

Shabbat Hanukkah (for 2013)

Numbers 7:18–29; Zechariah 2:10[Heb14]–4:7; John 10:22–42

notes by Tim Hegg

Once again we celebrate the Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah (as it is usually called in more modern times). This year, however, the first day of Hanukkah coincides with the US holiday of Thanksgiving! While we usually find Hanukkah occurring near the time of Christmas, this year the Feast of Dedication takes place nearly a full month earlier. So instead of having to explain that Hanukkah is not the “Jewish Christmas,” we have the opportunity to combine the themes of “dedication” and “thanksgiving” in our celebration of Hanukkah.

The traditional *parashot* for Shabbat Hanukkah include the passage from Numbers describing the dedication of the *Mishkan* (tabernacle) and Zechariah’s vision of restored Israel worshiping in the millennial temple with the *menorah* that burns continually without any disruption. We have added the notice from John’s Gospel which pictures Yeshua in the Temple precincts at the time of the Feast of Dedication.

The Torah portion was obviously chosen by the Sages to parallel the re-dedication of the Temple after it was desecrated by Antiochus IV in the 2nd Century BCE. The story of the Jewish people’s struggle against the pagan government under which they existed is retold in 1 and 2 Maccabees. Even as the dedication of the Tabernacle in Num 7 focuses primarily upon dedicating the altar of sacrifice, so the rededication of the 2nd Temple by the Maccabees consisted primarily as a rebuilding of the altar of sacrifice (along with other Temple structures) and dedicating it to the holy service of the God of Israel.

Then they took unhewn stones, as the law directs, and built a new altar like the former one. They also rebuilt the sanctuary and the interior of the temple, and consecrated the courts. They made new holy vessels, and brought the lampstand, the altar of incense, and the table into the temple. Then they burned incense on the altar and lighted the lamps on the lampstand, and these gave light in the temple. They placed the bread on the table and hung up the curtains. Thus they finished all the work they had undertaken. Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of Chislew, in the one hundred and forty-eighth year, they rose and offered sacrifice, as the law directs, on the new altar of burnt offering which they had built. At the very season and on the very day that the Gentiles had profaned it, it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals. All the people fell on their faces and worshiped and blessed Heaven, who had prospered them. So they celebrated the dedication of

the altar for eight days, and offered burnt offerings with gladness; they offered a sacrifice of deliverance and praise. (1Macc 4:47–56)

In similar fashion, the choice of Zechariah’s vision to parallel the celebration of Hanukkah is likewise clear: the celebration for eight days as recorded in Maccabees parallels the dedication of the Temple under Hezekiah as noted in 2Chronicles:

So the priests went in to the inner part of the house of the LORD to cleanse it, and every unclean thing which they found in the temple of the LORD they brought out to the court of the house of the LORD. Then the Levites received it to carry out to the Kidron valley. Now they began the consecration on the first day of the first month, and on the eighth day of the month they entered the porch of the LORD. Then they consecrated the house of the LORD in eight days, and finished on the sixteenth day of the first month. (2Chron 29:16–17)

Finally, the choice of John 10:22ff is also clear, for the text tells us that Yeshua was in Jerusalem, walking on the Temple mount in the portico of Solomon at the “Feast of Dedication,” i.e., Hanukkah. It seems quite evident that John wants us to realize Yeshua as there to participate in the Feast of Dedication. First, there would be no real purpose for John to mention the Feast of Dedication if this had no significance in the message he intended to convey. Second, if Yeshua has no intention of joining the festival celebration, why would He have chosen to be in the Temple precincts at that time? Obviously celebrating Hanukkah in Jerusalem is not a biblical requirement. Third, the teaching of Yeshua on this occasion coincides with the general theme of Hanukkah, i.e., a dedication or re-dedication of oneself to live in true loyalty and faithfulness to God. Thus, the question of the Jews to Yeshua as to whether He is the Messiah focuses upon their desire to see the full restoration of Israel as promised by the prophets, a restoration which could only be accomplished by the Messiah.

In seeing Yeshua participating in the celebration of Hanukkah, we can see a number of important things to be emphasized. First, Yeshua participates in a festival commemorating God’s faithfulness to the Jewish people in that He gave the victory to the Maccabean forces even though they were outnumbered ten to one. Here, as often, we see Yeshua teaching by word and deed the importance of the nation of Israel in the overall salvific plan of God. God’s faithfulness to Israel remains the high watermark of His faithfulness to His word in general. If God has made an enduring covenant with the nation of Israel, then His faithfulness to that covenant stands as a constant indication of both His intention and ability forever to remain true

to His word.

A second emphasis we see in John's account: the Messiah Who would be able to accomplish all that the prophets had foretold could not be merely a mortal human, however holy He might be, but must be Himself one with the Father, bearing the eternal and ineffable Name, meaning He must participate in the eternal and infinite attributes of the One true God. This, in fact, is the very message Yeshua gives to the Jews who are congregated on the Temple mount, who asked Him if He was in fact the long-awaited Messiah. In replying to them that He would give eternal life to those who were His sheep, He includes the statement that He was one with the Father. The Jewish crowd to which He was addressing His words fully understood the implications of what He was saying, for they take up stones to murder Him right on the spot:

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one. (Jn 10:27–30)

Third, Yeshua came doing the works of the Father, the very works which the Prophets had proclaimed would identify the true Messiah. For when Yochanan HaMatbil (John the Baptizer) was in prison and asked his disciples to approach Yeshua with essentially the same question, Yeshua answered by pointing to His miracle works:

When Yeshua had finished giving instructions to His twelve disciples, He departed from there to teach and preach in their cities. Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Messiah, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" Yeshua answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me. (Matt 11:1–6)

Thus, Yeshua, in line with true semitic thought, was not about to publicly declare Himself to be the promised Messiah until He had accomplished the work which was prophesied to be done by the Messiah. In the final sense, that work entailed reconciling sinners to God and bringing in the final redemption, something that could not have been fully accomplished

until His death and resurrection. But even before the cross and the tomb, Yeshua's mighty miraculous works marked Him out as the One of whom the prophets spoke.

The question, of course, is whether those who witnessed His miracles would believe them to be something accomplished through Yeshua's own divine power, or if they would be met with blanket unbelief or even worse, attribute them to the power of the enemy. Thus Yeshua states: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand." Here we see three obvious characteristics of those who are truly born from above and who, therefore, are true members of the household of God.

First is that those who are Yeshua's sheep hear His voice. What does it mean to "hear" His voice? It means first of all to recognize His voice in the sense of distinguishing it from the voices of others. Sheep become accustomed to the voice of the shepherd who tends them, and they will follow him. Indeed, the Hebrew sense of the word "hear" incorporates the idea of obeying. Not only do the true sheep of the Messiah recognize His voice, but they also are ready to obey Him. In what way do we "hear" the voice of the Shepherd? We do so first through the Scriptures? When you read the Bible, are you tuned into the voice of Yeshua? Are seeking to find in the inspired words of the text the thoughts, viewpoint, wisdom, and commands of our Master?

Second is Yeshua's statement that He knows His sheep. Once again, we must understand the word "know" in its Hebraic sense, i.e., to have close, covenant, and intimate relationship together. Yeshua calls His sheep to follow Him because He has given His life for them, and intends that they will be with Him in glory, for He has given to them eternal life. Do you have a growing relationship and friendship with Yeshua? If you are one of His sheep, then He desires and even requires such a close and intimate fellowship.

Third, and closely related to the concept of "hearing" His voice, is that His sheep follow Him. Faithfulness to Yeshua is the true mark of being His sheep—conforming our lives to be like Him. If we are His, we strive to walk in His footsteps (1Jn 2:6).

Finally, Yeshua states that He "gives eternal life to them." Eternal life is not something earned or given as a reward for faithfulness. It is rather a gift—a pure gift of God's grace, purchased by the very life of Yeshua.

Here, in the season of Thanksgiving and Dedication, we renew ourselves again to grow in our love, appreciation, and faithfulness to the One Who has redeemed us and given us eternal life!