

## Antiochus' Decrees

At the end of the year 167 BCE, King Antiochus imposed decrees on the Jews to stop observing God's commandments and instead adopt the Hellenistic, Greek, way of life. King Antiochus offered a pig on the altar to the idol Zeus and desecrated the Temple. He ordered the Jewish people to:

1. **Stop worshipping God in the Temple**
2. **Worship idols**
3. **Stop keeping the Sabbath and holidays**
4. **Stop circumcising Jewish babies**
5. **Stop studying or following the Torah**

*“And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the cities of Judah to follow foreign laws of the land, to prevent burnt offerings, sacrifices...” (1 Maccabees 1:1:46-47)*

Hellenism believed in many gods and religions. Before the time of Antiochus Epiphanes, the Greek kings had allowed Jews to observe the faith of their ancestors. Antiochus Epiphanes did not persecute other nations or religions. Why then did he persecute the Jewish people? There are two explanations:

### Explanation 1:

At this time, some Jews had adopted Greek culture and became *Hellenized*. They desired to introduce reforms in Judaism. They wanted to control Jerusalem and establish a *polis* (Greek city state). They may have helped make Antiochus' decrees to harm Jews who opposed them.

### Explanation 2:

Rebellions in Judea began even before Antiochus' decrees. Most of the rebellions came from the religious leadership that opposed the Hellenists. According to this view, the decrees of Antiochus were a continuation of his efforts to suppress the uprisings in Judea.

For three years, the decrees were in place, until the year 164 BCE. Jews were forbidden to observe the commandments of the Torah and were required to prove they had abandoned Judaism by eating pork and participating in pagan rituals. Many who kept the commandments of God and refused to join the pagan ceremonies were punished with death.

Stories of great faith appear in the Books of Maccabees: women who continued to circumcise their sons, Eleazar who refused to eat pork and was killed as a result. The most famous story is that of Hannah and her seven sons. They were captured and forced to eat pork. When they refused, all seven sons were killed one after the other according to the king's orders. Afterward, their mother was killed as well.

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## Did You Know?

**Do you know why Hanukkah is celebrated for 8 days?** The Book of Maccabees doesn't tell us clearly why. However, it is written that during this time, when Jews were hiding in

mountains and caves, they could not celebrate the Festival of Sukkot, which is an 8-day holiday.

Another reason for the duration connects Hanukkah to the dedication of the Temple by Solomon when he built it: seven days of celebration followed by a solemn assembly on the eighth day.

**The Al HaNisim prayer** is recited during the holiday in the Amidah prayer and Grace After Meals (Birkat HaMazon).

By tradition, during the first Hanukkah, only one small jar of pure olive oil was found to light the menorah in the temple. The oil was only enough for one day, but a miracle happened! The oil lasted for 8 days and kept the menorah burning until new oil could be consecrated. **The miracle of the oil** is not mentioned in the Books of Maccabees. It first appears in the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Shabbat 21b).

**Hanukkah is also mentioned in the New Testament** (John 10:22). It was winter in Jerusalem and Yeshua was walking in Solomon's colonnade during Hanukkah.

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### Let's Review:

1. What were Antiochus' orders?
  2. Why was it wrong to obey Antiochus?
  3. What is Hellenism?
  4. How many days is Hanukkah? Why?
  5. Where is Hanukkah mentioned in the New Testament?
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### To Reflect On Together:

Matthew 5:14-16 says **“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on a lampstand so it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men so they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”** (TLV).

1. What does it mean to shine God's light to the world? What are some examples of good deeds we can do to glorify our Father in heaven?
  2. Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the Temple after it was desecrated. What areas of your life/heart would you like to rededicate to God?
  3. Bonus: *Assimilation* means losing our values and becoming like those around us. Antiochus wanted the Jews to assimilate and adopt Greek religion and culture. Do you feel pressure to fit in with your friends? What are some ways we can stand against assimilation and hold fast to God's commandments?
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