

The Feast of Dedication

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Overview

A post-biblical feast

Relevant because cited in John 10:22

Also provides an introduction to the Maccabean period, prophesied in Dan 11.

The Prophecy, Daniel 11:31

Daniel 11 is part of the revelation given to Daniel by the Angel of ch. 10, who came “to make thee understand what shall befall thy people in the latter days” (10:14). It brings us from the time of Alexander the Great down through the reign of Antichrist.

2, three kings in Persia ... the fourth ... against ... Grecia.— The four kings who followed Cyrus (11:2 "yet") are Cambyses, 539-29; Smerdis, 522-21; Darius Hystaspes, 521-486; and Xerxes, 486-65. Xerxes was not the last king of Persia. Seven others ruled in the 130 years between the end of his reign and the conquest of Alexander the Great. However, his vigorous attack against Greece set the stage for retaliation by Alexander, which is the next stage to which the Speaker wishes to bring Daniel.

3-4 a mighty king ... four winds.—The “mighty king” is Alexander the Great; the division of his kingdom was to his lieutenants. This important event was also foretold in 8:8.

- Cassander took over Greece,
- Lysimachus ruled Asia,
- Seleucus and his descendants ruled Syria, and
- Ptolemy ruled Egypt.

Israel was in limbo between Syria and Egypt. The following verses describe the ongoing tensions between the successors of Seleucus (termed “the king of the north”) and those of Ptolemy (“the king of the south”). Between 11:5 and 11:20, the Speaker covers 124 years, 7 Syrian kings, and 5 Egyptian kings. Then he devotes verses 21-35 to the twelve-year reign of a single Syrian king, Antiochus IV “Epiphanes.” This focusing of attention on this individual indicates his importance to the Jewish people, and his role as a type of the coming Antichrist.

22, prince of the covenant.—Probably a reference to the Jewish high priest Onias III, whose piety is described in 2 Macc 3:1. 2 Macc. 4:7-10 records how Jason bribed Antiochus to take over the high priesthood, and to pursue the Hellenization of the Jews. 4:23-26 describes how he was in turn overthrown by his brother Menelaus, who (32-35) subsequently murdered Onias, when the latter tried to rebuke him for pillaging the temple. Thus began an extended period in which Greek customs were forced on the nation. See 1 Macc 1:10-15.

Note on dates: “kingdom of greeks” is the Seleucid era (AS), beginning either 7 Oct 312 (Macedonian calendar) or 3 Apr 311 (Babylonian calendar, which is used by Josephus and

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apparently by Maccabees as well, though there is some disagreement). Thus $BC = 311 - AS + 1$. Antiochus took power in 175 BC

25, 29 at the time appointed.—These verses describe two successive campaigns of Antiochus into Egypt. The first was successful, but the second, in 168 BC, was interrupted. Note the angel's description of the time of this second campaign as "the time appointed." Nothing happens but by God's direction and permission.

30, ships of Chittim ... grieved.—These are Roman triremes. The Romans became concerned over the unrest that Antiochus was stirring up, and sent an ambassador, Popilius Laenas, with a letter from the Senate forbidding Antiochus to make war on Egypt. Antiochus with his army met Laenas with the Roman forces, and Laenas delivered his message. Reportedly (fragments of the third century commentator on Daniel, Porphyrius, in his work "against Christians," ref. <http://www.attalus.org/translate/daniel.html>), Antiochus said he would consult with his advisors. Laenas drew a circle around Antiochus with his stick, and said, "The Roman people tell you to make a decision and reply within this space" Antiochus realized he could not oppose the growing power of Rome. Disgraced before his troops, he turned back north, "grieved" at the frustration of his ambitions.

Indignation against the holy covenant.—He took out his rage against the Jews in Jerusalem. 1 Macc 1:41ff describes the steps Antiochus took to Hellenize the Jews, in concert with those who were already devoted to him ("them that forsake the holy covenant"). Some of the events described in Heb 11:34-38 may belong to this sad period.

31, pollute the sanctuary ... place the abomination that maketh desolate.—The culmination is the setting up of the abomination of desolation (probably an altar and/or image to Zeus Olympius) in the place of the brazen altar on 15 Kislev, and subsequent offerings there on 25 Kislev, 1 Macc 1:54, 59. According to Josephus, 12.253, he offered swine on the altar at this point. The year is 145 AS = 167 BC.

32, the people that do know their God ... shall do exploits.—The reference here is to the priest Mattathias and his sons, especially Judas, called "Maccabeus" (the hammer). See the inciting incident in 1 Macc 2:1-30, and their work in 2:45-48.

They struggled with the Greeks, and miraculously defeated several armies sent against them. Finally, they retook Jerusalem and purged the temple: 1 Macc 4:41-59. v.52, the restoration of sacrifice was on the same day, three years later, that Antiochus offered pagan sacrifices, the 25th of Kislev.

The feast of the dedication commemorates this rededication of the temple. The period of 8 days is explained in three different ways in various Jewish sources (www.loyno.edu/~edenison/hanukkah.htm).

- When Judah and his people came to the Temple, they knocked down the altars that Antiochus had put up. Then, on the 25th day of Kislev, they dedicated a new altar. This celebration lasted for eight days because the Jewish soldiers had missed celebrating the eight days of Sukkot during their years of fighting. So the Jewish people carried lulavim and etrogim and thanked God for leading them back to the Temple. Finally, the Jews decided to celebrate the rededication of the Temple for eight days every year. (II Maccabees 10:1-8).

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- When Judah and his people came to the Temple, they found eight spears of iron. The Maccabees hollowed out the spears and poured oil in. Then they added wicks and lit the oil. Long after that celebration, the fighting begun by the Maccabees was finally destroyed. That is why, on Chanukah, the Jewish people say the Hallel prayer to celebrate our victory and give thanks. (Pesikta Rabbati)
- When Judah and his men came to the Temple, they searched for some purified oil to light the menorah. But the only oil they could find had been used by the Greeks to worship their idols. Finally, the Maccabees found one small jug of oil with the official seal of the Kohan (the high priest) Gadol still on it. That jug contained only enough oil to light the great menorah for one day. But a miracle happened, and the oil lasted for eight days. From that day on, the 25th of Kislev was a day to celebrate this miracle, with no mourning or fasting allowed. (Talmud, Shabbat 21B)

Celebration of the Feast

Judas Maccabaeus ordained that the nation should celebrate this deliverance annually, and it has been celebrated down to the present day. The centerpiece of the celebration (which takes place in homes) is the lighting of the Menorah, a candlestick with nine branches. Eight hold candles for the eight days of the feast, while the ninth holds the “servant,” used to light the others. Each night one more candle is lit, until on the eighth night all eight are burning.

The motto for the feast of dedication is “Nes Gadol Hayah Sham” (“A great miracle happened there”), summarized by the four Hebrew letters *nun, gimel, he, shin*. Most people probably think of the miracle as the persistence of the oil, but the greater miracle was the victory that God gave a small band of faithful believers over the Greek oppressors, and the restoration of the pure worship of God after a period of corruption and domination by ungodly people.

The Reference in John 10

The time note appears in 10:22, but appears to cover the entire chapter. In the first half of the chapter, the Lord describes himself as the good shepherd. In doing so, he is drawing on a common OT metaphor for the leader of God’s people.

- We saw in our study of Genesis that this is a common ANE metaphor for the ruler. 18 centuries before Christ, the Babylonian king Hammurabi called himself “the shepherd” (stele, line 15).
- God established David as a shepherd for his people, Psa 78:70-72 (“fed” = “shepherded”)
- David himself recognized that this role was derivative, and that ultimately God was the shepherd of his people, Psa 23.
- Passages such as Ezek 34:1-16 and Jer 23:1-8 criticize the Jewish leaders (both palace and temple) for abusing their positions, and promise that one day the Lord will come to punish them and shepherd his people.

The events leading up to the original Dedication included the destruction of the corrupt temple priesthood (Dan 11:22) and the emergence of Judas Maccabaeus as a good shepherd for his people. But he eventually passed from the scene, and godly Jews must often have longed for the true shepherd promised in Ezek 34 and Jer 23. Here our Lord, at the feast of the dedication,

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presents himself as the true shepherd, greater than David, greater than Judas Maccabaeus, and certainly greater than the temple leadership that he confronted.

The people certainly understand his claim in this way, for they ask in v.24, “art thou the Christ?” The Lord replies by returning to his Shepherd claim. This is the final rupture: they take up stones to stone him, but he escapes beyond Jordan.

Summary

We can compare our Lord’s work to that of Maccabaeus at several levels. In each case, we can say, *nes gadol hayah sham*.

1. He did purge the temple physically (ch. 2), though it quickly fell back into corruption. The synoptics show that by the end of his ministry he had to purge it again (Matt 21:12 and parallels). It was a great miracle that he came into the world to confront evil.
2. He has purged us from our sin, and established us as a temple for the pure worship of God (1 Pet 2:5; Eph 2:20-22). It was a great miracle that he could turn rebellious sinners into a means of praise to God.
3. He will one day return, to put away all corruptions and perversions of religion, and restore the true worship of God (Rev 19:1-4).