees that the yearly festival of Hanukkah was instituted.<sup>21</sup>

#### EARLIEST HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE REDEDICATION OF THE ALTAR OF THE JEWISH TEMPLE: 1 MACCABEES

The earliest and only eyewitness account of these events is to be found in *1 Maccabees 4:36-61* an *Old Testament* book which is canonical for the Orthodox and Roman Catholics and found in the Greek *Septuagint (Lxx)*, the *Old Latin*, and the *Vulgate*. However, it is deemed non-canonical by the Jews and Protestants and deuterocanonical by the Anglicans.<sup>22</sup>

"Already in antiquity the existence of an original Semitic -- probably Hebrew *Vorlage* [prior version] of 1 Makkabees was

---

20. *1 Maccabees 2:1 (Lxx, Brenton Translation) In those days arose Mattathias the son of John, the son of Simeon, a priest of the sons of Joarib, from Jerusalem, and dwelt in Modin. And he had five sons, Joannan, called Caddis; Simon, called Thassi; Judas, who was called Maccabeus; Eleazar, called Avaran; and Jonathan, whose surname was Apphus.*

21. Abridged and paraphrased from M. Stern, *Chapter 14: The Decrees Against the Jewish Religion and the Establishment of the Hasmonean State*, in H.H. Ben-Sasson (ed), *A History of the Jewish People*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1976, pp. 201-210.

22. Among the Jews, these books are called *sefarim hitzonim*, i.e., external books, or in the Greek, *apocrypha*. Anglicans read from them in their services, but they are not used for doctrine.

documented by early writers. The first century Jewish historian Josephus may have had occasion to consult the original Hebrew text as he paraphrased substantial parts of its Greek translation in his *Jewish Antiquities*. But it is more certain that the Christian Bible scholars Origen (third century) and Jerome (late fourth/early fifth centuries) knew of the existence of the Hebrew text of *1 Makkabees*. Origen is quoted by the fourth century Church historian Eusebius as referring to a *Makkabean History* outside of the twenty-two book Hebrew scriptural canon. Origen identifies this book by its Hebrew title *Sarbethaniael*.<sup>23</sup> Jerome also, in his preface to the books of Samuel and Kings, clearly distinguishes the *Hebrew First Book of Makkabees* from the *Second Greek Book*, which ostensibly was *2 Makkabees*<sup>24</sup> ...

“The author of the original version of *1 Makkabees* has been praised for having written in an elegant Hebrew style that was modeled purposely after the historical books of the Bible -- *Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles*. The faithfulness of *1 Makkabees* to traditional biblical historiography implies that the writer may have considered his work to be a continuation of the Chronicler’s history. The Greek translation of *1 Makkabees* also seems to have been crafted by someone who shared the same conservative perspective as the original author. Scholars extol the careful extremely literal Jewish-Greek translational style of *1 Makkabees* and even consider it to be a deliberate choice on the part of the translator, whose exceptional vocabulary betrays a considerable facility with the Greek language.”<sup>25</sup> [Nevertheless, it was rejected by the Jews as non-canonical perhaps for reasons we shall see later.]

*1 Maccabees 4:36-61* “36 Then said Judas and his brethren, *Behold, our enemies are discomfited: let us go up to cleanse and dedicate the sanctuary.* 37 Upon this all the host assembled themselves together, and went up into mount Zion. 38 *And when they saw the sanctuary desolate, and the altar profaned, and the gates burned up, and shrubs growing in the courts as in a forest, or in one of the mountains, yea, and the priests’ chambers pulled down;* 39 *They rent their clothes, and made great lamentation, and cast ashes upon their heads,* 40 *And fell down flat to the ground upon their faces, and blew an alarm with the trumpets, and cried toward heaven.* 41 *Then Judas appointed certain men to fight against those that were in the fortress, until he had cleansed the sanctuary.* 42 *So he chose priests of blameless conversation, such as had pleasure in the law:* 43 *Who cleansed the sanctuary, and bare out the defiled stones into an unclean place.* 44 *And when as they consulted what to do with the altar of burnt offerings, which was profaned;* 45 *They thought it best to pull it down, lest it should be a reproach to them, because the heathen had defiled it: wherefore they pulled it down,* 46 *And laid up the stones in the mountain of the temple in a convenient place, until there should come a prophet to shew what should be done with them.* 47 *Then they*

*took whole stones according to the law, and built a new altar according to the former;* 48 *And made up the sanctuary, and the things that were within the temple, and hallowed the courts.* 49 *They made also new holy vessels, and into the temple they brought the candlestick, and the altar of burnt offerings, and of incense, and the table.* 50 *And upon the altar they burned incense, and the lamps that were upon the candlestick they lighted, that they might give light in the temple.* 51 *Furthermore they set the loaves upon the table, and spread out the veils, and finished all the works which they had begun to make.* 52 *Now on the five and twentieth day of the ninth month, which is called the month Casleu, in the hundred forty and eighth year, they rose up betimes in the morning,* 53 *And offered sacrifice according to the law upon the new altar of burnt offerings, which they had made.* 54 *Look, at what time and what day the heathen had profaned it, even in that was it dedicated with songs, and citherns, and harps, and cymbals.* 55 *Then all the people fell upon their faces, worshipping and praising the God of heaven, who had given them good success.* 56 *And so they kept the dedication of the altar eight days and offered burnt offerings with gladness, and sacrificed the sacrifice of deliverance and praise.* 57 *They decked also the forefront of the temple with crowns of gold, and with shields; and the gates and the chambers they renewed, and hanged doors upon them.* 58 *Thus was there very great gladness among the people, for that the reproach of the heathen was put away.* 59 *Moreover Judas and his brethren with the whole congregation of Israel ordained, that the days of the dedication of the altar should be kept in their season from year to year by the space of eight days, from the five and twentieth day of the month Casleu, with mirth and gladness.* 60 *At that time also they builded up the mount Zion with high walls and strong towers round about, lest the Gentiles should come and tread it down as they had done before.* 61 *And they set there a garrison to keep it, and fortified Bethsura to preserve it; that the people might have a defense against Idumea.”*

#### LATER HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS: 2 MACCABEES

The book of *2 Maccabees* is supposedly an abridgment of a 5 volume history of the times of the Maccabees composed by a hellenistic Jew by the name of Jason of Cyrene written around 100 B.C. in Koine Greek. The exact dating of the abridgment of *2 Maccabees* is unknown, but most likely it was sometime in the 1st century B.C.

*2 Maccabees 10:1* *Now Maccabeus and his company, the Lord guiding them, recovered the temple and the city:* 2 *But the altars which the heathen had built in the open street, and also the chapels, they pulled down.* 3 *And having cleansed the temple they made another altar, and striking stones they took fire out of them, and offered a sacrifice after two years, and set forth incense, and lights, and shewbread.* 4 *When that was done, they fell flat down, and besought the Lord that they might come no more into such troubles; but if they sinned any more against him, that he himself would chasten them with mercy, and that they might not be delivered unto the blasphemous and barbarous nations.* 5 *Now upon the same day that the strangers profaned the temple, on the very same day it was cleansed again, even the five and twentieth*

23. Thought to reflect a slightly corrupted Hebrew for “*The Book of the Dynasty of God’s Registers*”

24. Jerome writes, “*The First Book of Maccabees* I have found to be Hebrew, the second is Greek, as can be proved by the very style.” Jerome, *Preface to the Books of the Vulgate Version of the Old Testament, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2, Vol 6*, p. 490.

25. George T. Zervos, *To the Reader of 1 Makkabees* in Pietersma and Wright (editors), *A New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS)*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007, p. 478-479.



day of the same month, which is Casleu. 6 And they kept the eight days with gladness, as in the feast of the tabernacles, remembering that not long afore they had held the feast of the tabernacles, when they [had] wandered in the mountains and dens like beasts. 7 Therefore they bare branches, and fair boughs, and palms also, and sang psalms unto him that had given them good success in cleansing his place. 8 They ordained also by a common statute and decree, That every year those days should be kept of the whole nation of the Jews.

Thus, *2 Maccabees* adds some features drawn from the Feast of Tabernacles that we didn't see in *1 Maccabees*. For example, the celebration of the Feast of Dedication/Chanukkah was delayed for two years following Judah Maccabeus' liberation of Jerusalem. That suggests that the cleanup of Antiochus' defilements and changes to the Temple as well as the rebuilding of the altar were extensive and may have taken up to two years to complete satisfactorily.

#### THE HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF JOSEPHUS

Titus Flavius Josephus (c. AD 37 - c. AD 100), born Joseph ben Matityahu, was the most important historian of Israel during the Second Temple period. His father was of priestly descent, and his mother of royal descent. During the Jewish war against Rome, he, aligned with the religious party of the Pharisees, was commander-in-chief of the Jewish troops rebelling in Galilee. After being captured by the Romans in AD 67, he noted the power of Rome and decided that resistance to Rome was futile. Consequently, he defected to them and appealed to his countrymen to do the same to save themselves. Because of his capitulation to and collusion with the Romans, he was judged a traitor by the Jews and has retained that derogatory label ever since. Years later, circa AD 94, he composed his famous history of the Jewish people which includes a short description of the "Festival of the Restoration of the Sacrifices of the Temple", i.e., the Festival of Dedication. Other than stating a few general remarks about the feasting and sacrifices associated with the 8-day festival, he provides very little information other than that "we celebrate the festival and call it *Lights*:"

*Ant. XII.7.7* Now Judas [Maccabeus] celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifices of the temple for eight days, and omitted no sort of pleasures thereon; but he feasted them upon very rich and splendid sacrifices; and he honored God, and delighted them by hymns and psalms. Nay, they were so very glad at the revival of their customs, when, after a long time of intermission, they unexpectedly had regained the freedom of their worship, that **they made it a law for their posterity, that they should keep a festival, on account of the restoration of their temple worship, for eight days. And from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it *Lights*.** I suppose the reason was, because

this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival. Judas also rebuilt the walls round about the city, and reared towers of great height against the incursions of enemies, and set guards therein. He also fortified the city Bethsura, that it might serve as a citadel against any distresses that might come from our enemies.<sup>26</sup>

Although Josephus referred to it as "*Lights*", he offered no real justification for that name. For additional clues for that name we need to look at the Rabbinic tradition which developed after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70.

#### THE RABBINIC TRADITION: THE LATER REINTERPRETATION OF CHANUKKAH AS THE MIRACLE OF THE SACRED OIL

The *Babylonian Talmud*, compiled circa AD 600 offers the first Rabbinic source to discuss the association between Chanukkah and the "miracle of the oil":

"What is [the reason of] Hanukkah? For our Rabbis taught: **On the twenty-fifth of Kislev [commence] the days of Hanukkah, which are eight on which a lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden.** For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, **they made search and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient for one day's lighting only;** yet a miracle was wrought therein and **they lit [the lamp] therewith for eight days. The following year these [days] were appointed a Festival with [the recital of] Hallel<sup>27</sup> and thanksgiving.**"<sup>28</sup>

Even modern Jewish writers and scholars have noted the disparity between the Maccabean and Talmudic records and write about it in popular media. One Jewish scholar Malka Z. Simkovich writes:

"It is clear that the explanation provided for the celebration of Chanukah in the Babylonian Talmud marks a shift in how Jews in antiquity perceived the reason for celebrating this holiday; prior to this passage, there is no known source that places the miracle of the oil at [the] holiday's center. Why the shift? ...

"Josephus' reference to Chanukah as the holiday of Lights, coupled with his lack of awareness regarding any sort of light-related miracle is striking, and it is likely that the title "Lights" had nothing to do with a miracle of oil ... the tradition of the miracle of the oil was not prominent enough that Josephus was aware of it. Given Josephus' intimate familiarity with Jewish tradition and culture, this absence is telling ...

"From a historical vantage point, there is no doubt that the origin of the holiday lies in the Hasmonean military victory. However, the rabbis effectively rebranded the holiday so that instead of glorifying Hasmonean military prowess, the holiday instead glorifies the unconditional and miraculous divine light that Jews can depend on, even in the gloomiest of

26. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XII.7.7, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1974, p. 192.

27. *Hallel* = Psalms 113-118 (*Lxx*) recited on all Jewish Festivals

28. *Babylonian Talmud, Seder Mo'ed, Tractate Shabbat 21b*, in the *Soncino Talmud*, Version 1.3, Mac OS X Version, Institute for Computers in Jewish Life and Davka Corporation, 2007.



## THE GOOD WORD

c/o St. Seraphim of Sarov & St. John of Kronstadt Orthodox Church  
6063 Lake Murray Blvd.  
La Mesa, CA 91942-2506  
U.S.A.

darkness[es].”<sup>29</sup>

A second thought provoking article, “*Why Were the Rabbis So Uncomfortable With the Maccabees?*” by Jewish freelance writer Michele Alperin brings up another interesting and perhaps more significant reason:

“The Rabbis also had little admiration for the Hasmonean dynasty, which descended from the Maccabean heroes. First of all, the Hasmoneans had illegitimately usurped both the priesthood ... and the kingship (destined for descendants of King David). [In truth, they only usurped the kingship].

“Worse yet, they had combined the priesthood and the kingship, nullifying the separation between religious and political power that had been traditional in Israel. Ultimately, the Hasmoneans became the very Hellenists against whom the Maccabees had fought. Eventually, they invited the Roman Empire to be protectors of Judea, paving the way for the Roman conquest. **Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Hasmoneans had supported the Sadducees (the priestly party) against the Pharisees (the spiritual progenitors of the Rabbis). Indeed, the Pharisees suffered a period of intense persecution during the late Hasmonean period.**”<sup>30</sup>

I believe this spiritual rivalry was the major reason why the rabbis rejected the *Book of 1 Maccabees* as part of the “Jewish Canon,” and why the role of the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian King Antiochus Epiphanes IV has been downplayed by them in favor of the “miracle of the oil” in their 8-day feast.

### ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN COMMENTARY

---

29. Malka Z. Simkovich, *Uncovering the Truth About Chanukah*, at <http://thetorah.com/uncovering-the-truth-about-chanukah/>

30. Michele Alperin, *Why Were the Rabbis So Uncomfortable With the Maccabees?* <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/transforming-hanukkah/>

Orthodox Patristic commentary on the Feast of Dedication is quite scant as we have seen (see footnotes 11-15). Nevertheless, the Venerable Bede (AD 672-735), in a homily on the *Dedication of a Church*, suggested that this festival was the reason for our annual observations of the dedications of our churches:

“We take pains to observe with divine praises and vigils the annual solemn observation of the dedication of our church. We recognize that such a feast was so agreeable to our Redeemer that He deigned on it to enter the Temple and deliver a discourse to the people, and to make known to them the mystery of His divinity.”<sup>31</sup>

And what did Jesus discourse on there?:

“It was cold, and so the Lord walked in the portico of Solomon, which was a covered gallery. Here the Jews surrounded Him and said to Him, *How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.* Telling them this *plainly* was exactly what the Lord would not do because the word *Messiah* or *Christ* inspired incorrect ideas of an earthly, political leader, who was supposed to free their country from Roman lordship. The Lord wisely answered them by indicating all of His previous testimony concerning Himself, His works, and His relationship to His Father in Heaven. From all this, they should have long ago understood that He is the Messiah, but not in the way that they incorrectly imagined it. The reason they do not understand this is *because you are not of My sheep* and they do not recognize His voice.”<sup>32</sup>

---

31. Venerable Bede, *Homily 24: Dedication of a Church, Homilies on the Gospels, Bk II*, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI, 1991, pp. 241-242.

32. Archbishop Averky (Taushev), *The Four Gospels: Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament, Volume 1*, Holy Trinity Seminary Press, Jordanville, NY, 2013, p. 135.