



BY JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

HANUKKAH

Against overwhelming odds, Judas Maccabee defeated the mighty Syrian army and fulfilled prophecy. The Festival of Lights recalls the Jewish triumph of faith and the preparation for our Lord's birth.

The scene is so real it could have taken place last month, or last year. The year, though, was 165 B.C.

From their mountain camp a weary band of Jewish soldiers watched in dismay as the huge Syrian army approached their stronghold—marching across the plain. The odds were incredible. Behind the wall were 3,000 Jewish guerrillas, tattered and scarred from three years of fighting. Coming toward them was the world's then-greatest military power. The Syrian army numbered more than 47,000. It included not only foot soldiers but also thousands of warriors mounted on horses and, most fearsome, spearmen mounted on armored elephants.

The battle was the climax of history's first crucial fight for religious freedom.

The impossible odds, however, did not seem to discourage the Jewish warriors. Their leader, a steely-eyed Jew with huge arms which caused him to bear the nickname, "The Hammerer," looked out at

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the approaching army and snorted.

"In the sight of heaven there is no difference between deliverance by many or by few." Turning to his men, he shouted, "Do not be afraid of them!"

All this took place during a 400-year period in history symbolized by the blank page in our Bibles between Malachi and Matthew—a period many Bible students call the "silent years."

But God was not silent during those years. For all history is really "His story."

As the Old Testament closes, most of

the known world was ruled by Persia. In the year 336 B.C., two kings ascended their thrones. One was Darius III in Persia. The other was a 20-year-old soldier in Macedonia named Alexander.

Five years later, Alexander's armies had crushed the Persians and then went on to conquer the entire known world. Legend has it that Alexander then wept because he had no more worlds to conquer. When he died at the age of 33, his generals divided the kingdom among themselves.

During that time the Jews were first subjects of the Persians, then the Greeks, and finally—following the death of Alex-

ander the Great—were subjects of the Greco-Syrians.

The despised Syrian ruler Antiochus IV, who called himself "Epiphanes" (the visible god), set about to force the Jews to renounce the ways of God and adopt the new humanism called "Hellenism." In 171 B.C. Antiochus began his persecution of the Jews—a persecution which had all the elements of a holocaust.

The practice of worshiping Jehovah became a crime. Antiochus declared the elimination of all vestiges of Judaism, ordering the people to serve the state pantheon of pagan gods.

"Whoever refuses should be put to death," it was decreed. Observance of the Jewish Sabbath was forbidden. Torah scrolls were burned. Thousands of Jews were slain for minor "crimes"—such as reading the Bible. Mothers who circumcized their infant sons were killed and their newborn babies hung around their necks as their bodies swung from poles along public streets.

A heathen idol was set up in the Temple at Jerusalem, defiling Judaism's holiest place. Pagan altars were erected throughout Israel, and Syrian soldiers prowled the land, forcing villagers to bow to the new "gods." In a crowning blow of blasphemy, Antiochus ordered his soldiers to sacrifice a pig in the Temple in Jerusalem, offering it to the Greek god, Jupiter.

During this persecution an aging priest by the name of Mattathias defied a Syrian officer's command to kneel before an idol. Instead he turned on the pagan soldier and struck him with a sword, killing him. He and his five sons then fled to the Judean hills where they were joined by other rebels. They were called Hasmoneans and were the first group of guerrilla fighters the world had known.

While the orthodox Jews refused to fight back on the Sabbath, the Hasmoneans believed that, for self-defense purposes, they were allowed to fight. Lean and angry, the guerrilla warriors grew in numbers, inflicting great damage on the occupying Syrian forces with their hit-and-run tactics.

Mattathias died within a year, and his son Judas took charge. He was given the nickname "Maccabee," which means "hammer." It was said he was God's hammer to smash the Syrians.

Under Judas Maccabee, the Jews began to turn the tide of war against the Syrians. "Arm yourselves and be brave," the hammerer told them. "It is better for us to die in battle than to witness the ruin of our nation and our sanctuary."

This tough band of fighters used tac-

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tics unknown by the Syrians—lightning strikes and retreats, surprise attacks, ambushes, night raids, and harassment. Like David of old who faced Goliath, they were fighting for their lives and the lives of their loved ones.

It was at that time the forces of Antiochus sent his ablest general, Lysias, to crush the revolt. It looked as if the Jews would be annihilated by the vast army of 47,000 armored troops with the massive elephants. Even the faithful were beginning to doubt.

The night before the battle, however, the Jewish fighters in the Jerusalem hills read the book of Daniel. There they found an amazing prophecy. The rise of Alexander the Great, the persecution of Antiochus IV—all were vividly outlined by the ancient prophet. Even more star-

Each day, when the priests went to the Temple, they found the container of oil miraculously refilled—a feat which continued every day for eight days.

ting was the promise that the reign of the evil one would be crushed after 2,300 days. A priest did some calculating and realized that the persecution had begun six years before in 171 B.C. The 2,300 days had almost passed. The time of Antiochus was at an end:

"How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled—the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, and the surrender of the sanctuary and of the host that will be trampled underfoot?"

He said to me, "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated" (Dan. 8:13,14, NIV).

The prophetic verses of Scripture provided all the strength the Jewish resistance fighters needed. The next day they annihilated the Syrian army at Emmaus. It was the turning point for civilization in the preservation of a monotheistic religious heritage.

Judas Maccabee marched into Jerusalem and declared it a free city. The idols were torn down, and the God of Israel was once again worshiped.

Beginning with the 25th day of Kislev, the Jews declared an eight-day feast of

dedication. The time corresponds to our December. It took place in 165 B.C., exactly 2,300 days following the beginning of the great persecution.

Tradition says there was only enough consecrated oil for the Temple lamps to burn one day. The people gathered in faith, however, believing the God who gave them strength to win would give them oil to praise His name. Each day, when the priests went to the Temple, they found the container of oil miraculously refilled—a feat which continued every day for eight days until more oil could be made and consecrated.

That event is still remembered today by Jews the world over. It is called officially the "Feast of Dedication" and was mentioned by the apostle John in his biography of Jesus in John 10:22,23. The Jewish historian, Josephus, calls it the "Festival of Lights." His explanation for the name is that the right to serve God came to the people unexpectedly, like a sudden light.

It is remembered today as something of a Jewish Christmas. The eight-candle menorah is the central symbol, and each night of the eight-day celebration the Jewish family lights a fresh candle—using the ninth candle, the shammos or "servant" candle, to light the others.

Today's Jews still sing of the event in Maoz Tzur, Rock of Ages:

**Rock of Ages let our song
Praise Thy saving power;
Thou amidst the raging foes
Wast our shelt'ring tower.
Furious they assailed us,
But thine arm availed us,
And Thy word broke their sword
When our own strength failed us.**

The symbolism of Hanukkah is vivid when we, as Christians, remember that it was because of the mighty hand of God the Jews were preserved. Then, when the fullness of time was come, God sent His Son, born of a Jewish woman, to redeem those under law that we all might receive the full rights of sons.

In fact, the lights of the menorah candles had hardly burned out for the Jews in Bethlehem when another light burst forth in the stillness of a dark night.

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:9-11).

The years of silence were over. God, who had in times past spoken to our fathers by the prophets, had now spoken by His Son. ☞