

What is the Problem With Easter?

J.K. McKee

It comes every Spring, usually sometime in March or April.¹ You know it because in stores you see the baskets, candy, rabbits, eggs, and the annoying fake grass that goes in those baskets. You see the Cadbury cream egg commercials on television with the rabbits gobbling like chickens. Its name is Easter.

Most sincere Christians celebrate the season of Easter not as a time to fawn over rabbits or eat candy, but as a serious time to remember the resurrection of Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus). They commemorate His death on Good Friday and His resurrection on Easter Sunday. Certainly, of all the events in our faith, the resurrection of our Lord is the most important. The Apostle Paul validly writes, "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Messiah has been raised; and if Messiah has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain" (1 Corinthians 15:13-14, NASU). However, when we consider the pre-Messianic and pre-Christian origins of "Easter," we do need to reevaluate it.

It comes as a shock to many Christians, but Messianic Believers do not celebrate Easter. We do not see this holiday mandated in Scripture as one of the Lord's *moedim* or "appointed times." We believe it to be a *substitute* holiday in place of what God has asked His people to do in the Spring. By celebrating Good Friday and Easter Sunday, we think that it can communicate a view of Yeshua coming to die as a random man or a common criminal on the cross at Golgotha (Calvary), in a "generic" manner for the sins of humanity. He does not necessarily come as the Messiah of Israel, in fulfillment of our Heavenly Father's appointed times. The common celebration of Easter today

¹ This article was originally written for J.K. McKee, *Torah In the Balance, Volume I* (Kissimmee, FL: TNN Press, 2003).

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often downplays how Yeshua is the blameless Passover Lamb slain for our sin, and the unleavened, sinless Bread of Life who was scourged for our iniquities.

There are certainly Christians today who criticize Messianics, without mercy, for not celebrating Easter. Yet as it has sadly been the case, many Messianics usually respond to these Christians without mercy as well. They accuse Christians of participating in pagan "fertility rites" or that they are worshipping the Babylonian goddess Ishtar or the sun god. Likewise, because Messiah Yeshua's death, burial, and resurrection may not be emphasized at enough Messianic Passover *seders*, such Christians may feel that we have lost hold of this monumental event, and perhaps can rightfully say of some people that they treat Yeshua's resurrection with disgust (cf. Hebrews 10:29).

How are we as fair-minded Messianic Believers to handle Easter? How are we to be mature, Spirit-filled, Torah obedient Believers who follow the example of Yeshua the Messiah? At what time are we to appropriately remember what He did for us on the tree 2,000 years ago? Easter or Passover?

What did God tell us to do in the Spring?

It is only natural that Believers should want to do something to honor God in the Springtime. Spring is a wonderful time of year when we see new leaves on trees, flowers blooming, grass becoming green again, and things are warming in preparation for Summer. It is indeed a time for the remembrance of "new life." In the Springtime, in the Hebrew month of *Aviv* or *Nisan*, the Passover is to be celebrated: "Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, 'On the tenth of this month they are each one to take a lamb for themselves, according to their fathers' households, a lamb for each household'" (Exodus 12:3, NASU). Exodus 12:6 further instructs, "You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month, then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel is to kill it at twilight" (NASU).

Detailed instruction is given in Exodus 12:1-13 about how the Passover was originally to be observed in commemoration of the Ancient Israelites' flight from Egypt. Further details are given regarding the Festival of Unleavened Bread in Exodus 12:14-20, and how "In the first *month*, on the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread, until the twenty-first day of the month at evening" (Exodus 12:18, NASU), establishing that this special time is to last seven days. Concerning Unleavened Bread, the Lord states that "you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a permanent ordinance" (Exodus 12:17, NASU). "Permanent ordinance" in Hebrew is *chuqat olam*, or as the NIV renders this command, "Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come." These things are not to be easily forgotten.

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The two holidays of Passover and Unleavened Bread were codified among the appointed times in Leviticus 23:5-14:

“In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight is the LORD’s Passover. Then on the fifteenth day of the same month there is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the LORD; for seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall not do any laborious work. But for seven days you shall present an offering by fire to the LORD. On the seventh day is a holy convocation; you shall not do any laborious work.’ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, “When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD for you to be accepted; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. Now on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb one year old without defect for a burnt offering to the LORD. Its grain offering shall then be two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, an offering by fire to the LORD for a soothing aroma, with its drink offering, a fourth of a hin of wine. Until this same day, until you have brought in the offering of your God, you shall eat neither bread nor roasted grain nor new growth. It is to be a perpetual statute throughout your generations in all your dwelling places”’ (NASU).

It is only natural for us to want to celebrate new life and commemorate something in the Spring. This is why our Heavenly Father has instructed His people to celebrate Passover and Unleavened Bread. We as Messianic Believers observe these holidays not only in remembrance of the Ancient Israelites’ Exodus from Egypt, but also for the prophetic fulfillment in Messiah that these festivals demonstrate. Partaking of Yeshua’s salvation, we experience an exodus from slavery to sin to freedom and new life in Him. He has been slain as the Passover Lamb for us, and was bruised like the unleavened *matzah* bread. We get to consider these spiritual truths in a very real and tangible way during the Passover season, as we observe the *seder* meal.

What does the New Testament say?

In the Apostolic Scriptures, the Apostle Paul makes a strong parallel between Passover and Unleavened Bread and the salvation that we have in Messiah Yeshua. He writes, “Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Messiah our Passover also has been sacrificed” (1 Corinthians 5:7, NASU). “Leaven”² here is representative of sin, and as Believers in Messiah we are told to clean it out,

² Heb. *seor*, *chametz*; Grk. *zumē*.

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as the verb *ekkathairō* means “to remove as unclean, *clean out*” (BDAG),³ and “to cleanse out, clean thoroughly” (Thayer).⁴ This demonstrates how serious it is for us to get the sin out of our lives. Why are Believers told to do this? The answer may startle many Christians:

“Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:8, NASU).

Why are people of faith instructed to clean out the leaven in their lives? So we can all properly celebrate *the feast*. What feast would Paul be referring to here? Obviously, he would be referring to the Passover! 1 Corinthians 5:8 states quite plainly that born again Believers are to “celebrate the festival,” the verb *heortazō* meaning “to celebrate as or by a festival” (LS).⁵ These verses take on some key dynamics with the Hebrew terms used in the Complete Jewish Bible:

“Get rid of the old *hametz* [leavened dough], so that you can be a new batch of dough, because in reality you are unleavened. For our *Pesach* lamb, the Messiah, has been sacrificed. So let us celebrate the *Seder* not with leftover *hametz*, the *hametz* of wickedness and evil, but with the *matzah* of purity and truth.”

1 Corinthians 5:7-8 establishes how important it is that born again Believers remember Passover, and likewise the Feast of Unleavened Bread. These appointed times were established by God long before the Messiah’s First Coming, and give us the pattern of the Messiah being our blameless Passover Lamb atoning for our iniquities, and then being the scourged, sinless, leavenless Bread of Life as was prophesied in Isaiah 53:5:

“But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being *fell* upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed” (NASU).

This prophecy speaks of Messiah the Suffering Servant. Those of you who have seen unleavened bread or *matzah* know that it has lines with small holes in it, a visible and tangible reminder of Yeshua’s suffering for us. A “scourge,” or *chaburah* in Hebrew, is defined as “*stripe, blow, stroke,*” and “*blows that cut in*” (BDB).⁶ Eating *matzah* for a week should cause us to pause and

³ Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1083, 303.

⁴ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 195.

⁵ H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 277.

⁶ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 289.

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seriously consider how He was mocked and beaten—especially as the sinless Son of God (Mark 15:16-20; John 19:1-5).

Paul asserts in Colossians 2:17 that the Biblical festivals specified by God in the Torah “are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (ESV). In understanding these times to be shadows, we know that they give an outline of the prophetic fulfillment of Yeshua’s First and Second Comings, as the ultimate *sōma* or “substance” is to found in His redemptive work. By understanding times like Passover, we can better comprehend God’s plan of salvation history.

We as Messianic Believers are of the strong position that the Lord gave His people the appointed times for a reason. He gave them to us to show us the reality of Messiah Yeshua, giving testimony about His plan for order in Creation. Yeshua’s First and future Second Coming are not “random events” on the calendar, as many Christians may perceive them. They are rather ordered events that occur in a set pattern according to the Father’s “appointed times” or *moedim*.

What was “the Last Supper”?

We have to recognize, of course, that many Christians today believe in the prophetic significance of the Biblical festivals, including Passover, and many churches regularly do hold Passover *seders*. (My late father himself conducted Passover *seders* in our evangelical, United Methodist church in Northern Kentucky, in the late 1980s and early 1990s.) A Passover *seder* conducted in an evangelical church will open the eyes of many to the Hebraic and Jewish Roots of our faith. It will stimulate many evangelical Believers to really sit down and consider how Yeshua’s Last Supper—as it is commonly called—was actually a traditional, First Century *seder* meal. This has been one of the best ways that the Messianic movement has grown in recent years, as evangelical Believers have considered the salvation history themes of Passover and the Exodus, and how these things all relate to our faith in Jesus the Messiah.

Just as Yeshua earnestly desired to remember the Passover with His Disciples before He died, so should we also desire to come together every year, and consider what new lessons the Lord might teach us during this time. Yeshua was preparing to inaugurate the era of the New Covenant with His own blood, and commission His Disciples to continue His work:

“While they were eating, Yeshua took *some* bread, and after a blessing, He broke *it* and gave *it* to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’ And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave *it* to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins’” (Matthew 26:26-28, NASU; cf. Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20).

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The common practice of communion or “the Lord’s Supper,” as the tradition is often observed today in various denominations, is derived from the Passover. In Luke 22:19 Yeshua says “do this in remembrance of Me” (NASU). Today, multitudes of Believers are learning more about the intricacies of the Last Supper, beyond just the symbols of the bread and wine.

A Brief History of Easter

Following Yeshua’s final Passover meal He was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, taken before Pontius Pilate, scourged and beaten by the Roman soldiers, and then executed, atoning for humanity’s sin. Three days later He arose from the dead, and forty days following He ascended to the right hand of the Father in Heaven. The story sounds all too familiar, but it can take on a completely new light, and many different dimensions, when viewed with the significance of God’s appointed times in mind.

So how did we get Easter Sunday, observed in Christianity today, a holiday that by many accounts seems to be divorced from Passover? At Passover time we are told to eat unleavened bread and focus on the lamb, whereas on Easter Sunday yeast rolls and hams are commonplace. Yeast or leaven represents sin in relation to Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Swine is an unclean animal, the consumption of which God says is “an abomination to you” (Leviticus 11:10, 11, 12, 20, 23).

One of the things that we have to understand is that the Apostles and early Believers never celebrated what we today call “Easter.” They observed the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread as they always had, and remembered the Messiah in all. “Easter” as its own holiday was not formalized and mandated until centuries later at the Council of Nicea in 325 C.E. While establishing many critical doctrines of our faith, including the Messiah’s Divinity,⁷ later Church councils such as the Council of Antioch (341 C.E.) and the Council of Laodicea (363 C.E.) made it illegal for Christians to participate in the Sabbath or Passover. This is easily confirmed by persuing a popular Christian book, such as Susan E. Richardson’s *Holidays & Holy Days*,⁸ recognizing how the Fourth Century Church severed all ties as to whether or not the resurrection should be remembered on a Sunday, or three days after the Jewish Passover on any day of the week, as some Christians were still doing.

The Church of the Fourth Century wanted to establish a holiday largely separate from anything “Jewish.” Commemorating the resurrection of Yeshua

⁷ Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp 27-29; consult also “The Ecumenical Creeds,” in Hugh T. Kerr, ed., *Readings in Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), pp 74-77.

⁸ Susan E. Richardson, *Holidays & Holy Days* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books, 2001), 58.

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three days after the Passover—on any day of the week other than Sunday—was just unthinkable. Like Jeroboam of old, many of the bishops wanted to dismiss the Lord's appointed times with their own replacement holidays. Yet, Richardson also has to indicate in her book how when the method of remembering the resurrection of the Lord was finalized, that what would later develop into Easter became intertwined with some degree of paganism, and particularly Spring fertility rites.⁹ The origins of the name "Easter" itself are uncertain, and while many have disregarded connections to the Babylonian goddess Ishtar, *Eostre* or *Eastre* as an Anglo-Saxon derived term, is still connected to the changing into Spring, fertility, and growing.¹⁰

Whether "Easter" is a name of pagan origin or not in this case is *unimportant*. The fact that later generations of Christians would form a holiday honoring the Messiah's resurrection, and make some deliberate breaks with the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread, does cast a shadow upon Good Friday and Easter Sunday. People have largely decided to ignore what God asks us to do in Leviticus 23, reemphasized by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8, and instead feel it prudent to assert their own holidays. The typology of the ancient Passover and Exodus, foretelling the sacrifice of Yeshua at Golgotha, has been too summarily disregarded by many Christians over the centuries. **Yet today this is changing!** Today, many Messianic Jewish Believers are invited into evangelical churches to not only testify of their faith in Jesus the Messiah, but also of the great significance of Yeshua as the Passover Lamb.

We should not be so dense so as to think that all Christians over the centuries have been participating in "fertility rites." *They haven't*. I do believe that God has honored those who have celebrated Easter Sunday in past ignorance, truly wanting to serve Him. They have surely been blessed for wanting to remember the resurrection of Jesus Christ (even by attending various sunrise services), an event that we should remember and consider every year. However, the Father is leading us into a time when the fuller truth is being restored. Believers today can be blessed and spiritually enriched in their faith *even more*, if they learn to partake of the Passover and are truly able to grasp the significance of the Exodus in light of the sacrifice of the Messiah.

⁹ Ibid., 58-59.

¹⁰ For a further summary, consult D. Larry Gregg, "Easter," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp 362-363.

Fairy Tale Reasoning

Of course, there are some specific traditions associated with Easter that are supposed to “commemorate” the resurrection of Yeshua. What about the venerable “Easter bunny”? Where did it come from? Did the Apostles truly consider remembering the resurrection of the Messiah by thinking of a white rabbit wearing a pastel suit? I do not think so. The only place rabbits are mentioned in Scripture is in Leviticus 11:6 and Deuteronomy 14:7, where the Lord declares them to be unclean animals that we are forbidden to eat. Richardson simply notes in her book *Holidays & Holy Days* how the Easter Bunny directly originates from pagan beliefs associated with the rabbit’s fertility.¹¹ She also says that some ancient Christians must have seen rabbits coming out of their holes as things warmed up in the Spring, and quickly associated it with the empty tomb of the Lord.¹²

Adopting a rabbit’s coming out of its underground burrow and comparing it to Yeshua’s resurrection is complete *fairy tale reasoning* in my assessment—and makes little or no sense whatsoever! This really is about as factual as the White Rabbit we all think of from Alice in Wonderland.

Is “Easter” mentioned in Scripture?

There is, however, one instance where some Christians may tell us that “Easter” is mentioned in the Bible—not necessarily referring to the resurrection of the Lord. “Easter” appears in the King James Version rendering of Acts 12:4:

“And when he [Herod] had apprehended him [Peter], he put *him* in prison, and delivered *him* to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people” (KJV).

This is not an accurate translation of the Greek text at all. The Greek does not have “Easter” but *Pascha*, the transliteration of the Hebrew *Pesach* or “Passover.” The New King James Version has corrected this error:

“So when he had arrested him, he put *him* in prison, and delivered *him* to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover” (Acts 12:4, NKJV).

King James Only advocates, who believe that the KJV is perfect and without error, superior to the original Hebrew or Greek, have argued that this rendering of “Easter” for *Pascha* is accurate. Why is this the case? Because King Herod, they say, the one who took Peter captive, was a pagan and celebrated Easter. While this is unsupported by the text, notably because Acts 12:3 tells us that “Then were the days of unleavened bread” (KJV), connecting

¹¹ Richardson, 59.

¹² *Ibid.*, 60.

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Pascha to Passover—it is interesting that they must admit that “Easter” is a holiday of non-Biblical, rather than Biblical, origins.

Easter in Perspective

Many Christians will not understand why Messianic Believers do not celebrate Easter Sunday, and instead honor Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Some, in their ignorance, could look at us with disdain, and will claim that we deny the resurrection of Messiah Yeshua. But this is truly **not the case** as Messiah is our Passover Lamb slain for the forgiveness of sin, and “is the firstfruits of those who have died” (1 Corinthians 15:20, CJB). We do not deny Yeshua’s death or His resurrection; we just believe that Christians are commemorating it inappropriately. They are honoring it outside of the bounds God has given us, and have given credence to a holiday that has some questionable origins. We advocate that Yeshua’s atoning work and resurrection are best remembered in the context of Passover, and various teachings during the week of Unleavened Bread.

But potential problems that exist, just as during the Christmas season, are compounded by Messianics who condemn Christians mercilessly and claim that they are worshipping Ishtar or the sun god on Easter Sunday. **I do not believe that sincere, born again evangelical Christians worship the sun god on Easter Sunday**, and would consider such criticism to be unwarranted and unjustified. Many of the Messianics who vehemently protest “Easter,” have been caught at times not properly remembering Yeshua’s death, burial, and resurrection that much at their Passover meals. Yeshua Himself says, “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, NASU). Many of these same people will readily claim that when *they* celebrated Easter *they* were not celebrating pagan fertility rites, yet somehow most Christians today are celebrating fertility rites when Easter comes. This kind of unbalanced scale will not help the Messianic cause.

Messianic Believers need to set the higher standard when Easter comes. It is only one day out of the year, and fortunately it is not given the same type of commercialization as Christmas is. Let us be the ones who lead by our example of loving others who are ignorant of the truth of Easter’s origins and who celebrate it because they do not know any better, believing the Biblical appointed times of the Lord to be unimportant. They, in ignorance, do not really know the origins of the holiday and are often unaware of the greater blessings and significance of celebrating Passover. We should invite them to a Passover *seder* in our homes, or at our Messianic congregations and fellowships, enabling them to see Yeshua the Messiah for who He was at the Last Supper—as the Lord preparing Himself to be sacrificed for our sins. Let

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them partake of the good things of the *Pesach* season that we have partaken of!

For many of today's Christians, "Easter" may be described as a somewhat neutered celebration from God's larger plan and purpose. **It is our responsibility as the emerging Messianic movement to encourage all Believers to take a hold of the Passover**, and do so in a very edifying way that brings glory to Him and what He has accomplished for us.

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While as Messianics we do not celebrate Good Friday or Easter Sunday, because they were adapted by Roman Catholicism to replace Passover, I do not condemn those who celebrate it in ignorance, and neither do I condemn those who defiantly celebrate it and are opposed to us celebrating the Lord's appointed times. (God will handle them). But I would ask Christians to reconsider what they are doing, and really consider whether or not "the Church" has the right to replace God's holidays with its own holidays.

Today's Messianics find no Biblical justification for the historical Church completely abandoning the Passover and replacing it with something else. We choose to commemorate the Messiah's resurrection at its appropriate time connected to the Spring appointments—not a holiday that historically has connections to pagan fertility rites. We consider it to be quite important to view Yeshua's sacrifice for us as a part of God's orderly plan, rather than a part of the unordered and unsanctified days of the nations.

What is the problem with Easter? Easter was not established by God. It was established to be a substitute of some of the most important events on the Biblical calendar: Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Just as the Ancient Israelites were delivered via the Exodus from Egypt and brought into the Promised Land, so too have we as born again Believers received Messiah Yeshua into our hearts and have experienced our own exodus from sin into new life—including the promise of remembering the Passover with Him in His Kingdom on Earth (Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25)! We have the confidence of knowing that He came in a preordained order, not as part of a random, unordered day of revelry.