



OUTREACH ISRAEL NEWS

monthly newsletter of Outreach Israel Ministries
and MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS



DECEMBER 2023

DECEMBER HOLIDAYS
and RESISTING ASSIMILATION

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STATEMENT OF BELIEF

*Outreach Israel Ministries
and Messianic Apologetics*

There is One Almighty Creator God of the Universe, who has revealed Himself to us in the manifestations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) came in fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies of the Scriptures and is fully God. It is mandatory for us to believe in a Divine Redeemer to be saved. Salvation is a free gift of God to all who receive Messiah Yeshua into their lives and confess of their sins. Those who reject Messiah will be consigned to eternal punishment.

The Holy Scriptures, Genesis-Revelation, are the inspired, infallible Word of God as revealed in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts

All Believers in Israel's Messiah are to be regarded as a part of the Commonwealth of Israel. Jewish and non-Jewish Believers are to respect one another in mutual love as brothers and sisters, and are to work together for the salvation of the Jewish people and return of Israel's Messiah.

The Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy) is the foundation of all Scripture, was followed by our Messiah Yeshua, and is to still be studied and heeded by Believers today.

Yeshua the Messiah is coming to gather the Believers after the Tribulation period.

OIM is an *agapē* ministry, freely and benevolently giving the vast majority of its teachings and resources, without charge, to those who desire to be spiritually nourished.

For a fuller Statement of Faith, consult the OIM website

Outreach Israel News is the monthly newsletter of Outreach Israel Ministries, a non-profit organization with an emphasis on reaching, teaching, and encouraging the Messianic community. Subscription to **Outreach Israel News** is without cost and supported only by donation.

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OIM UPDATE

December 2023

J.K. McKee

My family has been fully Messianic since 1996, and being called into this faith community from a conservative, evangelical Protestant background, it has not always been easy. The month of December can be a very difficult season of the year for people across the Messianic movement, with many of us feeling various levels of upset,

disappointment, and even depression. There are external and internal challenges, among those who claim to follow the Messiah of Israel—not to mention all of the pressures from secular culture and society. **What do any of us do during the month of December, when confronted with the traditional Jewish holiday of *Chanukah* and the traditional Christian holiday of Christmas?**

Honestly, among mature brothers and sisters sharing a common salvation in Yeshua, the month of December should be a time when a fuller realization of something like Psalm 92:4 is understood: “For You, O LORD, have made me glad by what You have done, I will sing for joy at the works of Your hands” (NASU). More frequently, perhaps, a sentiment such as Deuteronomy 12:3 is likely to be invoked: “You shall tear down their altars and smash their *sacred* pillars and burn their Asherim with fire, and you shall cut down the engraved images of their gods and obliterate their name from that place” (NASU). And to be sure also, Mark 7:8: “Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men” (NASU). And, while one might think that these sorts of verses only get directed toward Christian people who remember Christmas on December 25, believing themselves to remember the birth of Jesus—do not be fooled—many in the Hebrew Roots movement direct these same kinds of verses toward Messianic Jewish Believers who remember *Chanukah*, as a part of their Jewish heritage and culture.

Many of us, who have been a part of the Messianic movement for any period of time, have gone through phases of negativity and skepticism. *We have probably each said things or issued opinions, about both Christmas and Chanukah, we wish we could retract.* But making mistakes is an important part of each of us growing in faith—and in helping others to hopefully not

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repeat some of the errors we have committed! So, what is a more positive and Messiah-centered approach to the December holidays? What are some of the important lessons we need to remember as His followers, which can too frequently get drowned out at this time of year?

Approaches to Christmas

What are some of the approaches each of us is likely to witness across the Messianic movement, regarding December 25 and Christmas? When I look back at the twenty years I have served in full-time Messianic ministry since 2003, and the experiences I have had in both teaching and interacting with people, I honestly can say that things are probably more complicated now than they ever have been before. **December 25 and Christmas evoke strong emotions from all sides.** And, I would also have to say how there is very little patience to hear others out, why they do or do not do certain things—and most especially to hear whether the activities of someone involved or not involved with December 25, are reflective of a mature Believer in Israel's Messiah.

Almost all of us have had to sort through the unfortunate phenomenon of "Christmas is pagan" rhetoric over the years. Now a major mainstay of the independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement, those who conclude that Christmas on December 25 is entirely pagan, will strongly assert that Christmas came in the early centuries of Christianity, entirely as a result of syncretism, or superimposing Biblical themes onto existing pagan holidays. Christmas is concluded to be the result of Roman Catholicism repurposing the Roman Saturnalia, which occurred in mid-December. The tradition of the Christmas tree is believed to be strictly condemned by Jeremiah 10:1-5. And, early Protestant groups such as the Puritans, and even the Scottish Reformer John Knox, condemned Christmas as a sign of Roman popery and corruption—the former making it illegal in the American colonies. While degrees of paganoia do vary, "Christmas is pagan" rhetoric is quite commonplace across social media when the month of December arrives.

Many people in the Messianic community do not like the "Christmas is pagan" rhetoric, often pushed by Hebrew Roots. This is because what it frequently communicates to sincere, evangelical Christians, is that one is saying the miraculous birth of the Messiah in the Gospels was a pagan event. When people say "Christmas is pagan," it is often concluded to mean that they do not believe in the Incarnation any more. So, while many people in the Messianic community do not observe Christmas, they also make significant efforts to do so in an non-contentious, polite way. *Participation in Christmas is simply declined, without making a scene.*

Messianics who just decline Christmas on December 25, have little issue with recognizing the Gospel record of Yeshua's birth, but He is not believed

to have been born in the Winter. While *Sukkot* or the Festival of Tabernacles is frequently proposed for the birth of the Messiah, per “the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us” (John 1:14, TLV), other Messianic proposals one will hear, now often include His being born at the Festival of Trumpets or around Passover. Likewise, Christmas on December 25 did not emerge as a holiday on the Christian calendar, until the late Second-early Third Century C.E., long after the death of the Apostles and their immediate successors. Regardless of what connections people claim can be made with ancient paganism, it is indisputable that Christmas on December 25 is something entirely inauthentic to Apostolic practice. And while Jeremiah 10:1-5 does, at least, get people asking questions about the tradition of the Christmas tree and its origins—decorating a tree with lights to remember the birth of the Messiah, is not something which can be legitimately derived from the account of His birth as seen in the Gospels. It is a tradition with no basis in the actual story or account of the Nativity.

Unlike twenty years ago, there are many Christian ministries today who recognize that there are many thousands of Hebrew Roots people out there, avidly declaring that “Christmas is pagan”—and they are indeed pushing back! Over the past several years, as some of the overstated claims of “Christmas is pagan” have been cross-examined—in particular how Jeremiah 10:1-5 can be interpreted as carving wooden idols, and not erecting a tree for adornment—a wide number of people have returned to observing Christmas on December 25. The social and family ties of one’s relatives coming together on December 25, remembering the birth of Jesus, can be very, very strong, and are not easily dispensed with. While some recognize the inauthenticity of Christmas on December 25 to Apostolic practice, many Messianics will actually think that it is hardly pagan to celebrate it outside the home, with their extended family and loved ones. A number of non-Jewish Messianic people, perhaps still with strong ties to evangelicalism, observe Christmas in their homes, possibly alongside of *Chanukah*. Many of today’s intermarried couples in Messianic Judaism, where one of the spouses is non-Jewish, do remember both *Chanukah* and Christmas. A number of younger Messianic Jewish couples, are now seen to remember Christmas on December 25.

Christmas on December 25 is considered by many Messianic people, such as myself, to be inauthentic to the life examples given by the Apostles and their immediate successors. Regardless of whether December 25 was repurposed by Catholicism, or if it was a misguided miscalculation based on a presumed Passover conception, Apostles such as Peter, John, or Paul did not observe it. One can politely decline participation in various activities on December 25, telling others in a friendly demeanor, “Happy Holidays.” At the same time, we can each remember and appreciate how there are many sincere, born

again evangelicals, who are making this time of year one of demonstrating good works of kindness and service to the less fortunate (cf. Micah 6:8). These are generally not the things which preoccupy the attention of Hebrew Rooters during the Winter holiday season.

Approaches to Chanukah

Because of its close proximity to Christmas, in the month of December, it is easy for people within the Messianic community to focus their holiday attention onto *Chanukah*, the Festival of Dedication. But what does *Chanukah* actually commemorate, as can be a presumed “Jewish Christmas”? Today’s Messianic Jewish Believers often remember *Chanukah* in some similar manner to their Jewish upbringing, by lighting the *chanukiah* lampstand, eating potato latkes, giving family members one present for each of the eight nights, and remembering an important victory of the Maccabees and their cleansing of the Temple. For many Messianic non-Jewish Believers, who have decided that Christmas is inauthentic to Apostolic practice, there can be some skepticism with remembering *Chanukah*, even though it is legitimately mentioned in John 10:22. What are some of the approaches to *Chanukah* we often witness in the Messianic movement?

While each person, family, and congregation is probably seen to focus on *Chanukah* a little differently—more frequently than not, celebration of *Chanukah* is something which tends to focus more on children and the young people, than the adults. In this way, *Chanukah* is not that much different than Christmas, as an alternative to Christmas is offered for those who might otherwise be enchanted with Santa Claus and the Christmas tree. Some victory involving people called the Maccabees is remembered, a pig was sacrificed by pagans in the Jerusalem Temple, they cleansed the Temple and relit its *menorah* or lampstand—and so now let’s go eat latkes, doughnuts, and open our presents! Each Messianic Jewish family, probably has its own specific traditions for remembering each of the eight nights of *Chanukah*, along with unique recipes and longstanding family memories. Messianic non-Jewish families are probably seen to experiment with different recipes and fried foods. Certainly, many Messianic congregations have wider *Chanukah* celebrations and parties, usually focusing on some sort of *chanukiah* lighting, many varieties of latkes being served with applesauce and sour cream, and various festivities for children.

It took several years for our family to distance itself from Christmas, as between 1995-1999, we eliminated the Christmas tree, but still often opened family “holiday presents” sent to us on or around December 25. While we recognized how various early Christian authorities imposed a holiday like Christmas on December 25, as a replacement for one of the Biblical appointed times—because *Chanukah* was not specified in the Torah as holidays to be

observed by Israel, we did not fully understand its importance. Steadily, however, as our family's understanding of Second Temple Judaism and Jewish tradition improved, I began to seriously recognize how *Chanukah* and commemorating the victory of the Maccabees over the Seleucid-Greeks, was something important. So at first, our family began to better appreciate *Chanukah* at corporate congregational gatherings. It was not until 2006 when we fully started remembering *Chanukah*, by lighting the *chanukiah* for eight nights, trying out different styles of latkes, and exchanging one gift each night.

Life and schedules being what they are, depending on when *Chanukah* actually takes place in the month of December, can and has altered our family's remembrance of it. My birthday occurs during the first week of December, and on some years we have combined the remembrance. (Although now as I have reached my forties, I admittedly prefer a much more low key and toned down birthday.) For a few years when my sister Maggie was away at college—and even now if various family members are away—we may have to wait until they are all with us, for us to have a large *Chanukah* remembrance. A *Chanukah* adaptation for our family, often because of close family who are out of town during the week of *Chanukah*, is for us to remember what we label as ***Chanukah II***. This usually can be closer to Christmas on December 25, but is a family remembrance of *Chanukah*, with most of our family present—where we light up the entire *chanukiah*, have a special meal, fry up latkes, and then exchange all of our gifts. And I am sure that many of you have had to do something similar, when accounting for out of towners who can finally join you.

And what do we do on December 25? The customary tradition witnessed throughout a great deal of the American Jewish community, is to go out to the movies and eat Chinese food. This continues in various forms among Messianic Jewish Believers as well. For the past ten years or so, when we have been in town, our family does typically get together with several Messianic Jewish families and other guests, on December 25. This may involve going to the movies, and later going to someone's home for a potluck meal (which may or may not be Chinese). More recently, in no small part due to COVID-19 and Woke films, we have actually gone over to a particular friends' house, had a potluck meal, fellowship, and just watched old movies in their entertainment center.

The Maccabean Crisis

Everyone's experience during the Festival of Dedication or *Chanukah*, is going to see some emphasis on a group of Jews known as the Maccabees, their resistance against the Seleucid-Greek occupiers of Judea, their commit-

ment to the ways of God's Torah, and their cleansing of the Jerusalem Temple from defilement. Traditionally in much of Judaism, it is believed that when the Temple was cleansed, that the Temple *menorah* was able to remain lit for eight days, while new oil was consecrated. Yet it is fair to say that our collective Messianic engagement with the Maccabean Crisis of the Second Century B.C.E., does not tend to be too deep. This is in no small part due to the fact that it concerns a period of history not covered in canonical Scripture, but instead, mainly in the Books of 1 & 2 Maccabees in the Apocrypha, and the historical writings of Josephus. The Apocrypha books are widely considered canonical in Roman Catholicism, and deuterocanonical in Anglicanism, and are incorporated into a wide number of ecumenical study Bibles. Some of you likely have a copy of an edition of *The Oxford Annotated Bible*, which includes the Apocrypha. I personally prefer *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, NRSV (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), because it includes a wide number of annotations (and not all from liberal scholars). But because most people do not, actually, have Bibles with the Apocrypha included, not enough are familiar with the period of the Maccabees, pre-dating the time of Yeshua by about a century-and-a-half.

Those in Biblical Studies—and this most definitely includes evangelical Protestants, for whom 1 & 2 Maccabees are valuable history and philosophy—are very much aware of the importance of the Second Century B.C.E. Maccabean Crisis. Those who do not hold to genuine Danielic authorship of the Book of Daniel, often conclude that the Book of Daniel is a parody of the Seleucid Antiochus Epiphanes. Those who hold to genuine Danielic authorship of the Book of Daniel, such as myself, still recognize how the period of the Seleucid invasion and defilement of the Jerusalem Temple, do affect one's reading of various parts of Daniel, particularly sections of Daniel chs. 7, 11.

Far more significant, to be sure, is how the resistance of the Maccabees against the Seleucids, their fighting on behalf of the One God of Israel, His Torah, and their Jewish heritage—had significant effect on later generations. The main core of what the Maccabees fought against was Hellenism, as Antiochus Epiphanes sought to homogenize all people to worship the Greek pantheon, speak the Greek language, and give up on their own religious practices and cultures. For the Jewish people, this specifically meant giving up on the Temple service and offerings, accepting Greek polytheism, giving up on the seventh-day Sabbath and appointed times, eating unclean meats such as pork, and no longer circumcising their infant sons (1 Maccabees 1:41-50). As the Maccabees would be seen to rightfully stand up in favor of the Jewish people maintaining their belief in the One God of Israel and various Torah practices—especially circumcision—scholars are very keen to recognize how the Second

Century B.C.E. Maccabean Crisis had a reverberating effect on later generations of Jews.

One of the main things which the Maccabean Crisis highlights, to those who read the record in 1 & 2 Maccabees, is that there were various Jewish people who were more than eager to welcome the decrees of Antiochus Epiphanes, and embrace Greek paganism:

“In those days lawless men came forth from Israel, and misled many, saying, ‘Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles round about us, for since we separated from them many evils have come upon us.’ This proposal pleased them, and some of the people eagerly went to the king. He authorized them to observe the ordinances of the Gentiles. So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil” (1 Maccabees 1:11-15, RSV).

These Jews who were not only assimilated—but who also practiced epispasm, an ancient form of foreskin restoration—were considered not only apostates against the God of Israel, but enemies of the Torah faithful Jews, the Maccabean resistance (cf. 1 Maccabees 2:23-26).

There is ample evidence from both inside and outside of canonical Scripture, that the Jewish community has always faced the threat of outside religious influences. Ancient Israel entering into the Promised Land was warned not to intermarry or embrace the ways of the Canaanites. The Southern Kingdom exiles who returned from Babylon, likewise had challenges with intermarrying with the locals. Hellenization as is encountered in the Books of Maccabees, would have been a way for Jewish people not only to assimilate into the dominant culture, but to be socially mobile. Even after the victory of the Maccabees, the threat of assimilation continued into the Roman period—especially as Diaspora Jews continually had to fight against the threats of polytheism, and in their Greek and Roman neighbors encroaching upon them. It should be no surprise, then, that in the First Century C.E., as the good news began expanding out into the Mediterranean, that a wide number of Jewish Believers in Israel’s Messiah, required proselyte circumcision and Torah observance as being mandatory, for Greeks and Romans to receive salvation and be incorporated into the faith community (cf. Acts 15:1, 5). Many were genuinely concerned that the Greek and Roman Believers in Yeshua, would introduce their polytheism and pagan way of life—and would have more influence upon the *ekklēsia*, than the Jewish Believers, with a Torah lifestyle and Tanach (OT) heritage, would have upon them.

These are some of the important points each of us needs to review, every year when *Chanukah* comes around. There were long term effects of the Sec-

ond Century B.C.E. Maccabean Crisis, which play into our reading and approach to Paul's letter to the Galatians, the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council, and various parts of Paul's letter to the Romans, among others.

The Threat of Assimilation

Do the holidays of Christmas and *Chanukah* have more in common, or not? What major messages do they actually communicate? These are actually the most significant, pressing questions regarding the month of December, which each Messianic person must sort through himself or herself. In much of historic Christianity, Christmas on December 25 has been a time of wanting to tell others about the birth of the baby Jesus (Yeshua), and the salvation which He would bring to the entire world. In much of historic Judaism, the Festival of Dedication has been a time when the resistance of the Maccabees, against the Seleucid-Greeks, was something honored—because without their sacrifice, there might not be any Jewish people today. *We should each be mature enough to recognize how our Eternal God has accomplished important work, through His sincere followers, during either Christmas or Chanukah.*

Today, however, with the unique emergence of the Messianic community of faith—and with many of the conviction that the Lord is calling His people back to a First Century style of practice—what are we to do with either Christmas or *Chanukah*? A wide number of popular Messianic groups and ministries, are seen to make statements in December, along the effects of: Without *Chanukah* there could be no Christmas. What they mean, of course, is: Without *Chanukah* there could be no birth of the Messiah. And indeed, without the Maccabees' victory over the Seleucid Greeks, it cannot be overlooked how there would have been no Temple, where Yeshua could have been dedicated (Luke 2:21-38), according to the prescription of the Torah (Exodus 13:2, 12; Numbers 3:13; 8:17).

Far more concerning, especially given how the major theme of *Chanukah* is resistance against worldly assimilation—is how many contemporary Messianic Jewish families have handled the issue of Christmas. To be sure, each of us in our respective social spheres, may have to deal with being invited to various parties or events. Many Messianic non-Jewish Believers, who do not celebrate Christmas themselves, because of wanting to maintain loving relations with extended family, will often attend Christmas Dinner as a matter of fellowship and goodwill. Also to be noted, is how many intermarried couples in Messianic Judaism, are seen to often be involved in commemorations of both *Chanukah* and Christmas. This may include remembering *Chanukah* at home, and Christmas with extended family—or actually remembering both *Chanukah* and Christmas at home. Unlike the independent Hebrew/Hebraic

Roots movement, a great deal of Messianic Judaism actually does not have a phobia against Christmas on December 25; Christmas on December 25 is simply thought of as not being something Jewish, and so it is not remembered. If intermarried couples in Messianic Judaism remember both holidays, then it is thought to be reflective of a mixed heritage.

In my over twenty years of serving in full-time Messianic ministry, I have seen a great deal of the negative impact of the paganoia Hebrew Rooters often display toward Christmas on December 25. **None of it has been helpful.** While they are seen to vehemently go after a great deal of sincere, godly evangelical Christian people—performing acts of kindness and charity to the less fortunate, on or around December 25—they sit in their homes issuing harsh condemnation, while doing very little to help others in need.

At the same time, I have also seen some disturbing, even laxical approaches, present among people in Messianic Judaism, to the issue of December 25. While the Messianic Jewish movement has mainly been setup, to be a place where Jewish Believers in Yeshua, can live out their faith in a manner consistent with the traditions and life cycle of the Synagogue—what does it say when not just Messianic Jewish Believers, but rabbis and leaders, are seen to *directly* celebrate Christmas on December 25? The Messianic Jewish community is to be a place where assimilation is prevented, not initiated. Certainly, we should all be mature enough to recognize that many Messianic Jewish rabbis have non-Jewish spouses, and may find themselves involved in extended family activities on December 25. But over the past several years, I have encountered on social media, different Messianic Jewish rabbis go out on Thanksgiving Day to Christmas tree farms, to cut down their Christmas tree—or Messianic Jewish families actually have their Christmas tree already decorated and ready to go, on Thanksgiving Day in November. *Even my own family, in the 1980s, waited until the first week of December to go get a Christmas tree...*

Each and every one of us, in our Messianic experience, has gone through phases, and experimented with different aspects of our Torah observance. We have made mistakes, and have had to make corrections. But when I see a family like mine, which as evangelical Protestants remembered Christmas as a religious holiday, commemorating the birth of the Messiah—but has given up Christmas since 1995—yet various Messianic Jewish people remember Christmas on December 25, **I am admittedly quite disturbed.** I am not disturbed for the reasons Hebrew Rooters promote. I am disturbed that the message of *Chanukah*, resisting assimilation into the wider culture of the nations, and maintaining Jewish continuity *and destiny*, has not been adequately heeded. While paganoia is something to be eschewed, people in the Messianic movement outwardly celebrating Christmas, is not going to help too much, either. *Are there some painful lessons for us to learn ahead. . .?*