

Is Hanukkah Hinted at in the Bible?

The holiday of Hanukkah is not mentioned in Torah. The events it commemorates happened long after the Torah was revealed.

The word “Hanukkah” means “dedication”, because, after the Maccabees’ victory over the Greek tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes, the Temple was rededicated.

The word “Hanukkah” itself is mentioned in the Torah. The Book of Numbers talks about *hanukat ha-mizbeach* (הַנִּכְחַת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ), “the dedication offering for the altar” [Numbers 7:10]. This section is a supplementary Torah reading during Hanukkah.

The word “Hanukkah” is also mentioned in the Book of Nehemiah. When Ezra and Nehemiah dedicated the walls of Jerusalem:

They sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication (“Hanukkah”) with gladness. [Nehemiah 12:27]

Some even say that the story of creation, where God says:

יְהִי אֹרֶךְ -- Let there be light! [Genesis 1:3]

is the source of the commandment to light Hanukkah lights!

But is the Maccabean revolt itself predicted in the Bible?

The Book of Daniel [Daniel 11:15-39] seems to predict the events commemorated by Hanukkah, which occurred 400 years after Daniel’s time. However, it does not name names. Some say Daniel’s prediction of the Maccabean revolt and its success may have emboldened the Jews to make it happen and take up arms against Antiochus Epiphanes, confident of their ultimate triumph. In other words, it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. Some also say that the Book of Daniel itself was written during those times of Greek persecution.

Here are some examples of possible predictions in the Book of Daniel.

First, it predicts that

A warrior king will appear who will have an extensive dominion and do as he pleases. [Daniel 11:3]

That would be Alexander the so-called “Great”, the Greek conqueror.

Then it says:

But after his appearance, his kingdom will be broken up and scattered to the four winds of heaven. [Daniel 11:4]

Indeed, Alexander’s empire splits into four when he dies. Note: “four”.

Then it says:

The king of the south will grow powerful... [Daniel 11:5]

That would be the Kingdom of Egypt, founded by Ptolemy I Soter.

Then it says:

However, one of his officers will overpower him and rule, having an extensive dominion. [Daniel 11:5]

That would be Seleucus I Nicator, who established the largest empire, the one in Syria.

Then it says:

After some years, an alliance will be made, and the daughter of the king of the south will come to the king of the north to effect the agreement. [Daniel 11:6]

Indeed, Antiochus II Theos, grandson of Seleucus I, married Berenice, daughter of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, about 250 BCE.

Then it says:

Then the king of the north will again muster a multitude even greater than the first. After a time, a matter of years, he will advance with a great army and much baggage. [Daniel 11:13]

That would be Antiochus III the Great, who conquered much land.

Then it says:

In those times, many will resist the king of the south, and the lawless sons of your people will assert themselves to confirm the vision, but they will fail. [Daniel 11:14]

Indeed, some Jews joined the Seleucids, in the North, against Ptolemaic Egypt, in the South.

Then it says:

His opponent will do as he pleases, for none will hold out against him. He will install himself in the beautiful land with destruction within his reach. [Daniel 11:16]

That would be when Antiochus the Great took Judea.

Then it says:

He will turn to the coastlands and capture many, but a consul will put an end to his insults, nay pay him back for his insults. [Daniel 11:18]

Indeed, Antiochus the Great conquered some Greek islands, but the Romans pushed him back.

Then it says:

His place will be taken by a contemptible man, on whom royal majesty was not conferred. He will come in unawares and seize the kingdom through trickery. [Daniel 11:21]

That would be Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the villain in the story of Hanukkah.

Then it says:

The forces of the flood will be overwhelmed by him and will be broken, and so too the covenant leader. [Daniel 11:22]

This may refer to the killing of the High Priest, Onias III, mentioned in the extra-canonical Second Book of Maccabees. [2 Macc. 4:34]

Then it says:

He will muster his strength and courage against the king of the south with a great army. The king of the south will wage war with a very great and powerful army but will not stand fast, for they will devise plans against him. [Daniel 11:25]

Indeed, Antiochus Epiphanes waged war with Egypt under Ptolemy VI, and won.

Then it says:

At the appointed time, he will again invade the south. [Daniel 11:29]

This may refer to Antiochus Epiphanes' second invasion of Egypt.

Then it says:

Ships from Kittim will come against him. He will be checked, and will turn back, raging against the holy covenant. Having done his pleasure, he will then attend to those who forsake the holy covenant. [Daniel 11:30]

Indeed, the Romans forced Antiochus Epiphanes to withdraw from Egypt. He attacked Judea again, in cahoots with Jews who supported him.

Then it says:

Forces will be levied by him. They will desecrate the Temple, the fortress. They will abolish the regular offering and set up the appalling abomination. [Daniel 11:31]

Indeed, Antiochus Epiphanes profaned the Temple and set up an idol there, and cancelled the daily sacrifice.

Then it says:

He will flatter with smooth words those who act wickedly toward the covenant, but the people devoted to their God will stand firm. [Daniel 11:32]

Indeed, he allied himself with Jews who preferred Hellenism to the Torah, while the Jews loyal to the Torah opposed him.

Then it says:

The knowledgeable among the people will make the many understand, and for a while they shall fall by sword and flame, suffer captivity and spoliation. [Daniel 11:33]

Indeed, many so-called “wise” Jews taught their fellows to accept the suffering and the humiliation, refrain from fighting back, and wait for the Messiah. Their attitude is problematic in any age. Change is sometimes necessary and sometimes only violence can bring it about, even if it goes against official policy. On the other hand, violence and rebellion when the outcome is very uncertain can lead to disaster. One cannot know for sure in advance.

The parallels between these fairly precise predictions in the Book of Daniel and what later transpired in history are certainly intriguing.

Chag Hanukkah sameach.