

Is It Biblical for Christians to Host Passover Seders?

I was a little surprised that Christianity Today published an article written by two rabbis, Yehiel Poupko and David Sandmel, who reject Yeshua as the Messiah, claiming that Yeshua did not eat a Passover Seder with his disciples. Furthermore, they exhorted Christians to stop hosting Passover Seders. I want to respond their arguments, because I strongly disagree with both points. But first, let me share where I agree with them—and maybe this is the reason that Christianity Today allowed them the platform.

Where I Agree

Something has changed.

About 25 years ago, when I began to travel as a Messianic Jewish teacher/evangelist, I never felt any animosity against me because I continued to live as a Jew or because I didn't connect to Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter (but also don't condemn those who do). However, over the past several years, I see more and more confusion over Messianic Judaism. Most of the confusion stems from non-Jewish believers feeling compelled to live as Jews or as ritually Torah observant—and then seek to “confront and convert” friends and family members, often with a less-than-humble attitude, to the point of alienation. I have received so many emails from wounded family members over the years.

The Hebrew Roots and One Law/Torah movements ([click here to learn more about these movements](#)) have stained the reputation of Messianic Judaism because the average Christian assumes we are one in the same. The main difference between Messianic Judaism and these other groups is this—Messianic Judaism encourages:

1. Jewish people to embrace Yeshua.
2. Jewish believers to continue to live as Jews, as the disciples did.
3. Non-Jewish believers to feel free to worship with us as equals in the kingdom, without having to embrace Jewishness (Acts 15).

The Hebrew Roots and One Law/Torah movements seek to compel non-Jews to forsake all extra-biblical traditions and embrace Torah, meaning, to keep the Sabbath on the seventh day, celebrate Jewish feasts and holy days, keep kosher (Mosaic dietary laws), celebrate New Moons and to understand the Scriptures from a Hebraic mindset. I do agree with the last point, that the church would do well to have a more Jewish understanding of Yeshua (that is why I wrote *Identity Theft*), but I don't believe that non-Jewish believers are to be compelled to live as Jews.

The influence of this movement is working its way into our churches and seminaries. It's dangerous in its implication that keeping the Old Covenant law is walking a "higher path," and is the only way to please God and receive His blessings. Nowhere in the Bible do we find Gentile believers being instructed to follow Levitical laws or Jewish customs.

While I agree with the quote, it does seem Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to celebrate Passover (1 Cor. 5:7-8), and when Yeshua returns, all nations will celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (Zech. 14:16). It is not my place to tell people what they can and cannot celebrate. Non-Jews are free to embrace Jewish holidays, but should not be coerced. At the same time, I do understand the rabbis' concern.

Misusing the Symbols of Another

The rabbis wrote, "adopting another's ritual shows a lack of respect. Even when pursued with the best of intentions, taking another faith's sacred ritual and transforming it into an

expression of one's own tradition displays a misunderstanding of the complex nature of faith traditions." I recorded a video a few years back called, "Shofar Abuse" to express concern that many were not treating the sacred symbols of Judaism with proper respect.

For example, when I walk into a church and see a woman wearing a Jewish prayer shawl, I tremble inside, understanding that for an Orthodox Jew, this is extremely disrespectful. I am sure that the woman loves Israel and the Jewish people and has no idea she is being a stumbling block. However, a prayer shawl or *tallit* is given to a Jewish boy at his Bar Mitzvah. It should not touch the ground and must be treated with respect. In orthodox synagogues, a woman would not wear one.

Can you see why the rabbis who wrote this article might have a point?

Where I Disagree

Was the most famous Passover meal a Seder?

It is ironic that while rabbis admit there is no Passover meal more famous than the Last Supper, they claim it was not a Seder—that the Seder, as we know it today, only came about after the destruction of the Temple. It is true that Judaism went through a massive post-Temple reform in the years following 70 C.E.

Yochanan Ben Zakai led the movement to recreate Judaism in a way that the Temple would not be essential, as it was destroyed. Over time, the oral traditions were codified and put into writing. The rabbis correctly state, "The Seder ritual, as it is practiced today, did not exist at the time of Jesus. It was only fully developed by the rabbis in the years following the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E."

However, their conclusion that this means Yeshua did not participate in a Seder is absurd. This was just 40 years

before 70 C.E.—where do they think these customs came from? They were not all simply invented in the years following the Temple's demise. We see in Yeshua's Seder many of the same things we see in a modern Seder. Apologist Michael Rydelnik agrees:

Some examples include ritual hand washing, the breaking of bread or matzah, the use of red wine, reciting the Hallel psalms (they sang a hymn after the meal), the anticipation of the messianic kingdom (Jesus said I won't drink of this cup until I drink it with you in the kingdom), eating ground-up bitter herbs (called the sop that Jesus passed to Judas). The great scholar Joachim Jeremias, in the Eucharistic Words of Christ, notes 14 of these clear associations with the Passover Seder. So, even if the Last Supper was not a Seder as practiced today, it certainly was an incipient Seder, as practiced before 70 CE.

How can the traditional Haggadah (the book that guides us through the Passover Seder) claim that traditions go back to Rabbi Hillel, who died almost a decade *before* Jesus was born, if indeed everything started in 70 C.E.?

Eating matzah, maror and haroset this way reminds us of how, in the days of the temple, Hillel would do so, making a sandwich of the Paschal lamb, matzah and maror, in order to observe the law "You shall eat it (the Pesach sacrifice) on matzah and maror."

The New Testament also records that they were reclining as they ate: "While they were reclining at the table eating... (Mark 14:18, NIV). The Haggadah asks, "On all other nights, everyone sits up straight at the table, why on this night do we recline and eat at leisure?" Clearly this was a Seder. He breaks the matzah before the meal—just as we are to do—and then Yeshua takes wine after dinner, just as the Haggadah prescribes a third cup after the meal—the cup of redemption,

and He would become our *ge'ula*, redemption.

A Better Question

My question to the rabbis is this: How did such an overtly Messianic/Christian theme end up in the traditional Jewish Seder? I am referring to the Afikoman:

Prior to the meal, this matzah was broken, wrapped in linen, and hidden away. Following the dinner, the matzah reappears. For the Messianic Jewish community, the afikomen symbolically represents the Messiah, as Jesus' body was broken, wrapped in linen, buried and raised on the third day.

Not to mention that matzah is unleavened bread. Leaven represents sin. Yeshua was the “lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet. 1:19, MEV)—without sin.

Can you Separate Passover from Yeshua?

I know the rabbis are walking a tightrope in their article. On the one hand, they don't want to offend their Christian audience by saying, “Jesus was a fraud,” (However, the truth remains that if traditional Judaism is correct—that the Messiah has not come—then Christianity is idolatry and Jesus was a counterfeit Messiah. Only one can be correct.) but neither do they want you to think it is possible for a believer to be inspired in their faith in Yeshua through a Jewish Passover Seder. They speak highly of Christianity, as well as traditional Judaism, while seeking to claim something akin to: “You have the Eucharist and we have the Passover meal—don't confuse them.”

They correctly state, “For most of Christian history, the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, replaced the Jewish Passover Seder.” But that doesn't mean it *was* correct. They see Christianity as many who embrace replacement/reform theology do. They assume that all believers embrace the idea that the church has replaced Israel. We don't. And most of

these replacements were done by anti-Semitic leaders, like Emperor Constantine, who sought to rid Christianity of any Jewish influence or St. John Chrysostom, who was so concerned about Judaism's influence on believers that he taught, "It is every Christian's duty to hate the Jews."

The first Christians, Jewish and Gentile, were certainly aware of the Hebrew calendar. Jewish Christians, the first to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus, timed the observance in relation to Passover. Direct evidence for a more fully-formed Christian festival of Pascha (Easter) begins to appear in the mid-2nd century.

That was more than 100 years after the Resurrection. Early Christians were familiar with the Passover story, as Paul refers to Yeshua as the Passover Lamb when writing the non-Jews in Corinth. John calls him the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), and Peter uses the lamb symbolically to explain how Yeshua purchased us with His blood (1 Pet. 1:18-19). When explaining baptism as going from death to life, Paul uses the imagery of the Israelites passing through the Red Sea, from the old life of slavery to the new life of freedom.

You simply cannot separate Christian or Messianic theology from the Passover story. Yes, Yeshua fulfills the Passover, but he doesn't cancel the traditional Passover. He would come to Jerusalem every year to celebrate, and it was no mistake He was crucified on Passover.

Identifying as Messianic Jews?

And what about Jewish believers? Can we still celebrate Passover? Is it no longer our history if we believe Yeshua to be the Messiah? Many Chabad Jews believe that their deceased Rebbe is the Messiah (I saw a sign today that said of him, "Long live King Messiah"), but no one is telling them they can't celebrate Passover. And, of course, I love their

description of Messianic Jews:

In evangelical settings, the promotion of Christian Seders by those who identify as Messianic Jews and other such affiliations has also contributed to its growth.

I don't identify as a Messianic Jew, in the way that a transgender may be male but identify as female. By using this terminology, they are gently saying there is no such thing as a Messianic Jew—only one who identifies as such.

Conclusion

If I put myself in the place of the rabbis, I do understand their concern. They feel that a much larger worldwide movement is kidnapping their religious ceremonies and rituals, and adding Jesus. However, you cannot deny:

1. That without Judaism there is no Christianity.
2. Yeshua's original followers were Passover-celebrating Jews.
3. He established Passover as clearly pointing to His death and Resurrection by taking the unleavened bread and saying, "This is my body."

Therefore, yes, Christians can and should celebrate Passover (as they did in the early church). At the same time, they should be very sensitive to the Jewish people so as not to dishonor the Passover. The Church is called to provoke Israel to jealousy, not merely provoke her. {eoa}

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