

7 Thoughts About Christmas From a Messianic Jew

Over the years, I have run into many hurting Christians who tell me of loved-ones suddenly having an epiphany and declaring they can never celebrate Christmas again!

These well-meaning, but a bit overzealous believers often connect it with Messianic Judaism. The end result is that folks believe Messianic Jews are on a Crusade (pun intended) to end Christmas. Whether Christmas is pagan in origins or not, one is not going to win over their loved-ones by preaching to them that they are now pagans or celebrating a pagan holiday.

If one has a longstanding tradition of celebrating Christmas with their extended family, I see no reason not to continue even if he or she has come to different conclusions about celebrating it. Family is too important. Just recently I was in a Jewish synagogue singing songs about the Creator with 40 Jews who don't share my belief in Yeshua. It was not a time to preach, but to be a light. I was there to honor my nephew who was married last week. Though we have strong disagreements regarding the Messiah, I want to *win* my in-laws, not drive them away. With that in mind, I wrote a series of blogs on Christmas.

Back in 1999 we lived in Ukraine. We were working with the Messianic Jewish Bible Institute, training leaders for Jewish ministry. When Christmas came, we were invited to a party with about 30 other expats working in Ukraine. They decided to go around the room, asking each other what their favorite Christmas memory was. There was a gasp when I shared that I didn't have one—"I've never celebrated Christmas." Mental hard drives began to crash.

It is simple. I am Jewish. I didn't grow up with Christmas. There is no spiritual or cultural connection. However, I do have a few things I would like to share with both Jew and Gentile alike about Christmas. I am not here as a *Christmas Basher*. I think (hope!) you'll find my view balanced and affirming and hopefully enlightening as well. But we need to go through it point by point.

1. Christmas is not in the Bible and neither is the timing of Yeshua's Birth. And neither is Hanukkah, for that matter, and I love to celebrate it. We are never commanded to celebrate the birth of the Messiah. That doesn't mean we shouldn't. I have many God-honoring traditions in my life that are not commanded in the Bible. John 10:22 tells us that Yeshua celebrated the aforementioned extra-biblical holiday of Hanukkah. But regarding Christmas, it should be stated that for centuries it never occurred to the first believers that they should celebrate His birth, nor did they know when he was born.

"With no Biblical directive to do so and no mention in the Gospels of the correct date, it wasn't until the fourth century that church leaders in Rome embraced the holiday."
(click for source)

If I had to guess—and *I'm no expert in this*—Yeshua was born just before Passover. Here's why in a nutshell.

Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was a priest and according to the Luke passage there are only five possible times that someone in the Abijah grouping, as was Zechariah, could have been serving. It was either during one of the three feasts or the tenth week after the beginning of the year or nine weeks after Rosh Hashanah.

For sure, one of these dates (the Feast of Tabernacles), assuming that Elizabeth conceived within a short period of time after Zechariah came home from the Temple, could lead to

a winter birth. We know that Yeshua was born 15 months after Elizabeth conceived as Miriam conceives in Elizabeth's sixth month.

However, it would be highly unlikely for shepherds to be outside on a cold and possibly wet winter night. It would make more sense since that they were with their lambs *in the warmer spring* in preparation for the Passover, when Lambs would be needed all over Jerusalem. According to Dr. Ziony Zevit, lambing season—when lambs were born—was at this time.

It is unlikely that Caesar Augustus would call for a census in the middle of the winter, when the rains could make for a cold, muddy trip. Although it could rain in the spring, it is less likely at the end of March/April and a lot warmer.

It would make sense that Yeshua not only died as the lamb of God on Passover, but was born at the time that the Passover Lamb would have been.

Of course, this is just a hypothesis—but a cool one.

2. Is Christmas Pagan? First a story. I was getting ready to preach one morning and the fellow giving the announcements said: "Everybody's talking about the pagan roots of Christmas. Next thing we'll know, they are going to start telling us that Halloween is pagan too!" He was being funny of course. But we must deal with the pagan roots of Christmas or at least the accusations.

One theory is that Christmas was connected to the heresy, *Docetism*, spreading in the fourth century which stated that Jesus had never been physically born, but was merely some sort of spiritual entity. The Council of Nicea dealt a blow to this heresy affirming both the divinity and humanity of the Messiah. It is believed that church leaders felt that if they gave Him a birthday, it would crush the heresy.

The winter pagan celebrations were already widely observed, so

they chose December. It is believed that they did this to win pagans to Christianity.

“More than likely, this date was picked to line up with the Roman holiday of Saturnalia, which was celebrated with a pagan sacrifice to Saturn and a public banquet, followed by gift-giving and a carnival-like atmosphere.” (click for source)

However, Saturnalia ends on December 23, not the 25th. There is a strong case made that Christians were celebrating Christmas before the fourth century. To be honest with you, there is much that is written on the pagan roots of Christmas and just as much written to refute it. Many of these folks have outstanding credentials and they all make strong cases. But as we will see in point three, *it doesn't really matter*.

3. Just because the pagans use a symbol doesn't make it pagan.

For instance, the LGBT community uses the rainbow. But when I see a rainbow I think of God's covenant with Noah. A symbol only has meaning to the extent that you give it meaning. That is why Paul said that for someone who realizes there is no power in idols, he can eat meat sacrificed to idols. But for someone who grew up as a pagan, he still might think there is some spiritual power in this practice, so as a believer, he abstains.

My point is that if someone brings a Christmas tree into their house, it doesn't mean that are embracing pagan practices. Yes, it is true that pagans were fond of bringing greenery into their homes in the winter and many Romans decorated the tree to honor *Bachuss*, the fertility God. But that doesn't make *trees* evil.

Jeremiah (10:2-4) does condemn pagan practices, but again, he is condemning mimicking the pagans who sought *spiritual reward* or *favor* through such things. So to be clear, if you think that your Christmas tree has spiritual power, then Jeremiah has a problem with you. But if it is merely a family

tradition that reminds you of Yeshua's birth, what is to condemn?

Stay tuned Wednesday for part two of this series. {eoa}

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