

The Meaning's Not Just the Menorah



Many Christians don't know the history behind Hanukkah—I'm afraid we sort of think of it as "the Jewish Christmas." This is not fair at all. It's a timely and important story of heroes of the faith and we should know it.

I also find it fascinating that the all-American holiday of Thanksgiving and the iconic Jewish festival of Hanukkah have much more in common than you might think.

And both pack a powerful message for Christians today.

Let's Start with Thanksgiving: Do We Know It as Well as We Think?

Our harvest being gotten in, our Governor sent four men on fowling so that we might after a more special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruit of our labours.

– Edward Winslow

The truth is, we don't know as much about the quintessential American feast as you might suppose. The two surviving eye-witness accounts are sparse on details. We don't know the precise dates the feast took place, although we can narrow it down to between mid-September and mid-November of 1621. We don't know exactly what was on the table. "Wild fowl" and venison are mentioned, but besides the meat, we don't know what else was for dinner. Mashed potatoes? Cranberry sauce? Pie? Probably not.

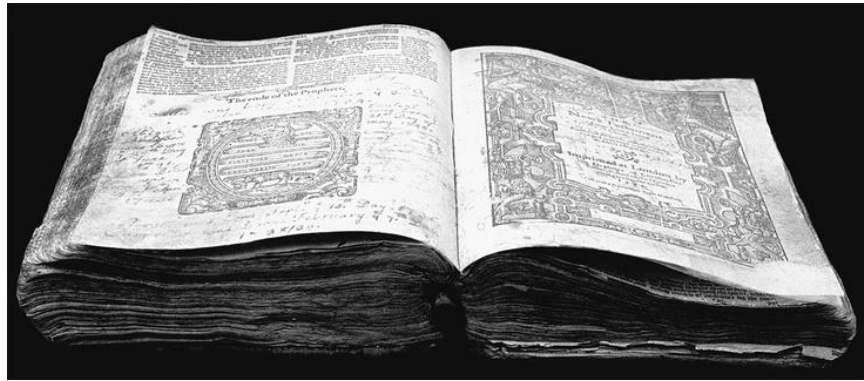
We do know from Edward Winslow's description that they "entertained and feasted" for three days. And we know about 140 attended. At that point, the settlement at Plymouth consisted of 52 men, women and children who'd survived the voyage and that first brutal winter. The settlers welcomed guests: the "great king" of the Pokanoket tribe, Massasoit, "with some ninety men." The native Americans contributed five deer.

What We Do Know: The Faith Behind the Feast

While we don't know so much about their iconic feast, we know quite a bit about their faith. We know they were serious about the Bible. In William Bradford's words, the Puritans "endeavored to establish the right worship of God and the discipline of Christ in the Church according to the simplicity of the gospel and without the mixture of men's inventions, and to be ruled by the laws of God's word dispensed by such officers as Pastors, Teachers, Elders, etc., according to the Scriptures."

In other words, they held all their practices up to the light of scripture, and anything they didn't find explicitly supported by God's word they jettisoned!

This attitude put them at odds with King James and the Anglican church. The Reformation was about a century old at the time of the Mayflower. In England, the authoritarian and traditionalist Roman Catholic church had been replaced with an Anglican church that looked... authoritarian and traditionalist. A monarch in London had taken the place of a pope in Rome.



William Bradford's 1592 Geneva Bible, on display at [Pilgrim Hall Museum](#). It traveled with him from England to Holland to Plymouth. The Puritans preferred this Bible, which was edited in Sweden without the pressure to conform to King James' politically motivated theology.

King James had no sympathy for Christians in the "Puritan" movement who didn't believe the Anglican church had reformed enough. Those found "disobedient in matters of religion" — meeting in house churches to study their preferred translation of the Bible which didn't happen to be the "authorized" one, eschewing accepted church rituals they didn't see as Biblical, straying from the *Common Book of Prayer* — faced fines, imprisonment under potentially deadly conditions — even the gallows.

"Prisoners often did not long survive the unsanitary filth of prisons and the rampant infections of overcrowding. Meals weren't part of the deal. Food had to be brought by outsiders and distributed by guards. A long prison sentence was often a death sentence."

- Glenn Alan Cheney, *Thanksgiving: The Pilgrims' First Year in America*

“Pilgrims”

We don't know *when* the Plymouth settlers were first called “pilgrims” but we think we know *why*. Bradford and the Puritan band escaped to Holland in 1608, where they enjoyed the freedom to worship according to their beliefs. But like Abraham when he'd gone out from Ur and traveled as far as Haran ([Gen 11:31](#)), the Puritans felt the Lord's call to go further.

The “pilgrim” moniker probably arose from words William Bradford, the colony's governor for some thirty-five years, penned about their decision to leave Leyden, Holland:

So they left that good and pleasant city, which had been their resting place for nearly twelve years; but they knew they were pilgrims, and looked not much on those things, but lifted up their eyes to the heavens, their dearest country.”

- William Bradford, *Of Plimouth Plantation*

This is a clear reference to [Hebrews 11:13-16](#), which in the Puritans' favored Geneva Bible reads:

All these died in faith, and received not the promises, but saw them afar off, and believed *them*, and received *them* thankfully, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things, declare plainly, that they seek a country. And if they had been mindful of that *country*, from whence they came out, they had leisure to have returned. But now they desire a better, that is an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed of them to be called their God... ([Heb 11:13-16](#))

The “these” in the passage are Abraham and Sarah and other patriarchs of the faith.

You can see where Bradford and his company would have identified with Abraham—in fact the parallels between the two stories are striking.

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going... ([Heb 11:8](#))

Like Abraham, the pilgrims were called out by faith, leaving behind everything familiar. Many families split, sending men and older boys ahead to establish a settlement—“offering up” their Isaacs to a highly risky venture ([Heb 11:17](#)).

“Not knowing where they were going....” The intention was to settle in Virginia, but the vagaries of storm and sea drove them to Massachusetts instead. Like Abraham, the settlers would “live as aliens” ([Heb 11:9](#)) among the tribes that already dwelt there. And like Abraham, they would have skirmishes with hostiles ([Gen 14:12](#)), but by and large would be blessed to live in peace and cooperation with their neighbors ([Gen 23:6](#)).

The Plymouth Pilgrims' story also has a number of parallels to another bit of history, very pertinent at this season....

The Story Behind Hanukah: A Despot Who Thinks He Can Dictate Belief

The Hanukkah story is told in the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees, which are considered canonical in several orthodox Christian denominations. The story holds several ingredients in common with Thanksgiving.

Like King James, the Hanukah story starts with a despot, Seleucid emperor Antiochus Epiphanes, who wanted to see all his kingdom unite under a single religious system—that of Hellenistic Greece. Israel was included at that time in the Greek Seleucid Empire, which stretched across modern Lebanon, Syria, parts of Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Iran.

On Antiochus' orders, Jews caught keeping Shabbat were burned alive. The Feasts of the Lord were outlawed. The Emperor banned the Torah and burned any scrolls found.

The Temple sacrifices required by God's law were halted. Jews were forced to participate in sacrifices honoring the Emperor, on pain of death. Women who defied the law and circumcised their sons were "paraded about the city with their babies hanging at their breasts and then thrown down from the city walls." ([2 Macc 6:1-11](#))

The ultimate outrage took place when Antiochus set up an altar to the Greek God Zeus over the altar of burnt offerings in the Temple in Jerusalem and sacrificed an unclean animal, a pig, in the sanctuary.

A Culture of Compromise

The Greeks had overrun Israel more than a hundred years earlier and many Jews bought into Greek culture. As was also the case in seventeenth-century England, Antiochus found plenty of people who were willing to blow with the prevailing winds of culture. Antiochus appointed Jews to the priesthood who would go along with his idolatrous system, in place of any Aaronic priests who resisted him.

The Faithful Remnant

But as in seventeenth-century England, a remnant determined to stay faithful to God's word arose. Jews who wished to keep God's law hid in the wilderness and many suffered martyrdom. A priest named Mattathias fled Jerusalem with his five sons and settled in Modiim, a small town near Jerusalem. In 167 B.C., Antiochus' soldiers arrived there and tried to pressure Mattathias into making a detestable offering to the Greek deities. He refused.

*I and my sons and my kindred will keep to the covenant of our ancestors.
Heaven forbid that we should forsake the law and the commandments.
We will not obey the words of the king by departing from our religion in
the slightest degree. ([1 Macc 2:20-22](#))*

A Jewish man who was prepared to make the sacrifice came forward to do it in Mattathias' place. Mattathias killed the man and led an uprising against the Antiochus' soldiers.

An armed resistance movement was born.

The Cost

Don't kid yourself. For both the Plymouth Pilgrims and the Hebrew Maccabees, the cost was real.

It took three years of guerilla warfare and several battles before Mattathias' rebels triumphed and reentered Jerusalem to take back their Temple. Mattathias' third son, Judas, showed military leadership that gained him the nickname *HaMakkaba*—"The Hammer" in Aramaic. Maccabee (Hebrew: מכבים *Machabi*, מכבים) is also an acronym for the Torah verse the insurgents used as a battle cry: "*Mi chamocha ba'elim YHWH*", "Who is like You among the heavenly powers, Adonai!"

Plymouth Pilgrims Tested

And in Plymouth, although they eventually did better than "living in tents" like Abraham, the bitter first year for the Pilgrims could not have been more difficult. Many challenges during their passage caused them to make landfall further north than planned and weeks later than intended. It was too late in the season to build so they were forced to winter on the *Mayflower*. Poor diet and cramped and unsanitary conditions aboard the largely unheated ship left both the pilgrims and the crew easy prey for disease. Scurvy, pneumonia and tuberculosis ravaged them from December through April, claiming nearly half their lives.

Bradford summarized these weeks in a letter to their financiers:

But it pleased God to visit us then with death daily, and with a disease so disastrous that the living were scarcely able to bury the dead, and the healthy not in any measure to tend the sick.

But he also testified of the settlers that:

...they had borne their sad afflictions with as much patience and contentedness as I think any people could do. But it was the Lord who upheld them, and had beforehand prepared them, many having long borne the yoke, yea, even from their youth.

The first winter was especially hard on the women. Bradford himself lost his young wife, Dorothy, one of the early victims. She slipped on the ship's icy deck and drowned in the frigid waters of the bay. The daunting task of preparing that famous feast for around 140 was directed and probably chiefly borne by only four English women who survived the first winter—tragically, out of eighteen who'd sailed.

The Triumph

After this, the sons of Israel went up to the Temple and rebuilt its gates and purified the Temple from the dead bodies and from the defilement.

– Scroll of Antiochus

Once the Maccabees won their Temple back, they had to return it to a state of ritual purification. This was no small task.

Hanukkah is best known for its special nine-branched Menorah. When Jewish people light the Hanukkah menorah, it serves to remind them of a miracle that occurred when the Temple was restored:

And they sought after pure olive oil to light the lamps therewith, but could not find any, except one bowl that was sealed with the signet ring of the High Priest from the days of Samuel the prophet and they knew that it

was pure. There was in it [enough oil] to light [the lamps therewith] for one day, but the God of heaven whose name dwells there put therein his blessing and they were able to light from it eight days.

– Scroll of Antiochus



Gold-plated replica of the magnificent Temple Menorah on display in Jerusalem. It stands about six feet tall.

Levitical law required the lamps in the Temple to burn every night. ([Ex 27:21](#))

Photo Credit: [Temple Institute](#).

The Feast of Heartfelt Thanks

When they were able to resume the sacrifices commanded in the Torah, Judas Maccabeus declared an annual eight-day festival.

Now Judas 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.

– Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* xii. 7, § 7, #323

Sound a bit like the Pilgrims' feast? Only grander and longer?

Therefore, the sons of Hashmonai made this covenant and took upon themselves a solemn vow, they and the sons of Israel, all of them, to publish amongst the sons of Israel, [to the end] that they might observe these eight days of joy and honour... so as to make known to those who come after them that their God wrought for them salvation from heaven.

– Scroll of Antiochus

The Crux of the Plymouth Story

Here, for me, is the crux of the Plymouth story. How could people who gave up everything to obey God's word as they understood it, only to face such deadly adversity—weeks of illness, the loss of wives, husbands, children—not start to question at least a little?

“God, are You really in this thing? Heavenly Father, are You there?”

I'm sure I would! And I have to think some did. But Bradford and the other first-hand accounts give no hint of this. Instead, they

- Accept God's sovereign will when they experience it as adversity;
- Thank Him for it when they experience it as blessing; and
- Approach Him with an attitude of trust at all times.

It seems they were fully prepared to “die in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen and welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.” ([Heb 11:13](#))

How many of us would say with Job, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him” ([Job 13:15](#))?

Or with Habakkuk,

Though the fig tree should not blossom
And there be no fruit on the vines,
Though the yield of the olive should fail
And the fields produce no food,
Though the flock should be cut off from the fold
And there be no cattle in the stalls,
Yet I will exult in the Lord,
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. ([Hab 3:17-18](#))

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.... And without faith it is impossible to please God, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. ([Heb 11:1,6](#))

The story of the Pilgrims and their feast reminds us that sometimes — *many* times — the rewards that come from keeping faith with God aren't immediately visible. At such times, like the Pilgrims, we get the opportunity to prove our faith by “confessing that we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth” for whom “to live is Christ and to die is gain” ([Phil 1:21](#)).

The Legacy

In both cases, the Lord used this tried-and-faithful remnant to begin a powerful new work. It wasn't long before a newcomer to Plymouth Colony would write home these glowing words:

We are all freeholders; the rent-day doth not trouble us.... Our company are, for most part, very religious, honest people; the word of God sincerely taught us every Sabbath; so that I know not any thing a contented mind can here want.

– William Hilton

As for the Maccabees, they formed a new Hasmonean dynasty that ruled Israel for nearly two hundred years. Sadly, like virtually all human institutions, it eventually went south—it brought the Herods to power.

The Bible doesn't mention the miracle of the oil. But the New Testament does allude to this annual feast as the "Feast of Dedication." And in case you weren't aware, it records Jesus observing *this* feast almost two hundred years later ([John 10:22](#)). (Yes, Yeshua the Jewish Messiah observed Hanukah, not Christmas—reason enough for us to learn its history!)

In fact it was during the Feast of Dedication, while Jesus walked *in the Temple court*, that the Pharisees demanded, "How long do You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly."

Jesus' response?

I and the Father are One... If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father. ([John 10:24-30](#))

Yeshua consistently showed the Jewish people how their feasts pointed to *Him*. Their Emmanuel / "God with Us" ([Matt 1:23](#)). Their "Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace, Mighty God" ([Is 9:6](#)). Hanukah was no exception. Josephus tells us it was known even then as the Feast of Lights. And there was the True Light, walking in the miraculously rededicated Temple! While the Pharisees picked up stones to stone Him... ([John 10:31](#))

There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. ([John 1:9-13](#))

When Yeshua came the first time, the nation's leadership rejected Him—but thousands of individuals still “received Him” and gained “the right to become children of God.”

The Spirit of the Antichrist

It seems I retold these stories a bit out of order. If God had allowed Antiochus Epiphanes to eliminate the Torah and stamp out Judaism, we wouldn't have the Messiah, the “author and finisher of our faith” ([Heb 12:2](#)).

Without Hanukah we wouldn't have Thanksgiving.

The Feast of Light paved the way for revealing of the True Light.

Which brings us to another aspect of this I don't want to pass over. While you won't find the Maccabees' story in the Bibles most of us use—or in the ones the Pilgrims used—you *will* find Antiochus Epiphanes.

In Babylon around 540 B.C, the Prophet Daniel received a vision.

A male goat was coming from the west over the surface of the whole earth without touching the ground; and the goat had a conspicuous horn between his eyes. ([Dan 8:5](#))

The goat rushes a ram that has two horns and shatters them. However, “as soon as the male goat was mighty,” the large horn was broken and replaced with four smaller horns. ([Dan 8:8](#))

In scripture, horns always refer to a position of leadership / authority.

Later in the chapter, Gabriel explains the vision. He explicitly identifies the ram's horns as Medea and Persia and the male goat as Greece. He states that the broken horn is “the first king” and the four horns are “four nations which will arise from his nation, although not with his power” ([Dan 8:21-22](#)).

The imagery could not be more perfect for the rise and fall of Alexander the Great. He swiftly conquered “the known world” but died young. His empire was split between his four generals.

Daniel's vision goes on to describe the antics of one of these “four smaller horns.”

Out of one of them came forth a rather small horn which grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the Beautiful Land. It grew up to the host of heaven and caused some of the host and some of the stars to fall to the earth, and it trampled them down. It even magnified itself to be equal with the Commander of the host; and it removed the regular sacrifice from Him, and the place of His sanctuary was thrown down. And on account of transgression the host will be given over to the horn along with the regular sacrifice; and it will fling truth to the ground and perform its will and prosper. ([Dan 8:9-12](#))

Antiochus fulfilled this precisely when he trampled down the righteous in the Beautiful Land [Israel] (verse 10), demanded that people sacrifice to him as if he were a god (verse 11) and defiled the Temple (verse 11). In fact, the fulfillment was so complete that liberal Bible scholars have refused to accept that Daniel really made this prophecy.

Bible prophecies often have multiple fulfillments, providing ever-greater realizations of the same spiritual truth. “Out of Egypt” God calls His people ([Hos 11:1](#))—first Moses, then the nation of Israel, then Yeshua, then (symbolically) Yeshua's followers. Moses

released his followers from physical bondage to Egypt; Yeshua releases His followers from spiritual bondage to sin.

Accordingly, it's clear from scripture that Antiochus serves as a type of an even greater evil. When Yeshua refers to the "abomination that makes desolation" in [Matt 24:15](#) and [Mark 13:14](#), He is referring to this vision of Daniel's. You could argue that Daniel's prophecy was fulfilled again in the first century, when Roman legions crucified our Lord and leveled the Temple.

And there remains a future fulfillment.

In light of other New Testament scriptures, it is clear that this "horn" refers to a future world leader (sometimes called the "Antichrist") who would one day attempt to "assimilate" all of humanity into a "New World Order" ([Dan 9:26-27](#), [2 Thes 2:3](#), [Rev 13:7-9](#), etc.).

– John J. Parsons, [Hebrew4Christians.com](#)

The final fulfillment will come when Yeshua overthrows the Man of Lawlessness at the end of the Great Tribulation ([2 Thes 2:3-8](#)). But in fact we've seen the spirit of the Antichrist emerge again and again through the millenia—despots who decimate God's people and force them into false worship, elevating themselves and their false systems as gods. Antiochus Epiphanes, Hadrian, Nero, Stalin, Hitler / Himmler, Mao, Islamic jihadists, Kim Jung-Un... the list could go on for a page.

So Thanksgiving and Hanukah carry a common message. And it's as timely now in these last of last days ([2 Pet 3:3](#)) as ever.

Believer, don't fall prey to the culture of compromise.

Stand on God's word, regardless of the cost.

When Yeshua came the first time, those who should have been first to welcome Him rejected Him instead.

He will come again. Stand among those who receive Him when He does!