

A Maccabee for All Seasons – Jewish, Christian, Literary and Rastafarian

by **Geoffrey Clarfield** (December 2014)



This year the Jewish festival of Hanukkah lasts from December 16 until the 24. It will be celebrated for a full eight days with one candle lit each night until all eight shine on the eighth day. Jews in the US, Israel (where it is a national holiday) and around the world, celebrate Hanukkah to commemorate the miracle of the oil, when their ancestors in Judea, the Maccabees, after having successfully fought off Hellenistic invaders who forbid the Jewish Temple rituals, discovered a tiny amount of sacred oil which managed to light the Temple sanctuary in Jerusalem for a full eight days.

In 2001, President George W. Bush inaugurated the first White House Hanukkah Party where he and Lady Bush entertained American Yeshiva deans, heads of Jewish organizations and hundreds of other American Jews involved in the political life of the United States. Cynics may argue that this has now become a presidential precedent, whereby American Jews are wooed to support whichever of the two parties hold the presidency.

However, this somewhat secular presidential interest in Hanukkah is not new. It is echoed in a story about George Washington who on inspecting the dismal conditions of his near mutinous troops at Valley Forge on Xmas eve 1777, discovered one of his Jewish soldiers lighting a Hanukkah lamp. When he asked the soldier what he was doing and why, the soldier explained the meaning of the holiday and told Washington that it was in commemoration of rebellious freemen who in Biblical times, fought off much stronger tyrants. No doubt, the symbolism of the story was not lost on the man who was to become America's first president.

But these two examples of a Jewish holiday resonating in the wider Western world, whose culture and leaders have almost always been drawn from the mainstream Christian culture of the West, are not unique. The spirit of Hanukkah and its heroes, the Maccabees, has permeated Western civilization for more than two thousand years, theologically and artistically.

First of all, the full tale of Hanukkah as described in the two canonical books of the Bible

(Maccabees One and Two) are gifts of the Catholic Church to the world and later on back to the Jews who during the enlightenment of the 18th century, began to explore the diverse non canonical Jewish written sources of their own history.

The Books of the Maccabees, written slightly after the time that the Maccabees restored Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel after the conquests of Alexander the Great, were not canonized by the early Rabbis, for fear of Roman persecution, as the Jewish canonization of the Old Testament was finalized shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD. Jewish scribes stopped copying these books and they faded from the memory of their descendants, being replaced by a simpler Scroll of Hanukah – the ‘Megilat Hanukkah’ in Hebrew.

And so the detailed narratives of the Maccabean revolt survived because the full story remained part of the Latin version of the Catholic Bible, which had been based on an earlier Greek version that had included the two books. In addition to these two books, there are non-canonical books about the Maccabees in the Apocrypha that were and are preserved in the Christian tradition, such as Maccabees III, IV and V. Outside of the Apocrypha, are the books of Maccabees VI, VII and VIII and three Ethiopian variations called “Megabyan”

In Catholic theology the Maccabees loom large, as they are thought of as martyrs for the faith. In the books there is a grisly description of Maccabees being tortured by Syrian Greeks in the hope that they will give up their faith and honor Greek polytheism, eerily similar to what is happening to so many Christians in Syria and Iraq, as they try to resist the onslaught of ISIS. Refusing to convert, the Maccabees died in their faith and thus became the prototypical pre Christian, but ultimately Catholic, martyrs honored by the Church.

As Christian martyrs the Maccabees are also venerated by the Eastern Orthodox (Greek and Slavic), Coptic (Egyptian) and Ethiopian Christians. Churches and shrines that are dedicated to the memory of the Maccabees include the Church of St. Mary and St. Shmuni in Sinstorf, Hamburg, the Chapel of the Maccabees in Saint Pierre, Geneva and the Church of St. Maccabees Brothers in Poland.

The story of the Maccabees has also been featured in the imaginative literature of Western civilization for more than two thousand years. The most famous Maccabee, the rebel Judah Ha Maccabee “Judah the Hammer,” is a consistent presence in European literature. In 1000 AD the Old English author Aelfric wrote a piece called “Old English Homilies on the Maccabees.” Shakespeare mentions Judas Maccabeus in his play “Love’s Labor Lost.”

In post Renaissance Italy the Spanish writer Miguel de Silveyra published a piece called “El

Maccabeo," overlapping in time with that of Frenchman Pierre du Ryer's, "Le Chevalrie de Judas Macabe." A German wrote "Judas Makkabaeus" in 1885, which was then followed by the rise of the Philo Judaic movement in 19th century Britain, which gave us the novel "The Hammer" by Alfred J. Church and Richmond Seeley (1890).

Visually, Judas Maccabeus appears in the illustrated manuscript called the "Libre Maccabaeorum" of 900 AD, in illustrations by Rubens in the Chapel of the Dead in Tournai Cathedral, in the Nine Heroes Tapestries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan (made in the south Netherlands from 1400-1410) and in the 19th century engravings created by the world famous French artist, Gustav Dore in his "Illustrated English Bible."

In 1601 the Protestant English writer William Houghton wrote his play "Judas Maccabeus." Much later on this side of the Atlantic, American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote his poem "Judas Maccabeus" in 1872. Most recently an American Jewish writer Howard Fast wrote a novel called "The Maccabees" and after WWII an Italian director delivered a Grade B Sword and Sandal version which is now posted on the Internet (Australian actor Mel Gibson is hoping to produce a Hollywood epic called the Maccabees and that may be based on Fast's book, but as usual, Gibson has fallen out with one of his writers who has explained that Gibson cannot hold back his anti-Semitic outbursts, so the project is "on hold.")

Without doubt, the most spectacular rendering of the Hanukkah story can be found in George Friedrich Handel's magisterial oratorio "Judas Maccabeus" that first premiered in London on April 1, 1747. It has been performed regularly by orchestras and choirs ever since.

With the rise of the State of Israel, European classical music has become part and parcel of daily life there. As the modern Jewish state feels it is constantly fighting the wars of the Maccabees against enemies who clearly declare that they want to destroy them and force upon them a foreign religion, we should not be surprised to find that Handel's melodies have penetrated the children's songs that Israelis use to celebrate Hanukkah. What was once a piece of high European culture has now become a children's holiday folk song, but in the ancestral language of, the Maccabees!

19th century English speaking missionaries made sure that the Bible was spread to the four corners of the world and it has become a near universal document that has spilled out of its ancient Jewish and Christian roots. Max Romeo is one of Jamaica's Rastafarian Reggae stars. He has argued that English missionaries who brought the Bible to convert Caribbean slaves intentionally left out versions with the Book of Maccabees, so as not to give a Biblical role model of just rebellion to the slaves who had been converted by their European oppressors. In

1971 Romeo wrote the reggae hit song "Macabee Version" which includes the following lyrics:

Bring back Maccabee Version...Give back the King James Version

It would appear that by now the message of Hanukkah is not limited to any one race, creed or color. It is a universal story of the fight for political freedom, freedom of conscience and above all for personal liberty. In this time of political turbulence its message is clear; freedom is light and tyranny is darkness. Happy Chanukah; Jewish, Christian and Rastafarian.

Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large.

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