

# What About God's Chosen People?

## Part XVII



By Philip E. Busby

**Question #21** - *"Is it true that the Jews are God's chosen people? I have a Christian friend who says the Jews were not God's chosen people."*

In our last segment, we began a look at the events that led directly up to the historical reason the Jews celebrate Hanukkah. In that we talked about how this era is where we begin to see the Romans become involved in the affairs of the Greek Empire. To be more clear on this issue, one should realize that the Romans had fought with the powers in the Greek homeland off and on as these powers became a nuisance to the Romans during their war with Carthage. Thus, what is more important to our study here is that the Romans began to be involved with the Seleucid Kingdom, which held much of the land Alexander the Great had taken control of, excluding Egypt and the Greek homelands. Most importantly, the Seleucid king held control over the promised land by this point.

As the Seleucid king, named Antiochus Epiphanes, came to the throne around 175 B.C., he was motivated by his ambitions to shape the world to his way of thinking. In doing this, he understood the Laws of God which the Jews clung to were a more dire threat to those ambitions than anything else in his kingdom. As we begin to go deeper into the events of this time period, it is also a good time to start referring to the land of Judah

as Judea. This is not to diminish the Jews in any way, but because we need to be clear on how much the land had truly become a region within the various territories being fought over by the powers of the day! This will also help us remain clear while discussing any historical figures who share the name Judah with the forefather and namesake of the tribe.

As we talked about last time, due to Epiphanes' decree, the observance of the Torah was outlawed in its entirety; but when the Jews resisted, emissaries and soldiers were sent. Copies of the Torah were burned, circumcision was banned, heavy taxes were imposed on the Jews, and the temple itself would be desecrated by setting up a statue of the Greek god Zeus and sacrificing swine on the altar, thus making it unusable for the offerings commanded in the Laws of God. This was the desecration that made the temple desolate which Daniel was told about, and it would foreshadow the fact the temple would later be destroyed in its entirety during the Roman rule but after The Messiah's first coming. (Dan. 11:29-31) These later events are what Jesus was referring to as He wept over Jerusalem, and later as He talked to His disciples while on the Mount of Olives. (Matt. 24:1-28, Mark 13:1-23, Luke 19:41-48, 21:5-24)

In talking about these most difficult times for the Jews under the Greek rule, we again return to the fact many Jews were willing to go along with the Hellenization of their lives. That being said, we also don't want to pass over what those Jews who were not willing did in order to be sure the Laws of God were not lost. In an earlier segment, we talked about how copies of the Torah had become more widely available than they had been, but this still did not mean everyone had a copy. Now, the fact the Greeks were burning copies of the Torah made them even more scarce than they ever had been. One of the greatest stories for our point here about preserving the Torah under these difficult times comes from the fact the Torah was one of those things, especially Jewish men, would gather together in order to teach and discuss with one another. This is part of that hiding the Word in one's heart we talked about, and because this was already a tradition, the fact physical copies of the Torah were becoming scarce did not stop Jews from knowing, learning, and discussing how the Law affected and should still guide their daily lives in real time as life's events unfolded.

The problem was that Jews getting together to do such a thing was something the Greeks were going to notice and put a stop to. Thus, the Jews came up with clever ways to do this without being noticed, and one of the main traditions of Hanukkah remembers one of the things they did. During Hanukkah, there is a game that

mostly children play, but I would suggest adults take time to do it as well; it's called Dreidel. The game is named after the main object used to play it, which is called a "dreidel." Today this is seen as a toy, but when it was used for the real thing it was no toy! While today dreidels are often wood or plastic, and in days gone by many were made of metal, the original dreidels were even more simple and one might say, disposable, if necessary. This was so any group anywhere could make one to begin the game and even remake one if out of malice, or the like, a Greek enforcer chose to destroy a dreidel. To make a dreidel one simply needed a square form, which could easily be made of wood or the like, and that form would be packed with clay. At one end a stick would be pushed into the middle of what would become the top of the dreidel. When it was dry, the clay "block" was removed from the form, and the end opposite the stick could be carved into a simple blunt rounded shape like the larger end of an egg.

On each of the four sides of the dreidel a symbol to represent an action would be carved. Today each side has one of the Hebrew letters: Nun, Gimel, Hey, and Shin. These letters stand for the Hebrew phrase "Nes Gadol Hayah Sham." meaning, "A great miracle happened there." This refers to the miracle Hanukkah celebrates. Now, sadly the game is widely misunderstood and used as a gambling game. I say sadly because quite the opposite is the real truth of its meaning in that it was made to seem to be a gambling game so the Greeks would simply pass it off as something "guys do," when, in fact, it gives a perfect way to make sure everyone goes home in the end with exactly what they came with! Coins would be used, and each person would put the same amount of coins in front of them as everyone else. To start, each person put one coin in the "pot." In turn each person would spin the dreidel, and when the dreidel stopped it would land with one side up. Depending on what symbol was on that side, the player would do nothing or give to or take from the pot. As each person ran out of coins, they were out, and when all the coins were in one person's possession the game ends.

Children like to play this game because they enjoy spinning the "top," but in playing Dreidel with adults, I have noted some will remark the game is "boring." Unfortunately, this has contributed to people using it for actual gambling; but in many ways boring is the point! Remember the game was made so the Jews could gather in public to discuss the Torah. Depending on how many coins each person put in to start the game, many people can be knocked out very quickly and have nothing to do - except what they actually came to do!

Also, if the discussion became so deep that everyone stopped playing the game, it could easily be started up at any moment in case a Greek enforcer came by. Observers who saw the group getting into heated discussions thought nothing of it. Money often causes arguments! People leaving or joining the game could easily be done, and in the end of it all the coins that had been put in the pot could simply be redivided among the players. The game could then begin again or each could go home with what they brought. Even if a Greek wanted to join in, if he lost, it was his loss. If he won, the coins were a small price to pay for what could be accomplished by having this "game"!

These kinds of practices ensured that iron could still sharpen iron in the ways of God. (Prov. 27:17) However, for all the things the Greeks did in their attempt to make it impossible for the Jews to continue performing the ordinances of the Law by taking it and its practices from the Jews, the persecution did not end there. Perhaps this is the point where I should clarify again that the official groups such as Pharisees and Sadducees did not exist as yet, but the predecessors of such groups did. What this meant is there were those totally willing to go along with Greek practices, those who were not, and many shades of gray in between. With that in mind, the Greeks were so determined to convert all the Jews to the Greek way of doing things, they demanded the Jews set up pagan altars in their towns, villages, etc. in order to offer sacrifices to the gods of the Greeks. No covert action on the part of any Jew could cover for taking part in such abominations, and this is where those who truly felt the ways of God were higher than life itself had to draw the line! As Greek enforcers were sent out to make sure Jews followed such edicts, they came to the town of a certain elderly priest named Mattathias, and this brought the issue to a head. Mattathias would not perform the sacrifice, and this is where we see those who were willing to conform come in conflict with those who said enough was enough!

Mattathias not only refused to perform the sacrifice himself, but as those willing to do so stepped forward, he intervened to stop them. The pagan altar was destroyed, and blood was shed as the one willing to step forward and do the sacrifice, as well as the Greek enforcers, were killed. Mattathias, along with his five sons and others, fled to the Judaeian mountains where they would hide in the caves. As others fled their homes in resistance and joined them, they began striking at and destroying the pagan altars which had been set up. Some say this was a war more with the Greek power of the Seleucid Kingdom, and others look at it as more a civil

war between Jews who were willing to be Hellenized and those who were not. To a degree both thoughts are correct. The elder Mattathias himself would die about a year after these events began in earnest in 166 B.C. However, his sons would continue the cause. His son Judas would receive the name Maccabeus, which means "The Hammer," and would eventually form an army that would be known by that same name.

Epiphanes was determined to hold on to the region of Judea, but he had other troubles as well. In negotiating peace with the Romans, high tribute money had been demanded, and this meant he could not afford to lose valuable trade routes and pieces of his kingdom. In the East this is exactly what the Parthians took advantage of. As Epiphanes' troubles in the West increased, the Parthians seized a main city along the trade route to India in 167 B.C. Not wanting to risk losing the East, Epiphanes left a general named Lysias in charge while he took an army and headed east. This meant that Lysias was in charge while most of this was going on in Judea, and when the Maccabees were finally a sizable enough force to launch directly against those in Jerusalem who held the temple, they did so. They would attack in the year 165 B.C., and their attempt to retake the temple would be successful.

Now, their main purpose for retaking the temple was to cleanse it and begin again the commandments of God, which they wanted to do as quickly as possible. They cleansed the temple and it was ready to be rededicated unto the service of The Lord, but one of the main things that needed to be done was to light the seven lights of the menorah inside the Holy Place. To do this there was special oil needed that was not easily made, and the supply found on hand was only enough for one day. They did not wait, for if God had brought them this far He would surely make a way, and He did! The miracle of the oil is not that God provided oil out of something, such as God did with water out of the rock in the desert as Israel traveled from Egypt to the promised land. (Ex. 17:1-7) Instead, it would be more like the oil and the flour during the famine of Elijah's day. (I Kin. 17:8-16) It would take eight days for more oil to be produced for the menorah, but miraculously with only the one day's supply of oil the lights would not go out the entire eight days it took for the new oil to be ready. This was a great symbol that God had truly rewarded their efforts in standing up for His ways and not bowing to pagan corruption or giving up on being the people He had called them to be!

Daniel chapter 11 verses 34&35 talks about how many in the chosen nation would fall in these days, but

when they did they would be "...holpen with a little help:..." Hanukkah remembers that help God gave his people, but as Daniel was told it would be a little help, meaning the nation would continue to be embroiled in the political circumstances of the day. The help would be so those who desired the ways of God would know God had not left them nor forsaken them. Hanukkah remembers the war, the victory, the terrible times the people suffered, but it is important to understand that Hanukkah does not celebrate the winning of the war or any of the violence it entailed. Hanukkah does not celebrate national pride, though there is rightfully national pride in the remembrance today. Hanukkah celebrates God's miracle, the miracle of the oil as the temple was once again put back into service. This is why Hanukkah means, "The Feast of Dedication" in English, and it is referred to as such in the Gospel of John when it talks of The Messiah walking in the temple during Hanukkah! (John 10:22-31)

Getting back to the history, of course, the Seleucid Kingdom was not going to stand by and do nothing, and while the war in the East initially went well for Epiphanes, when he heard of Lysias' failure to hold Judea he attempted to head home. He would not make it back! There is dispute as to exactly how he died, but it would seem the most likely general explanation is that he fell ill and died before he could return. Epiphanes' death threw the Seleucid Dynasty into question. General Lysias had been left in charge because Epiphanes' heir Antiochus V Eupator was not old enough to take the throne, and still only 9 years old when Epiphanes died. General Lysias recognized Eupator as the king, but another man named Philip, who was on the campaign in the East with Epiphanes, had originally been named regent during Eupator's youth. While being threatened even by other generals on this whole matter, in 162 B.C. Lysias and Eupator did attempt to retake control over Judea. They had some success and made it to Jerusalem where Lysias was determined to take back the city, but then word came of Philip returning from the East with the other half of the Seleucid army.

Due to this, Lysias wanted to return to Antioch and to do this convinced the young Eupator to offer the Jews religious liberty if they would keep the peace. Eupator agreed and the Jews accepted! While the Seleucid army did great damage to Jerusalem's fortifications before heading back home, when they got to Antioch they found what would further ensure the Jews some breathing room. Philip had indeed taken control. This led to civil war. Lysias, along with the young Eupator, won back the capital and generally control over the kingdom. However, this is where the

Romans get involved once again. Previously the Romans had pulled back from the Greek regions of the East content their success in battles against them would keep the peace, but time and again this strategy had not worked. The Romans were becoming increasingly irritated by this and desired to keep a closer eye on the Greek powers. This particular point in time caused them to take notice of the fact the Seleucid Kingdom was keeping a larger navy and military force than the treaty Rome had made with them allowed.

The Roman's appeared and began sinking ships and crippling the Seleucid military. Lysias feared standing up to the Romans in any way, and this made him very unpopular with the people. If you go back to the original involvement of Rome with the Seleucids, you find that Antiochus III had to send hostages to Rome as part of his punishment for pushing westward and running into the Romans. Epiphanes was one of those hostages, and his brother became king when Antiochus III died. Eventually Epiphanes was allowed to return from Rome in exchange for his brother's heir Demetrius I Soter. When Demetrius I's father was assassinated, it was Epiphanes who became king by overthrowing the assassin. When Epiphanes died, Demetrius I, then 22 years old, petitioned the Roman government to allow him to return and take the Seleucid throne, but Rome at the time favored Lysias and young Eupator. Two years later, as Rome was exacting punishment on the Seleucid Kingdom for their military overstock, Lysias' unpopularity with the people grew to the point they rose up and killed a Roman envoy on their own. About this same time, Demetrius I escaped from Rome. Upon returning, Demetrius I was welcomed back as the rightful king in 161 B.C. To solidify his power, he almost immediately put Lysias and Eupator to death.

Now, before we go any further, it's important to our study that we attempt to cover the events of the High Priesthood because this has great ramifications on the fact that while the temple service had been restored, things were still not as they really should be. The fact this further degrading of the nation needed to come to a full is why God did not miraculously intervene further to help the Jews at this time. It's also why The Messiah was sent when He was, and we see what we do by the time The Messiah arrives on the scene! Through the Greek era leading up to and through the time of Hanukkah's events and those shortly thereafter, we do not have a complete picture of who held the High Priesthood. However, what we do know is that there was plenty of those who were both for and against a certain level of Hellenization, which is the main point. There is also quite a bit of

evidence there was a lot of political jockeying as well as all-out bribery involved in how some came to the office, especially going forward starting with Epiphanes.

When the Seleucid Kingdom took control over Judea they were originally "friendly" to the temple service. However, after the High Priest Onias III stopped an attempt to further plunder the temple's treasures, an event set in motion by a Hellenistic Jew and involving many of the main actors that brought Epiphanes to power, the relationship with the Seleucid Dynasty was never on his side again. By the time Epiphanes came to the throne of the Seleucid Kingdom, Onias III, who was against the Hellenization of the Jews, was obligated to step aside in 175 B.C. Onias III's brother Jason became the High Priest. There is some evidence even this happened through bribery, but the real point is that Jason did support the Hellenization of the Jews. In spite of this, he made a fatal mistake in sending a man named Menelaus, who would appear to be the brother of the man who caused trouble for Onias III, to deliver the tribute money to the Seleucid ruler. Menelaus basically bribed the Seleucid king to give him the office of High Priest in place of Jason.

This man was not of the house of Aaron and should never have been a priest, much less the High Priest, but as the Greeks considered the office something they had the right to appoint at will, not something determined by the Laws of God, this did not matter to them. An officer with soldiers was sent back to Jerusalem with Menelaus to put down any opposition to his appointment. Menelaus then did what Onias III had stopped, which was to make use of the temple treasures to fulfill the promises he had made to the king in order to obtain the High Priesthood. When news of this reached Onias III, he publicly accused Menelaus of robbing the temple. Due to this, Menelaus bribed the king's officer to kill Onias III before an official complaint could be made to the capital. This the officer accomplished. However, Menelaus' plunder of the temple did not end there, and when this resulted in disfavor among the Jewish people, violence broke out. Menelaus then accused the Jewish people of being against him in favor of the Seleucid Dynasty's Greek rivals in Egypt. This not only led to the death sentence of many Jews but fanned the flame of desire for Epiphanes to forcefully Hellenize the Jews completely!

By the time the temple is retaken by the Maccabees in 165 B.C., it is unclear if Menelaus served in any real capacity as High Priest, but it is said he was killed by Epiphanes' son Eupator when the young king

made peace with the Jews in 162 B.C. It is believed that in the interim Judas Maccabeus may have served as the High Priest. However, when Demetrius I took the Seleucid throne in 161 B.C., a man of the house of Aaron, but still not of the High Priest's line, named Alcimus, who was very Hellenistic and opposed to the Maccabees, went to Demetrius I to be named High Priest. This request was granted, and an army was sent to ensure his installment. At first the Jews seemed to simply be glad to again have a man of the house of Aaron in the position, but he turned the people against him with his cruelty and corruption. This is where the Maccabees again find themselves at serious odds with the Seleucid kings. When the Seleucid army returned to Antioch, Judas Maccabeus would attack and drive Alcimus back to Antioch as well.

It's possible the youngest of the five sons of Mattathias, Jonathan Maccabeus, took over as High Priest, but Demetrius I demanding to have control over the Jews' high office sent an army to reinstate Alcimus. Judas Maccabeus would defeat this army just north of Jerusalem, but Judas was not ignorant to the fact his forces were likely too small to withstand a continual assault from the king. Judas would turn to the Romans for help, sending two envoys to Rome. The Roman's Senate received these two men and agreed Judea deserved to be an independent state that would serve as a buffer between the two factions of what was left of the Greek Empire: the Ptolemy and the Seleucid realms. Sadly, this would not help as the Romans really only worked in their own interests and sent no troops to enforce such a thing. In any case, Demetrius I quickly sent an even larger army to Jerusalem. Judas, once again, gathered his forces and met them north of the city, but was defeated and killed in battle in 160 B.C. Alcimus would be reinstated as the High Priest, and a garrison of soldiers would be left to keep him there. However, Alcimus' arrogance would quickly catch up with him as he was killed pulling down the wall of the court that divided the Gentile area from that part only Jews could enter in 159 B.C.

It is not clear who served as High Priest for the next few years, but different suggestions have been made that would connect who it was to latter religious groups such as the one thought to be responsible for what we call the Dead Sea Scrolls. In any case, with Judas now dead, Jonathan was thrust into the position of leadership of the Maccabees. The oldest son John had been captured and killed during the battles leading up to Judas' death, and Eleazar had also been killed in battle. This left only Jonathan and Simon. Jonathan would be active in resistance to the Seleucid kings, and due to internal trouble for the Seleucid Kingdom he would see a fair

amount of success. His diplomatic skills would gain him the name, Jonathan Apphus, which means, "The Diplomat." As the Seleucid Kingdom was in all-out civil war, Jonathan was offered various treaties by the leaders because the Maccabees, in spite of their being anti-Hellenistic, had become the most stable leadership in Judea. Jonathan, already the military governor, was also eventually appointed to the position of High Priest by one of the Seleucid rulers around 153 B.C.

Some in the Jewish community were not happy about this anymore than they had been over seeing some of the other men not of the correct line be in the position. However, Jonathan was fairly well liked and supported. Over the next ten years, he and Simon would take the opportunities that presented themselves to strengthen Judea's position and diminish those among the Jews who had sold out to the Hellenistic ways, all the while sorting their way through the treacherous civil conflict the Seleucid rulers were going through. In 143 B.C. one of the Seleucid rulers named Diodotus Tryphon made offers to Jonathan, and in gaining his trust the ruler captured him and killed 1,000 of his men. Tryphon, now facing Simon, offered to release Jonathan in exchange for Jonathan's two sons and a sum of money. Not wanting the people to blame him for Jonathan's death, Simon agreed even knowing Tryphon would not keep his word. Tryphon killed Jonathan as Simon had suspected he would, and Simon buried his brother in their home town.

Simon was now free to solidly stand in full opposition to Tryphon and side with Demetrius II Nicator, the rightful heir to the Seleucid throne. Simon sent a request for Judea to be freed of taxes, and Demetrius II granted the request. This gave Judea, which now included land holdings reminiscent of its past, political independence in 142 B.C. The joyous people held a large assembly, and by official resolution they made Simon the first prince of what would become the Hasmonean Dynasty in 141 B.C. This resolution also declared Simon and his descendants High Priests, "...until a faithful prophet should arise." This set the perfect stage for God eventually sending John the Baptist, whom Jesus called the greatest prophet to be born, as well as The Messiah Himself! (Matt. 11:7-15, Luke 7:24-30)

Until next time, may we each continually choose to be the people God wants us to be!

