

## **Are Christian Feasts Pagan?**

An Article Seeking Mutual Understanding and Unity

By Dan Juster

**Christians seeking to recover the Jewish roots of their faith often claim that the Church celebrations are on the wrong dates. It is then said that the Church dates are pagan.** They call for a return to “God’s appointed feasts.” (Lev 23) I find that Messianic Jews do not make these assertions as much as Christians who attach themselves to Messianic congregations. The message is that most Christians are compromised by paganism! Easter and Pentecost are the wrong dates due to paganism, and Christmas is wholly rooted in paganism. This claim is so divisive that we had better be sure that it is really grounded in the evidence.

**In fact, the evidence for this claim is not clear.** In the past, we have argued that Christians in this age are not responsible for the Jewish calendar, which is part of a covenant made with the Jewish people. (See Acts 15, Romans 14, Colossians 2, and Galatians). However, the Church has embraced a yearly calendar cycle of celebration. The less traditional celebrate weekly on Sundays and yearly at Christmas, Easter (Pascha) and Pentecost. Traditional churches build their year around events in the life of Yeshua: His birth, circumcision and dedication, His forty days fast, His entry into Jerusalem, the last supper, the crucifixion, His Ascension.

**The problem with the Church days of celebration is not the dating, but that they are not anchored in their ancient roots.** It is not our part to criticize the Church for its dating. Rather, a return to Jewish roots is a return to Jewish contexts for understanding, an embrace of Jewish believers who obey their calling to remain within and witness to the Jewish community, and an affirmation of Jewish life. Here are some reasons why I think that the claim that Church celebrations are pagan is wrong.

**For the Rabbis the dates of the Feasts are set by man; only the Sabbath is set by God.** What does this mean? We know the right day for the Sabbath; it is the seventh day week after week. However, we have a major problem with the annual biblical calendar. How can we reconcile the cycle of the moon with the annual cycle of the sun? Twelve lunar months would be out of alignment by at least 5 days from the year of the sun, so that we would be celebrating the fall festivals in the winter! So the Jewish lunar calendar adds an extra month in seven years of each nineteen-year cycle, giving us a 13-month year in those “leap” years. Solar calendars add a day to five of the twelve months and then, more recently, add an extra day every four years. **The Bible does not tell us what to do about this reconciliation.** This is a human decision. In addition, being sure of the exact day of the new moon and full moon was by communal Rabbinic decision. The ancient

Essenes, the Jewish ascetics from the first century, chose the solar calendar and made an annual reconciliation. Some argue that the calendar discrepancy can even be found in the Gospels. The Gospel of John can be read to suggest the celebration of Jesus before Passover compared with the Synoptics on the actual Passover date.

Additional evidence that the Christian Feasts are not pagan from Oskar Skarsaune:

**- The evidence of history.** As detailed in Oskar Skarsaune's monumental book, *In the Shadow of the Temple*, the Eastern and Western Churches differed on when to celebrate the church feast days. In the East, closer to the Rabbis, the death and resurrection of Yeshua was celebrated on the date of Passover according to the Jewish calendar, for the Rabbis taught that First Fruits was the day following Passover; this was known as the quartodeciman position. In the West, the decision was to work back from the Resurrection which was always on a Sunday, the day after the Sabbath of Passover week. This produced a great controversy at the end of the second century as both churches claimed apostolic authority for their celebration dates.

If the Eastern Church followed the Pharisaic practice of First Fruits and the resurrection being together and the Western kept First Fruits on the Sunday of Passover week as the Sadducees, we can see the controversy itself as rooted in Judaism. Skarsaune argues that the celebration of First Fruits is behind the Western tradition. From Resurrection Day, the Church calculated back to their celebration of the crucifixion, rather than strictly keeping Nisan 14 and 15. Interestingly, but unintentionally, this coincides in most years with the Sadducean Temple date for First Fruits. Skarsaune also provides amazing details concerning how the liturgy for communion took over elements from the early Passover Seder! Observing Sunday as a weekly celebration may be rooted in this as well, though my study suggests that the evidence here is more ambiguous. However, the resurrection became the dominant reason for Sunday observance. The sad aspect to this was the later rejection of the legitimacy of the seventh day Sabbath for Jews.

**- Evidence from preceding Jewish tradition.** Christmas is sometimes corrupted with pagan syncretism, however, the charges against Christianity are too simplistic. Many claim that Christmas was to sanitize the pagan feast of Saturnalia. Yet, it may also have Jewish rooting by the conflation of the 25th of Kislev, Hanukkah, with December 25th. This is the most likely time for the conception of Yeshua on the basis of the calculation of the birth of Yeshua at Sukkot (Tabernacles). If so, the evidence of Hegippus who claims in the late second century that Yeshua was born on the 25th of December, could be a confusion of birth and conception.

**- Evidence from liturgical progression.** Skarsaune's evidence for Jewish influence on

the creeds is very important as well. He sees them as preserving the Jewish understanding in the Scriptures against a Unitarian heresy that arose in a Hellenistic context.

Therefore, calling the Church to return to Jewish roots should not be based on criticism of Church celebrations as being rooted in paganism and calling on them to adopt the true Jewish dates as if rabbinic dating methods are absolute. This is even more the case since these days many celebrate biblical events and meanings. Rather, it is overcoming the paradox of the early churches seeking to have it both ways; adopting practices rooted in the Jewish traditions while rejecting the Jewish people themselves. This produced a disguising of the Jewish roots that were and are present in the Church. This can be seen in the common symbolism shared by both the Church and the Synagogue.

The Church is called to return to Jewish roots in the sense of being joined together with Israel and the Messianic Jews, acknowledging Jewish roots and understanding the Bible in its original context. This requires returning to a more Biblical understanding of an involved and responsive God, over against the abstract changeless God of Greek philosophy that has dominated Christian theology. The repudiation of the theology that says the Church has replaced the Jewish people is a foundational key.

Such an approach to Jewish roots is a much more feasible and truthful way to approach the churches and to gain their support in the great last days work for the salvation of Israel.