

Is the Traditional Understanding of Pentecost in Acts 2 Totally Wrong?

Over the years that I have been a Messianic rabbi, I have been invited to share in hundreds of churches. Whenever possible, I try to set up a time for questions and answers from the congregants. I know that there are many people who do not fully understand what a Messianic Jew is, so this gives me an opportunity to share who we are and what we believe.

During these question and answer sessions, one of the first questions asked of me is “Why don’t Jews believe in Yeshua (Jesus)?” I usually respond by saying “I do.” This allows for a slight change of mindset for the group as many, even when speaking to a Jewish believer in Yeshua, don’t realize that there are more than a million Jewish believers in Yeshua today. The person will invariably ask a follow-up question. “Why don’t more believe?” They often will follow that with a few verses like Isaiah 53 or Isaiah 9 and continue by saying, “How can they read these verses and not see Yeshua?” “How can they be that spiritually blinded?”

For years I responded by saying something like, “Jews believe what they are taught by the leaders, just as Christians do.” In other words, no matter our faith background, we tend to believe that our rabbis, pastors and priests know what they are talking about. After all, they went to Bible college or seminary to learn so they could teach us.

But more recently, I start, not by showing how Jewish people have been blinded to Yeshua for thousands of years but by sharing just how blinded many Christians have been for thousands of years. For context, I use Acts 2 and the Pentecost narrative. When asked what happened on Pentecost,

the usual answer is “The birth of the church.” I follow up by asking “from a plain reading of the text of Act 2, why do you believe the church was birthed or born?” This question usually is followed by a spirited conversation.

The truth is that nothing in the actual text says anything about the birth of the church. Now before you start getting mad at me, please read on. Acts 2 begins with: “When the day of Shavuot (Pentecost) had come, they were all together in one place” (Acts 2:1, TLV).

Shavuot is a biblical holy day, which is one of the days commanded by G-D to be observed by the children of Israel in Leviticus 23. So the “they” that “were all together,” was a group of Jews observing an appointed time. These were not a bunch of anti-Jewish people rejecting the ways of Judaism. These were not a bunch of religious rebels holding a rally for “Jesus.” These were hundreds of thousands of Jewish worshippers fulfilling the commandments to observe *Shavuot*. Included in this huge assembly were the followers of Yeshua who had been gathered in the “Upper Room” (A topic for another blog to come). All who were there celebrating the day of *Shavuot*.

When we actually read the text of Acts 2, we find a few things. First, the Acts 2 experience was not the beginning of something new. In fact, it was the fulfillment of prophecy:

But this is what was spoken about through the prophet Joel: “And it shall be in the last days,” says God, “that I will pour out My Ruach on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even on My slaves, male and female, I will pour out My Ruach in those days, and they shall prophesy. And I will give wonders in the sky above and signs on the earth beneath— blood, and fire, and smoky vapor. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the great and glorious Day of Adonai comes. And it

shall be that everyone who calls on the name of Adonai shall be saved" (Acts 2:16-21).

Notice people are not proclaiming this as the start of something new; he is proclaiming it as the fullness of a promise. Peter continues to proclaim who this message was to be shared with on that day: the whole house of Israel as we read in Acts 2: "Therefore let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him—this Yeshua, whom you had crucified—both Lord and Messiah!" (v. 36).

In Acts 2:38 Peter responds to the heart-cry of those "fellow brethren" in verse 37, who had come to realize their sin in rejecting when they say "Fellow brethren, what shall we do?" What is Peter's response? Peter says, "Repent." What is repentance? Well, it comes from the biblical concept of turning or returning. Returning to G-D and His ways.

So far, we have seen that *Shavuot* was already a holy day that the children of Israel were commanded to observe. That those gathered in Acts 2 were gathered to observe that commanded appointed time. Peter lets us know that it was the fulfillment of something already established and not the beginning of something new. We also see that Peter's response to the questions "What should we do?" when asked by this group of Jewish people was to repent or return.

In Acts 2:41, the text continues with "So those who received his message were immersed, and that day about three thousand souls were added."

Notice carefully what is said and what is not said in this verse. We read that those who received Peter's message were immersed, and that 3000 souls were added. What were they added to? There is no reason to conclude that they were added to a newly established "church," a replacement for Israel. Not at all, the full text in context has us to conclude that these 3000 were added to repentant Israel about which Joel spoke.

After I finish sharing about what Acts 2 really says about the day of *Shavuot* or Pentecost I say, “The reason more Jewish people do not accept Yeshua as Messiah is the same reason Christians believe the “church” was born on the day of Pentecost. It’s because they were taught what they were supposed to believe instead of reading the Bible for themselves. {eoa}

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