

“Why the traditional explanation of Chanukah was suppressed”

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156. *If the miracle of the oil did indeed occur, why did none of the earlier sources refer to it before the Talmud?*

The silence of the earlier sources, especially the Mishnah (circa 200 CE) – the core text on which the subsequent Talmudic discussions were based – to mention the miracle of the Chanukah oil might indeed leave the impression that its existence was unknown. However, such an inference is uncertain, for, when the Talmud discusses the way the eight lights of Chanukah should be lit, the dispute on the issue is between the two schools of Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai (last cent. BCE and early 1st cent. CE) – the period leading up to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. As they were the undoubted experts on Temple law and practices, they were best placed to serve as transmitters of the traditional reason for the eight days of the festival. They would hardly have concocted such a miraculous tradition, so we may assume that its rationale was quite widespread within Judea, though there were different customs regarding how the lights should be lit.

There are several reasons to account for the silence of the Mishnah, according it no special tractate in the way that it did for every other festival, including Purim. Our sources³¹ record that the later Pharisaic movement – whose traditions were handed down to the Mishnaic and Talmudic sages – became disaffected with the Maccabees for various reasons. First, on account of the fact that one of the Maccabean kings, Alexander Yannai (103-76 BCE), a great-grandson of Matityahu, defected from the Pharisees to the Sadducees, and proceeded to

initiate violent persecution of the former and especially of its sages. Not surprisingly, then, that the early Pharisaic sources passed over in silence any mention of the Maccabees.

Another reason was that, in the view of the Pharisees, the Maccabees, a priestly dynasty, had unlawfully proclaimed themselves kings, a status that biblical law reserves exclusively for descendants of the tribe of Judah. Already, when Jacob blessed his children, he vehemently proclaimed that, “the ruler’s staff shall not depart from Judah;”³² and it was the offspring of King David (from that tribe) who consequently ruled the southern kingdom of Judah.

The implacable Pharisaic opposition to the Sadducees was primarily because of the latter’s rejection of the Pharisaic-Rabbinic oral traditions which they replaced with their own, rooted in a strictly literal reading of the Torah text. Further divisions between the two factions were socio-economic, with the Pharisees consisting of and representing the lower classes, and the Sadducees representing the wealthy assimilationists and landowners.

A further most significant rift between the two factions was occasioned by their conflicting respective attitudes toward the Roman occupiers, with the Pharisees implacably opposed to them, and the Sadducees favourable, and constantly currying their favour.

Against this background, the later Talmudic sages would certainly not have been prepared to acknowledge that the Maccabees – notwithstanding that their early dynastic leaders, before Alexander Yannai, were of Pharisaic and priestly affiliation – had been recipients of such a miracle of the oil, given that they could have used that miracle as heavenly confirmation of their right to rulership, and subsequently kingship, of Israel.

157. *But why would the Books of the Maccabees have suppressed any mention of that miraculous event of the Temple lights until the much later Talmudic disputes of Hillel and Shammai, preferring to link the origin of Chanukah with Temple dedication ceremonies?*

Again, we are in the realm of speculation. We suggest, however, that it might have been a reaction to the Persian, Zoroastrian beliefs which, from the 5th century BCE., had infiltrated all the nations surrounding Judea. Fire was regarded as a symbol of truth and order in that system, and it occupied a predominant place in its worship and theology.

The Jewish Apocalyptic literature, produced in Palestine from about 200 BCE – just before the Maccabean period – to 200 CE, was strongly influenced by such ideas, as were some doctrines of the Qumran community, with fire - a recurring theme in the Persian belief system – becoming similarly significant in that non-mainstream Jewish theology. Thus, the consignment of the wicked to a place of fiery eternal punishment is ‘presupposed in the Qumran scrolls and ubiquitous in later apocalypses.’³³ We also encounter the notion of the God of fire, of Gabriel as the angel in charge of fire, of angels bathing in fire, emitting tongues of fire, and even made from fire. We also have references to chariots of fire, demons of fire, mountains of fire, thrones of fire, the universe as concentric rings of fire, the destruction of the world by fire, seas and lakes of fire, Abraham being tested by fire, lashes of fire and martyrdom by fire.³⁴

Indeed, measures to counter Persian dualism’s basic doctrine are a recurring precaution in the later Pharisaic-Talmudic system; and the fact that normative Judaism turned its back on that entire Jewish Apocalyptic literature – whose ideas were infiltrating Judea and influencing Jews at the very period of the Maccabean revolt – helps explain why any festival whose core significance was focused upon a happening associated with fire would have been an acute

embarrassment to the religious leaders of Judea at that time. This might well explain why that miracle of the pot of oil, sufficient to burn for but one day and instead burning for eight, was suppressed by such writers as the religious authors of the First and Second Books of Maccabees.

The re-introduction of the traditional explanation

158. So, if the rationale of the miracle of the oil was suppressed, only to reappear in the period of the Talmud, why would the rabbis of that later period have had no qualms about promoting that reason in preference to the other two explanations of the Books of the Maccabees connecting it with the reconsecration of the Temple altar by the Maccabees?

Again we speculate that, having reinvigorated Jewish religious life, and regulated it at every turn with clear halachic guidance, and having successfully excluded such sectarian or tainted tracts as the Apocrypha (and especially the Pseudepigrapha), the sages of the Talmudic period (some two hundred years after the books of Maccabees were written) were not so much worried by the significance of fire in other religions. In any case, they themselves had but recently produced a chapter of Mishnah dealing with the Sabbath lights and the type of oil and wick that was and was not sanctioned for use,³⁵ as well as operating with fire in a number of other halachic contexts, such as for the *havdalah* ceremony, the kashering by fire of metal utensils, etc.

Perhaps those sages were also prescient. Witnessing Rome's iron grip on Judea and its manipulation of the Temple officialdom, even to the extent of selling the office of High Priest to the highest bidder – and noting the emergent Jewish resistance movement in the wake of the repressive measures of Gaius Caligula (37-41 CE) and the anti-Jewish riots in the period of Claudius (41-54 CE), the authorities of the Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai schools may well

have been apprehensive of an imminent, full-scale Jewish revolt, with its inevitable consequences for Jerusalem and the Temple.

By the early Mishnaic period (40-70CE.), there was a distinct lessening of interest in the Temple, occasioned by its manipulation and politicization by the Romans and aided by the developing network of synagogues that was mushrooming across the country.³⁶ The sages may have feared that, if the rationale of Chanukah continued to be promoted exclusively as a commemoration of the Temple's dedication, then, if the worst happened and the Romans were to destroy the Temple or ban the festival, it would totally die out. They may well have sought to safeguard Chanukah's observance, therefore, by converting it into a home ritual and resurrecting its hitherto suppressed rationale as the miracle of the pot of oil that burned for eight days. As all homes were lit as an ordinary activity by Jews and gentiles, the Chanukah lighting could be observed without it attracting the suspicion of the Romans that it was part of a religious commemoration.

The emergence of Chanukah as a home ritual

159. *So, at what stage did the festival develop into a home, rather than an exclusively Temple, ritual?*

Probably at that precise period when Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai were disputing exactly how the lights should be lit, namely during the decades preceding the destruction of the Temple, circa 40-70 CE. Had the festival been characterised by the kindling of home lights for any length of time before that, a consensus regarding the method of performing such a popular ritual would already have been well established. We may assume, therefore, that until the view of Bet Hillel finally won the day there would have been variety in the way people chose to light their lights.

160. *But do we have any source outside the Mishnah which might corroborate this change of emphasis in the significance and celebration of Chanukah around that period?*

We do, indeed. Although the rabbis employ, exclusively, the name *Chanukah*, meaning ‘Temple (or altar) rededication,’ the first-century historian, Flavius Josephus, tells us that ‘from that time [of its rededication by the Maccabees] to this, we celebrate this festival and call it ‘Lights’.³⁷

That was a ritualistic term that neither the authors of the Books of the Maccabees nor the sages were familiar with. We may assume, therefore, that this was the name popularly used by Jews in Josephus’s day, probably because it was much safer than one with any association with the Temple or the festival’s original name of *Chanukah*, which, if overheard by any Roman informer, would have attracted serious consequences. This was because that Hebrew name, with its connotation of Temple consecration, might well have touched raw Roman nerves, considering that they had been responsible for the destruction of the Temple some twenty-five years before. It would have been impolitic, therefore, to suggest that the Jews were still celebrating a festival which focused on the Temple, and which might well serve as a touchstone for ‘rekindling’ the flame of Jewish rebellion in an attempt to recapture the Temple from the Romans and celebrate a future ‘rededication’.

NOTES

31. See for example, commentary of Nachmanides (*Peirush HaRamBaN*) on Genesis 49:10.

32. Genesis 49:10.

33. James H. Carlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York, Doubleday, 1983), vol. 1, p.352.
34. For source of these references, see James H Carlesworth, *op. cit.*, vol.2, pp. 949-950.
35. See Mishnah *Shabbat* chapter 2.
36. For the tension between Temple and Synagogue, see Jeffrey M Cohen, *Blessed are Thou* (New Jersey, Jason Aronson, 1993), pp9-13.
37. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 12:7, 7.