

The Christmas Challenge

by J.K. McKee posted 12 December, 2001 www.tnnonline.net

No matter who you are or what religious ideology you hold to, the Winter holiday season involving Christmas will be a challenge.¹ It is first a challenge to non-Believers as they are continually presented with the message of the birth of Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) into a world that is lost in sin. Secondly, the Christmas holiday is a challenging time for many Christians who seek to remember the birth of our Savior, but at the same time all too often indulge themselves in overly frivolous gift-giving. And thirdly, the Christmas season is a challenge to Messianic Believers, as we choose not to celebrate this holiday.

The Reformation certainly did a great deal of work eliminating many non-Biblical Roman Catholic traditions and theologies from the faith. Today, Protestants believe in salvation by grace through faith and in the priesthood of all Believers, rejecting the claim that the pope is the “vicar of Christ” on Earth. Many evangelical Christians recognize that if something is primarily Catholic it should be tested against the inspired Word of God to see if it is truly Biblical. The Bible does not tell us to pray to saints or confess sin to a priest to be forgiven. Scripture does not teach transubstantiation. Furthermore, Scripture does not tell us that Mary, the mother of our Lord Yeshua, is the so-called “Mother of God,” for our Creator has always been and ever will be (cf. Micah 5:2-3).

Many Protestants pride themselves on being *Sola Scriptura*—Scripture Only. However, it is an unfortunate reality that many Protestants today still adhere, unknowingly, to some non-Biblical Catholic tradition. There are various practices and traditions among Christians today that can neither be found in Scripture, nor find their origins in Scripture, but rather on customs established long since the death of the Apostles and early Believers.

All too often, it has been our unfortunate observation that many in the Messianic community strongly and vehemently criticize our Christian brothers and sisters during the Winter holidays. Statements along the lines of “Christmas is a pagan holiday!” are all too commonplace. This turns many away from hearing the origins about a holiday that cannot be specifically found in the Bible, but is seemingly good. Many Christians believe that when you denounce Christmas, you are denying the Biblical reality of the virgin birth of our Lord and Savior. Certainly, Luke ch. 2 is a part of our Holy Scriptures, and the miracle of the birth of Yeshua is a sacred Biblical event. In an effort to stress balance, grace, and understanding during the Winter season among both Christians and Messianic Believers, we offer our analysis of “the Christmas challenge.”

A Brief History of Christmas

Why is it asserted among many Christians that if there are those who do not celebrate Christmas, then obviously such people cannot be true Believers? Are we dangerous cultists who do not believe in the virgin birth of the Messiah?

Obviously, Luke ch. 2, which fully details the miraculous birth of Yeshua the Messiah, the Savior of the world, is something that none of us should ever deny or consider unimportant. If Yeshua had not been born, He would not have grown up to become the perfect sacrifice for our sin. We would be unable to have His blood covering us and have no hope for permanent forgiveness of sin.

But what of the holiday we now call “Christmas”? Where did it come from? If its celebration is not specified in Holy Scripture itself, then how did we get it?

Author Susan E. Richardson makes some interesting observations in her book *Holidays & Holy Days*:

During the Roman Empire, people usually celebrated the birthdays of rulers and other outstanding people, though not necessarily on the exact date of their birth. The early Christians’ desire to honor Christ’s birth may come from the fact

¹ This article has been reproduced from the paperback edition of the *Messianic Winter Holiday Helper*, pp 3-11.

that they gave him the title and other honors that pagans gave to the “divine” emperors. These Christians lived in a culture where the birth of a ruler was a major celebration. What could be more natural than celebrating the birth of the King of Kings?

Despite the logic of this, Christmas has long been surrounded by controversy. In A.D. 245, Origen wrote that even to consider observing it was a sin. Early Christians in Armenia and Syrians accused Roman Christians of sun worship for celebrating Christmas on December twenty-fifth.²

I would probably not fall into the same category as Origen saying that commemorating the birth of the King of Kings is “sin,” because if that were the case then we should probably strike Luke 2 from our Bibles. Typological connections are undoubtedly intended to be made between the birth of Yeshua, and the birth of Moses seen in *parashah Shemot* (Exodus 1:1-6:1). However, we should find serious problems celebrating it at a time that has historically been associated with the honoring of pagan deities, for Richardson later comments that “pagan celebrations held on December 25 included Mesopotamian celebrations for Marduk, Greek ones for Zeus, and Roman *Saturnalia* in honor of Saturn.”³ Irvin and Sunquist further note in their *History of the World Christian Movement*,

Prior to the year 300 there had been no consensus among Christians concerning the date on which to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Some argued for a spring date, but others suggested December 25. That latter date was the day celebrated in honor of the Invincible Sun, who had grown in imperial favor through the third century. Through the course of the fourth century most Christians came to accept December 25 as the celebration of the birth of Jesus, integrating elements of this solar monotheism with Christianity.⁴

The celebration of the Messiah’s birth on December 25 came as a result of generations of Christians, long after the death of the Apostles, as Christians of the Third and Fourth Centuries often used syncretism to evangelize pagans. The original intent was to reinterpret the local religious holidays with Biblical meanings, in an effort to share the gospel. Without any doubt, the motives of many of these Christians were sincere, as they wanted to “adapt their faith” for the pagans around them and use Biblical overtones of their holidays to spread the good news. However, such adaptations came at a time after the destruction of Jerusalem when anti-Semitism was at a serious high in the Roman Empire, and the Believers in Yeshua were ejected from the Synagogue. Anything perceived as “Jewish,” namely the appointed times or *moedim* (מוֹעֲדִים) of Leviticus 23, would be looked down upon and not be observed.⁵ Substitute and replacement holidays had to be created instead and Christmas is a reality to this very day.

How Christmas has been celebrated over the centuries has been determinant on a variety of cultures and Christian denominations. The name Christmas comes from “Christ’s mass,” or a service that is held in Roman Catholic churches. Many Protestants realize many of the non-Biblical elements of the Roman Catholic service certainly derive from ancient paganism, the foremost of

² Susan E. Richardson, *Holidays & Holy Days* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books, 2001), 119.

³ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴ Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, Vol. 1 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 164.

⁵ Consult the benediction against heretics, actually seen in the Jewish *siddur* until this very day (Joseph H. Hertz, ed., *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, revised [New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1960], 283; Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Nusach Ashkenaz* [Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1984], 107), and a summary of early Christian remarks that followed toward the Jewish people seen in “Jew, Jews,” in David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), pp 374-378.

which might be transubstantiation,⁶ so the name Christmas has already to an extent been tainted. What is perhaps more disturbing is that other such “masses” exist on the Roman Catholic service calendar, such as Michaelmass, a service to be held for the Archangel Michael, which I must admit is very strange (cf. Colossians 2:18).

What about the Christmas tree?

For many Protestants throughout the centuries, Christmas was not like we consider it today. For those living in Great Britain and colonial America, Christmas Day was a very serious occasion where a family would attend church services, sing hymns about the birth of the Lord, and return home and sometimes exchange small gifts in remembrance of the three Magi who later gave gifts to Yeshua. There would have been no Christmas tree. Up until the mid-Nineteenth Century, Christmas trees were unheard of in either Britain or the United States:

The earliest recorded account of a Christmas tree is from 1605 in Strassburg, Germany. By the 1700s, the custom was firmly imbedded in Germany, and Christmas trees were mainly a German custom. When German settlers came to Pennsylvania in the early nineteenth century, they brought the Christmas tree with them.

President Franklin Pierce set up the first Christmas tree inside the White House in 1856. By 1877, the custom was well established. In 1923, President and Mrs. Calvin Coolidge began the custom of lighting the National Christmas tree on the White House grounds.

In England, Prince Albert popularized the Christmas tree in the 1840s. The English people had heard of Christmas trees before then, but his decision to set up a tree for his family spread the custom.⁷

The most common modern-day association with Christmas is obviously the Christmas tree. Its usage for “honoring the Lord,” of course, is not detailed anywhere in the Bible. Rather, it was a tradition introduced from Germany into Britain and the United States, and subsequently has become quite popular all around the modern world. Unfortunately for those Christmas tree lovers, Holy Scripture strongly prohibits us from introducing decorated trees into our home for (spiritual) adoration. The following words from the Prophet Jeremiah detail how the Christmas tree had its forbearers in Ancient Near Eastern religion:

“Thus says the LORD, ‘Do not learn the way of the nations, and do not be terrified by the signs of the heavens although the nations are terrified by them; for the customs of the peoples are delusion; because it is wood cut from the forest, the work of the hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool. They decorate *it* with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers so that it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field are they, and they cannot speak; they must be carried, because they cannot walk! Do not fear them, for they can do no harm, nor can they do any good’ (Jeremiah 10:2-5).

Many Christians have astutely observed that these Bible verses speak of pagan idolatry. Now, are we accusing Christians today, who truly know Yeshua as their Savior, of participating in idol worship? No! But let us also be aware of what God’s Torah tells us:

“You shall not plant for yourself an Asherah of any kind of tree beside the altar of the LORD your God, which you shall make for yourself” (Deuteronomy 16:21).

⁶ Transubstantiation is the belief that during communion, the bread and wine actually become the *literal* body and blood of Christ. During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther advocated a position known as consubstantiation, where the bread and wine *did not change*, but the presence of Christ was active during communion. Today, most Protestant traditions see the practice of communion as only being a memorial of the Last Supper.

For a further discussion, consult the FAQ on the TNN website, “Communion.”

⁷ Richardson, 132.

Certainly, we cannot accuse all Believers of participating in idolatrous worship of trees. However, the Word of God does prohibit us from adorning trees in our homes, and these quotations from Jeremiah and Deuteronomy, respectively, are the most explicit examples of what we know today as the Christmas tree in Scripture. For even if Believers, who in ignorance, have Christmas trees in their homes and do not worship them—as I have many fond personal Christmas memories and former Christmas trees of my family are no doubt still growing tall around the home of my youth—what of non-Believers who have Christmas trees? What of the non-Believers who have rejected salvation in Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus) who celebrate Christmas by indulging themselves? What is the god that they worship during the Christmas season? Richardson observes,

Using trees as part of religious celebrations goes back well beyond the first recorded Christmas tree. Egyptians decorated green date palms indoors for winter solstice rites. Romans hung trinkets on pine trees during *Saturnalia* and used evergreens for *Natalis Sol Invicti*. In Britain, Druids placed candles, cakes, and gilded apples in tree branches as offerings.⁸

Some Christians when confronted with the verses forbidding Christmas trees have stated things along the lines of, “In many cultures, trees symbolized life,”⁹ justifying their usage of something that has its roots in idolatry. In addition to just the Christmas tree, an evergreen is commonly employed in various decorations throughout the Christmas season. Unfortunately for them, this is not what Holy Scripture says: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement” (Leviticus 17:11). Our eternal life is neither found nor represented in evergreen trees, but rather in the shed blood of Messiah Yeshua, in which “we have confidence to enter the holy place” (Hebrews 10:19) and be forgiven of our sins.

The argument that to the ancients evergreen trees symbolized life, and thus we should have them in our homes, is patently weak. What did the ancients do when they celebrated? The Romans held wild orgies where they would take hallucinogenic drugs, consume vast amounts of alcohol, and have illicit group sex. Following in their pattern, should we do these things when we celebrate? **God forbid!** Scripture clearly tells us “do not get drunk with wine” (Ephesians 5:18) and “the *marriage bed is to be* undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Hebrews 13:4). Certainly we should rejoice in our Messiah Yeshua and remember Him every day of the year, but we should not knowingly participate in things that are directly forbidden in Scripture and are connected to idolatry.

We cannot judge the heart intent of those who have Christmas trees in their homes during the Winter season. Yet, Scripture does forbid this practice. Christmas trees have nothing to do with the birth of our Messiah; they are rather a prohibited custom that has been adapted by Christianity. Certainly, **most Christians who have Christmas trees do not worship them**, but knowing their origin should hopefully be conviction enough to change, and actually consider what God might want us to do during the Winter season. If it is acceptable to have Christmas trees in one’s house, is it likewise acceptable to have a statue of Buddha, Shiva, or some other pagan god?

Santa Claus is a Child’s Myth

I do not feel the need at all to address Santa Claus and the “eight tiny reindeer.” Such things are as factual as the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny. They are child’s myths and have no

⁸ Ibid., 130.

Please note that these comments specifically speak of trees involving religious ceremonies; they do not speak of having potted trees or plants for decoration, as you would find in many public buildings throughout the year, *not* including Christmas trees.

⁹ L. Smith (2001). *The History of Christmas*. Christian Study Center. Retrieved 02 December, 2001 from <<http://www.christianstudycenter.com>>.

place among Believers, even in seemingly “Biblical” celebrations such as Christmas. The propagation of the existence of Santa Claus during Christmas time to young children, and the revelation of him not being real in later years, has resulted in many people also denying the truth of Yeshua (Jesus) being real as well—as both are men we cannot see. Even when my family celebrated Christmas many years ago as conservative, evangelical Methodists, we did not play the “Santa game.” Why should others?

Is Christmas mentioned in Scripture?

Is there any specific reference to Christmas in Scripture? There are certainly prophecies that speak of the virgin birth of our Messiah, His entry into the world, and the Biblical record that details the event itself—but this is *not* Christmas itself, per se.

Is the holiday we have come to know as Christmas mentioned in Scripture at all? Some Christians would actually say yes—and if it is indeed Christmas, then it is in a place that should get us all very concerned:

“And their dead bodies *will lie* in the street of the great city which mystically is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. Those from the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations *will* look at their dead bodies for three and a half days, and will not permit their dead bodies to be laid in a tomb. And those who dwell on the earth *will* rejoice over them and celebrate; and they will send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 11:8-10).

When I was taking a correspondence Christian prophecy course back in 1999, I was taught that after the two witnesses of Revelation are killed that then the holiday of Christmas will occur. This is based on the assumption that since the world will “make merry, and shall send gifts one to another” (KJV), that it must be Christmas time. While it is more likely that this is referring to some future ecumenical holiday where people exchange gifts—and not “Christmas” itself—suffice it to say, the fact that some Christians believe that this holiday is Christmas is extremely disturbing.

If the only reference to “Christmas” in the Bible that Christians can present us with is in a passage that speaks about the murder of God’s two witnesses, then we should most certainly reevaluate our participation in it. Already, many secularists are doing their best to “eliminate Christ from Christmas,” which most Christians would view as a sign of apostasy—but Christmas is not a Biblical holiday so technically it is not a sign of apostasy. But this might be what is necessary to encourage Believers to participate in the God-given festivals as specified in the Torah, rather than in substitute holidays that are tainted by some questionable practices and customs.

Should Chanukah be celebrated as an alternative to Christmas?

Many Messianic Believers who decide to give up the Christmas tree and the trappings of this holiday want to know what they should do. A valid alternative that many discover is the celebration of the Jewish holiday of *Chanukah*, which often occurs in December around the same time as Christmas. But, as has unfortunately been the case, for many, *Chanukah* presents become substitutes for Christmas presents and the birth of the Messiah is something that is readily looked down upon

It must be readily emphasized that *Chanukah*, surprisingly to many Christians and some Messianic Believers, has not been mandated in Holy Scripture. However, unlike Christmas, *Chanukah* should be considered extra-Biblical as opposed to non-Biblical, the events of which are detailed in the Books of 1-4 Maccabees in the Apocrypha. The story of *Chanukah* is quite moving and inspiring, as it speaks of the Maccabees’ defeat of the Syrian Greeks and the rededication of the Temple.

We encourage Messianic Believers to celebrate *Chanukah*, but emphasize that it is imperative to keep it in proper perspective. We must not uplift this celebration over the birth of our Messiah Yeshua (who some Messianics believe was conceived around the time of *Chanukah*). When you celebrate this holiday with your family, **do not forget who the Light of the World is.**

Also remember that as the Lord is in the process of currently restoring His people and all Israel, this should be a time that we all rededicate ourselves unto Him, and seek reconciliation with one another.

The only reference in Scripture to *Chanukah* or the Feast of Dedication **actually occurs in the New Testament**, in John 10:22-23: “At that time the Feast of the Dedication took place at Jerusalem; it was winter, and Yeshua was walking in the temple in the portico of Solomon.” These verses do not directly state that Yeshua actually celebrated *Chanukah*, but it may be safely assumed that He did. *Chanukah* is a national commemoration for Israel, much like Fourth of July celebrations for Americans, albeit with strong religious overtones. We should have no problem rejoicing in the historical triumphs of our Jewish brethren, but likewise we should not uplift them over the miraculous birth of our Lord and Savior.

Christmas in Perspective

It is an unfortunate predicament that many Messianics who do not celebrate Christmas, *mercilessly and vehemently* criticize Christians who do. This, in the long run, **will not work well** for the Messianic movement and will turn many Christians off to the truths that God is restoring to His people. Calling Christmas “utterly pagan” will seriously deter many sincere Believers to reexamine the holiday. It may be true that Christmas is not a Biblical holiday, but by calling it “pagan” many Christians will interpret these statements as meaning that we reject the virgin birth of Messiah Yeshua, **which we do not**. It is more appropriate to call Christmas a non-Biblical holiday, which is an accurate description that should not get as many people heated or turned off to the truth of its origins as the term “pagan” does.

Fortunately, we serve a Creator who is much bigger than we are and He looks beyond our many shortcomings: “The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression” (Numbers 14:18a). The Lord will honor those who celebrate Christmas in ignorance, who do not realize its questionable connections. During the Christmas season, many Christians will seek to please the Lord, and He who is in control of all things will use nativity scenes and the proclamation of the birth of Messiah Yeshua to bring many to Himself. During the Christmas season, the Lord will also no doubt look beyond the contentious attitudes of many Messianic Believers who unwarrantedly criticize Christians without the love, grace, or mercy that He desires us to have in our hearts.

We Need to be Careful in our Criticism

As Messianic Believers, we need to be very tactful during the Christmas season. We **should not vehemently and cruelly criticize those who celebrate Christmas**, lest they think we are denying the Messiah's birth. We must not exclusively emphasize negative aspects of the holiday.

Many Messianics who observe the Biblical feasts of Leviticus 23 have been found wanting all too often by *excluding* Messiah Yeshua's substance in them. At many “Messianic” Passovers, the Last Supper and sacrifice of Yeshua for us are barely spoken of. Many fail to emphasize that *Shavuot*/Pentecost is all about the Torah *and* the Holy Spirit being given to us, and the latter is seldom talked about at many commemorations. At *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur*, the gathering of the saints, the return of Yeshua, and wrathful Day of the LORD are not usually emphasized. And, we might just find it appropriate to talk about Yeshua's birth during *Sukkot*, the Feast of Tabernacles, instead of the Christian practice of remembering it on December 25. Furthermore, how many “Messianic” *Chanukah* celebrations will be devoid of honoring the Light of the World?

What you do during the Winter holiday season is ultimately up to you and is between you and God, whether you celebrate Christmas, *Chanukah*, or do nothing at all. I certainly cannot be the Holy Spirit for you, because God Himself is the only One who can fairly judge the intentions of the human heart.

The Christmas challenge for Messianic Believers is not going away any time soon, so we must endeavor to be as loving and grace-filled as much as possible when showing Christians the problems with Christmas. We must not forget the words of our Messiah Yeshua who said, “For in

the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:2). If we mercilessly attack people for celebrating Christmas, who in their minds are honoring the birth of the King of Kings, we could be mercilessly attacked by the same for honoring the Lord's appointed times. We will become part of the problem as opposed to the solution, and Satan will have won once again. Contrary to this, demonstrate the great blessings of remembering a holiday such as *Chanukah*, and radiate Yeshua's light to all you encounter during the Winter holiday season!

J.K. McKee (B.A., University of Oklahoma; M.A., Asbury Theological Seminary) is the editor of TNN Online (www.tnnonline.net) and is a Messianic apologist. He is author of several books, including: *The New Testament Validates Torah*, *Torah In the Balance, Volume I*, and *When Will the Messiah Return?* He has also written many articles on the Two Houses of Israel and Biblical theology, and is presently focusing on Messianic commentaries on various books of the Bible.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.

revised 29 September, 2005

edited for spelling/grammar
29 October, 2006

edited edition from paperback *Messianic Winter Holiday Helper*
posted 01 December, 2009