

# The Sower

*Bulletin & Voice of*

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## Special Holiday Edition

### The Story of Chanukah:



Approximately 24 centuries ago, the Greek armies, under the leadership of Alexander the Great, conquered the whole of what is now known as the Middle East, which included the land of Israel. After the death of Alexander, the empire split apart and the land of Israel came under the control of the Seleucid dynasty. In the year 167 BCE, King Antiochus Epiphanes decided to force all the people under his rule, which included the Israelites, to Hellenize; in other words, to assume the pagan Greek way of life.

Time-honored rituals such as the venerating of the Sabbath and circumcision became outlawed. Temples which had witnessed the adoration and worship of the Holy One, now saw within their hallowed halls the sacrifice of pigs and the worship of idols. Jews, fearing for their lives, were forced to gather, stark naked, in the great gymnasium. Many resisted the Hellenistic way of life, only to be put to death as martyrs for God and all that He had done for them.

One day, the Greek armies came to the village of *Modi'in* and set up an altar for the villagers. As brazen as was their sense of worldly materialism, they commanded the Jews to bring a pig to the altar as a sacrifice to the gods to prove, without a doubt, their obedience to the decree issued by Antiochus. At that time, there was an old and dedicated priest named Mattathias. When he saw a fellow son of Israel about to sacrifice a pig before the Lord, he became so outraged that he killed him. *"Better he should die before the Lord,"* thought Mattathias, *"than sell himself and his principles to the pagans."*

Mattathias and his five sons then gathered together; they fought the Greek detachment; they retreated to the mountains; they gathered a few more forces; and they initiated what can only be described as a small guerrilla war against the Greeks and their allies.

Before Mattathias died, he passed on the leadership of the resistance to his son, Judah, the Maccabee. Inspired by the will of his **earthly** father and strengthened by the Love for his **Heavenly** Father, Judah led his forces against a series of armies sent by Antiochus. History records this as an amazing battle which lasted eight days. Through undaunted bravery and inspired strategy, Judah and his small band of revolutionaries defeated the Greek armies.

In order to rededicate the temple, they needed to light the Temple Menorah. They could find only one small earthen pot of oil, properly blessed for the occasion; just enough to last for one day. When they used the oil to light the Menorah, a miracle occurred: The Menorah burned for eight full days.

Thus, we have what is known as the celebration of Chanukah: a celebration not only of a great military strategy, which led to victory; but of greater import, Chanukah is the celebration of a **miracle**. God, in His infinite power, performed a miracle. He intervened within the laws of nature, and He caused something to happen. He caused a small vial of temple oil to burn for eight days.

Interestingly, had the events commemorated during Chanukah **not** taken place, there may never have been a Christmas. Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, asserts the following:

*Chanukah was a controversial holiday for a number of centuries and did not achieve total acceptance until well into Talmudic times. The rabbis' reluctance to sanction the holiday can, perhaps, be attributed to the fact that they felt uneasy about commemorating a military victory. That may also be why they insisted that the primary reasons for celebration were that the temple was rededicated, and that the Menorah oil miraculously burned for eight days . . . and yet, the motif of the military victory did remain important, if not central, to the commemoration of the holy day. For were it not for the successful Maccabean revolt, paganism and Hellenism would very likely have been imposed upon the Jews. Had that happened, the very foundation of Judaism might very well have been destroyed forever and Christianity might never have come to be. In other words, if not for the miracle of Chanukah, there might be no Judaism and no Christianity in existence today.*

Imagine: there might be **no** Judaism and **no** Christianity in existence today, were it not for a small group of believers; believers who became **outraged** enough; whose sense of right and wrong was **challenged** enough; whose **pride** in their **faith**, in their **nation**, and in their **God** was **strong** enough to raise arms against the pagan tyrants. A group of people decided that **enough was enough!** Furthermore, they did something. They stood upon principle and faced the whole of the Greek armies.

Chanukah begins at sunset on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of *Kislev* (this year, December 18) and runs for eight days.

## **Advent - The Coming of Christ:**

Advent comes from the Latin *advenio*, which means *to approach* or *to come*. The Advent season begins on the fourth Sunday **prior** to Christmas Day (this year, November 27). That Sunday is called *Advent Sunday*. Advent is a time of preparation, mentally and spiritually, for the commemoration of the birth of Jesus Christ. It also denotes a period of expectancy for the Second Coming. The early Christian community expected an imminent return of Christ, as noted in *Hebrews 9:28*. However, as time proceeded, it became evident that the notion of *parousia*, or Christ's return, would have to be postponed; perhaps indefinitely.

Amidst the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, it is easy for the true meaning of Christmas to be forgotten. The beauty of Advent is that it allows us an opportunity to take a few moments each evening to light the candles and reflect upon Christ's birth and, subsequent, revelation.

It is not known, for sure, how the Advent wreath originated. However, it is believed that it has its roots in the pagan fire wheel. The circular wreath represents eternity. In some churches, Advent is marked by fasting and solemnity; purple vestments are worn as a reflection of this. Traditionally, purple candles are used, except for the third week, again to mark the solemn nature of Advent. Anglican churches tend to use blue candles. The Third Sunday of Advent is known as *Gaudete Sunday*. A pink candle (white in Anglican churches) is used for this week, reflecting the joy of anticipation.



On Christmas Day, the Advent wreath is refreshed with white candles. Some people continue to keep their Advent wreaths lit with white candles throughout the twelve days of Christmas, between Christmas Day and Twelfth Night, January 5<sup>th</sup>, or the *Eve of Epiphany*.

## **The Story of Christmas:**

The word comes from the Old English term *Cristes masse*, meaning *Christ's mass*. This was the name for the festival service of worship held on December 25th to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ. While it is accepted that Jesus was born in the small town of Bethlehem, a few miles south of Jerusalem, there is no certain information on the date of his birth, not even of the year. One reason for this uncertainty is that the stories of his birth, recorded in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke, were written several decades after the event, and those who wrote of it gave no specific dates for the events they mentioned. Jewish oral tradition was more concerned with events than with specific dates.

For several centuries, the Christian Church paid little attention to the celebration of Jesus' birth. The major Christian festival was Easter, the day of his resurrection. Gradually, as the Church developed a calendar to commemorate the major events of the life of Christ, the celebration of his birth became significant.

Because there was no knowledge about the date of Jesus' birth, a day had to be selected. The Eastern Orthodox Church, along with the Eastern Rite churches within the Roman Catholic Church, chose January 6th. The day was named *Epiphany*, meaning *appearance*, the day of Christ's manifestation. The Western Church, initially based at Rome, chose December 25th. It is known from a notice in an ancient Roman almanac that Christmas was celebrated, in Rome, on December 25th as early as 336 CE.

In the latter half of the 4th century, the Eastern and Western Churches adopted each other's festival, thus establishing the modern Christian 12-day celebration from Christmas to Epiphany. In some places, the 12th day is called the *Festival of the Three Kings* because it is believed that the three wise men, or magi, visited the Christ child on that day and brought him gifts.

## **Customs and Traditions:**

Over the centuries, a significant number of customs and traditional observances have emerged to make the Christmas season one of the most colorful and festive times of the year. Probably the most universal custom is gift-giving, frequently associated with the person of Santa Claus, or Saint Nicholas. Other customs have to do with decorations of evergreen trees, lights, wreaths, and holly; the sending of cards; good and plentiful food and drink; and the singing of carols and other songs.

**Gift Giving:** Gift-giving is one of the oldest customs associated with Christmas; it is older than the holiday itself. When the date of Christmas was set to fall in December, it was done, at least in part, to compete with ancient pagan festivals that occurred at about the same time. The Romans, for example, celebrated the *Saturnalia* on December 17th. It was a winter feast of merrymaking and gift exchanging. Two weeks later, on the Roman New Year, January 1st, houses were decorated with greenery and lights, and gifts were given to children and the poor. As the Germanic tribes of Europe accepted Christianity and began to celebrate Christmas, they also gave gifts.

In some countries, such as Italy and Spain, children traditionally did not receive gifts on December 25th, but on January 5th, the *Eve of Epiphany*. In several northern European nations, gifts are given on December 6th, the feast day of Saint Nicholas, the patron saint of children.

**Trees and Decorations:** Ancient, pre-Christian winter festivals used greenery, lights, and fires to symbolize life and warmth, amid cold and darkness. These, like gift-giving, have also persisted. The most splendid symbol of modern Christmas is the brilliantly decorated evergreen tree with strings of multi-colored lights.

The use of evergreens and wreaths as symbols of life was an ancient custom of, among other cultures, the Egyptians, Chinese, and Hebrews. Before their conversion to Christianity, tree worship was common amongst the Teutonic and Scandinavian people of northern Europe. At the New Year, they decorated houses and barns with evergreens to scare away demons, and they often set up trees for the birds in winter. For these northern Europeans, this winter celebration was the happiest time of the year because it signified that the shortest day of the year, about December 21st, had passed. They knew the days would start to get longer and brighter. The month during which this festival took place was named *Jol*, from which the word *Yule* is derived. In some countries, *Yule* has come to mean Christmas.

The modern Christmas tree seems to have originated in Germany during the Middle Ages. A main prop in a medieval play about Adam and Eve was a fir tree, hung with apples. Called the *Paradise Tree*, it represented the Garden of Eden. German families set up Paradise Trees in their homes on December 24th, the feast day of Adam and Eve. On them, they hung wafers, symbolizing the bread distributed at the Christian celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Because the Christmas holiday followed immediately, candles representing Christ as the Light of the world were often added to the tree. Eventually cookies and other sweets were also hung on the tree. The apples tended to be too heavy and, eventually, a German glass blower created red glass balls for the tree.



Germans kept a Christmas Pyramid made of wood, containing shelves to hold figurines, in the same room as the tree. The Pyramid was also decorated with evergreens, candles, and a star. By the 16th century, the Pyramid and the Paradise Tree merged and transitioned to the Christmas tree, so popular today. I am sure you will recognize a more modern rendition of the old German Pyramid Tree, as seen on the left.

The Christmas tree was introduced into England early in the 19th century, and it was popularized by Prince Albert, the German husband of Queen Victoria. The trees were decorated with candles, candies, paper chains, and fancy cakes that were hung from the branches on ribbons.

German settlers brought the Christmas tree custom to the American colonies in the 17th century. By the 19th century, its use was quite widespread. Trees were also popular in Austria, Switzerland, Poland, and Holland. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Christian missionaries introduced Christmas trees to the people of China and Japan. There, they were decorated with intricate paper designs.

The use of evergreens for wreaths and other decorations arose in northern Europe. Italy, Spain, and some other nations used flowers instead. Holly, with its prickly leaves and red berries, came into holiday use because it reminded people of the crown of thorns worn by the crucified Christ, with the berries symbolizing droplets of blood.

**Christmas Cards & Carols:** It is believed that the first Christmas greeting card was designed in England, in 1843, by an artist named John C. Horsley for a friend, Sir Henry Cole. The design showed a family party, beneath which the words “*A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You*” were inscribed. The practice soon became popular.

The most traditional Christmas songs are the Christmas carols. The word *carol* was associated with dance and open air. It later came to mean simply a joyful religious song.

**Manger Scenes:** A custom that originated in southern Europe is the manger scene, often referred to by its French name, *crèche*. This is a small model of the stable where Jesus was born, containing figures of Mary, Joseph, the infant, shepherds, farm animals, and the three wise men and their gifts.

The custom is said to have been started by Saint Francis of Assisi. According to tradition, on Christmas Eve, 1224, he set up a stable in a corner of his village church with real persons and animals to represent those of the first Christmas.

## **Christmas in the Holy Land:**

### ***Altar of the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem***



Apart from the many ingredients that go into making the Christmas season a festive and happy time for people around the world, the day itself and the religious observances that highlight it, remain the focal points. One of the most colorful and solemn celebrations of the holiday takes place in the village of Bethlehem.

On Christmas Eve, a long line of people winds through the narrow streets. Church dignitaries, priests, and attendants, all in magnificent robes, march at the head of this line. They carry a tiny, gilded, wicker cradle containing a wax image of the infant Jesus. At the old fortress-like Church of the Nativity, they pause, as each worshiper stoops to enter the low door into the sanctuary. The people gather in the Roman

Catholic chapel of Saint Catherine for the celebration of a midnight mass. Pilgrims from all parts of the world participate. The ceremony ends when the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem carries the image of the Christ child to the ornate glass and marble manger in the Grotto of the Nativity under the church.

Despite the beauty and magical ambiance of such processions and ceremonies, one can only wonder what Christ, born in a simple stable and surrounded by “beasts of the field,” must think of such elaborate commemorations of his earthly incarnation.

We, at the First Spiritual Temple, wish you, your family, and your friends a most joyous Advent, Chanukah, and Christmas season. May the true Spirit and meaning of these glorious and Light-filled celebrations fill your hearts and souls.

Rev. Simeon,  
Pastor

