

Paganism in Our World: How Should We, as Messianics, Handle It?

Bruce R. Booker

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Introduction: The Dilemma

Many of us who join the “Messianic Movement” are not Jewish by birth, nor were we raised “Jewish.” Then when we came into the “Movement,” we were presented with “new” (at least to us) observances, the Moedim (“Biblically Appointed Times”) - in contradistinction to those observances in which we were raised, such as Christmas and Easter and others.

As Messianic leaders, we are often asked by those in our congregations seeking God’s perspective on the matter of their former observances, since most of them still have relatives who practice them and invite their Messianic relatives and friends to participate in them.

Some Messianic leaders say there is no problem in observing Christmas and Easter and the other Christian observances, even encouraging their people to observe them: “Go ahead, celebrate them. Yes, they were once pagan in origin, but they don’t mean that anymore and they DO celebrate Jesus’ birth and resurrection.” Other Messianic leaders take a “live and let live” approach, that is: “Don’t criticize those who do observe them and in the spirit of tolerance, you may even attend them if asked.” Lastly, those (such as myself) that say, “Yes, they are pagan in origin and we shouldn’t observe them because of that origin. We should educate believers about the origins of these practices and encourage them to embrace the Biblical observances (Moedim) in the light of the Messiah Yeshua, instead of the pagan-originated ones.”

In the light of the differing perspectives even among the Messianic leaders today, can we find any Biblical examples on how to handle the pagan-originated practices presented to us today as believers in Yeshua?

God’s Perspective

After God redeemed His people from Mitzraim (Egypt), He began to instill in them that He was a jealous God: He did not want them to worship other gods, nor did He want their worship toward Him to be based upon pagan practices. He says in the Torah regarding the worship and practice of how the nations worship their gods:

Exodus 23:24

"You shall not **worship** their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their deeds; but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their {sacred} pillars in pieces.

I.E., “Don’t even keep them around!”

Deuteronomy 8:19

"It shall come about if you ever forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and **worship** them, I testify against you today that you will surely perish.

Deuteronomy 12:29-30

²⁹ "When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations which you are going in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, ³⁰ beware that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How do these nations serve their gods, that I also may do likewise?'

I.E., "Don't worship in the manner of the nations! Don't even **ask** how they worship their gods!"

What does God feel about the matter of even inquiring about and following after the practices of paganism in the lives of His believers? He strongly *prohibits* it!

In the times of the Judges we read:

¹ Now the angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land which I have sworn to your fathers; and I said, 'I will never break My covenant with you, ² and as for you, you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars.' But you have not obeyed Me; what is this you have done? ³ "Therefore I also said, 'I will not drive them out before you; but they will become *as thorns* in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you.'.. ¹¹ Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals, ¹² and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from *among* the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the LORD to anger. ¹³ So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroath. ¹⁴ The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around *them*, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies. ¹⁵ Wherever they went, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had spoken and as the LORD had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed.

(Judges 2)

⁷ The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth. ⁸ Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, so that He sold them into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the sons of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years.

(Judges 3)

Then the sons of Israel again did **evil** in the sight of the LORD, served the Baals and the Ashtaroath, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the sons of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; thus they forsook the LORD and did not serve Him.

(Judges 10:6)

You can read in the book of Kings about how Israel and Judah went after the practices of cultic worship in the high places and with the "Asherim" and "Baalim."

³³ After this event Jeroboam did not return from his evil way, but again he made priests of the high places from among all the people; any who would, he ordained, to be priests of the high places. ³⁴ This event became sin to the house of Jeroboam, even to blot *it* out and destroy *it* from off the face of the earth.

(1 Kings 13)

²² Judah did evil in the sight of the LORD, and they provoked Him to jealousy more than all that their fathers had done, with the sins which they committed. ²³ For they also built for themselves high places and *sacred* pillars and Asherim on every high hill and beneath every luxuriant tree. ²⁴ There were also male cult prostitutes in the land. They did according to all the abominations of the nations which the LORD dispossessed before the sons of Israel.

(1 Kings 14)

Omri did *evil* in the sight of the LORD, and acted more wickedly than all who {were} before him.

(1 Kings 16:29)

Ahab the son of Omri did *evil* in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him.

(1 Kings 16:30)

I could cite hundreds more passages in the TANAKH (Hebrew Scriptures), but I would like to get to the bottom line: “What is God’s perspective of practicing pagan observances?”

If you are honest with yourself, you already know the answer. God didn’t “wink” at such practice in His people. In fact, He hates it! He is a jealous God. He does not want to be worshipped as the pagans worship their gods! Instead, He has implemented His own ways of being worshipped; He has designated His own days of observances!

It does not matter that the worshipper following those external practices actually *believes* in the paganism represented by those practices! Let me give you an example.

When Judah was brought into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, they were brought into a pagan land and culture. False gods were everywhere. In fact, in order to create a common religious focus for his people, Nebuchadnezzar set up a golden statue and he decreed that all people bow down and worship it when the music played. Yet, there were three men, Jews, who refused to bow down to the gold statue:

⁸ For this reason at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and brought charges against the Jews. ⁹ They responded and said to Nebuchadnezzar the king: "O king, live forever! ¹⁰ "You, O king, have made a decree that every man who hears the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psalter, and bagpipe and all kinds of music, is to fall down and worship the golden image. ¹¹ "But whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire. ¹² "There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon, *namely* Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. These men, O king, have disregarded you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up."

¹³ Then Nebuchadnezzar in rage and anger gave orders to bring Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego; then these men were brought before the king. ¹⁴ Nebuchadnezzar responded and said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? ¹⁵ "Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery and bagpipe and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, *very well*. But if you do not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?"

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. ¹⁷ "If it be *so*, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. ¹⁸ "But *even* if *He does* not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

It would have been so easy for them to say to themselves, "Well, we could simply bow down and pretend to worship it when the music plays and then everything will be ok. We don't have to *believe* in the god represented by the idol; we simply have to bow down to it!"

Yet, that is *not* how they approached it. They realized that others would see them bowing down to the idol and *presume* that they were worshipping it. Such behavior would cause others to stumble and to think it is ok to bow down to the god and perform the practice.

To God, even performing the externals (making an idol) even *without* actual belief in it is tantamount to idolatry and is prohibited.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. (Exodus 20)

God does not wink at pagan observances and practices. Shaul (Paul) in speaking to the Greeks in Acts 17 told them that God overlooked the times of ignorance when the men of the nations worshipped pagan gods of stone, silver and gold, but now calls them to repent through Yeshua:

²² So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. ²³ "For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵ nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all things; ²⁶ and He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷ that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' ²⁹ "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. ³⁰ "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, ³¹ because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

When the people of the nations come to the knowledge of the One True God, they were to leave their former religious practices behind. Rahab left her practices behind when she joined with Israel. Ruth did, too. She said, “Your people shall be my people and your God, my God,” (Ruth 1:16) so too do those who join themselves to Israel and to their God.

Since God no longer “winks” at the pagan worship practices of the nations, it is time that true believers in Yeshua *stop* worshipping God in the ways of the pagans and come to worship Him as He defines it.

Yeshua and the Talmidim (Disciples)

In First Century Judaism, paganism not only surrounded them in the form of pagan nations, but also, because of compromises made by many Jewish people over the centuries, was even incorporated in the practice of many Jews – as we have seen. This does not excuse the practice of paganism in Judaism, it just explains why it existed.

In searching the Gospel accounts, we see that Yeshua and His immediate Twelve Disciples did not really acknowledge, nor teach against, the paganism of the day. It was a given.

Instead, they taught and lived what a true believer in the Most High God should practice. They set the example. They did not compromise with the pagan practices of the day and practice even a little bit of them. It was totally possible, I am sure, that they would have had plenty of opportunity, if they wanted, to perform any pagan practice and to incorporate them into the “faith.” Yet, they did not. They realized the high calling, as Shaul would later say, of the walk of a person of God. They were called, and called others, to walk a straight and a holy way. They showed us how to do so.

Today’s Talmidim: US!

As believers in Yeshua, we need to do the same thing. If we are true disciples of Yeshua, we need to realize that we are lights and that we are to set the example for others to follow. It is not our call to “wink” at the sins of others. Tolerance does not mean that we accept sin as a practice. We are to love the sinner, as does God, and hate the sin. We are to continue the walk in the high calling of Yeshua and His Talmidim without wavering, without compromise.

The world may not understand it and may judge us as intolerant for our unwillingness to compromise, yet we must realize that this is exactly what Shaul is writing to his Colossian readers (Colossians 2):

¹⁶ Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day-- ¹⁷ things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

So often this passage is used by believers who practice Christmas, Easter, a Sunday Sabbath and disregard the Biblical dietary laws to stop up the mouths of believers who hold to the validity of the Moedim (Biblical Appointed Times), the kosher laws and the Biblical Seventh-Day Sabbath.

“Don’t judge me for my observance,” is the theme behind the use of this passage. Yet, if we were to take this passage in the context of the whole book of Colossians, we will come to realize that this is not the thrust of Paul’s (Shaul’s) message at all.

These Colossians were Gentiles; formerly pagans, they are now joined to a “Jewish” faith and are beginning to follow the “Jewish” customs associated with that faith: the dietary laws, the Rosh Chodesh (New Moon), the Moedim – including the seventh-day Sabbath. No doubt they are being ridiculed by their pagan friends, co-workers, and families about living like “Jews.”

It is to these believers that Shaul writes. He tells them not to let the pagans around them judge them for their observance of the “Jewish” – actually, better yet, Biblical things. He is not writing to justify a believers *non-observance* of these things, as this passage is now interpreted to mean – rather, he is writing this passage so that these Colossian believers who *are* observing these Biblical things will not regard too strongly and be dissuaded by the opinions of their pagan counter-parts.

Now, the believers in Colossæ were, as in most cities of the time, in the minority group. Their non-believing Greek-oriented families, friends, co-workers and employers were in the majority. Those co-workers, friends and relatives, as indeed the believers themselves in their former practice, would have been influenced by not only Greek philosophy, but also by Greek religious practices. It would have been easy to blend in the previous religious practices and philosophical thought into their new-found faith. This is what Shaul is warning these believers about in his epistle.

Imagine that you were a Colossian believer at that time. You have embraced the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You have left your old pagan temple and its worship system behind and are now attending a Messianic gathering.

One day on the way to the market, your long-time friend, whom you haven’t seen in a while, saw you and said, “Come now, let’s go and worship and offer sacrifices together at the Temple of Diana like we used to! I really miss us doing that.”

You say, “No, I can’t do that anymore! I am a believer in Jesus now. I worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob! We don’t do such things as worship idols. We worship Him and we observe His holy days. We do what He says in His Word.”

“What! Are you a *Jew*? Why are you doing those *Jewish* things?”

“No, I am not Jewish, but the God of Israel has always accepted those who come to Him and love Him! I have accepted Him as my God and now follow His ways! I have found such joy and love and acceptance in knowing Him.”

“That’s stupid!”

“No, that’s what loving Him is about! He is my God now and that means more to me than anything else. He sent His Son to die for me and forgive my sins and I want to live for Him! You should come to Him and find out what I have found!”

“Naw. I’m just fine as I am. I can live as I want, eat what I want and worship as I want with my god, Diana. She doesn’t tell me how to live. All I have to do is to offer my sacrifice to her. Your God gets too much into your life. He tells you how to live, what to eat and drink and how to worship Him. Naw. That’s too much interference for me. Sorry. See ya later.”

Fast forward to today. When non-Jews come into Messianic congregations and begin to observe the Moedim, the kosher laws and the Seventh-Day Shabbat, their friends, families, and co-workers often struggle to understand why these new “Messianics” are beginning to act so “Jewish.” [Actually, the operative word should be “Biblical,” since these are not “Jewish” observances, but Biblical ones.] The non-Messianics think that these non-Jewish Messianics have “left the true faith” (which is the one they had been previously observing) and they put pressure on the Messianics to “come back to the true faith.”

On the other hand, these non-Jewish Messianics struggle against the peer pressure of their families, friends and co-workers. They still want to remain friends and close to their families, but the practice of the new faith they have embraced separates them from the practice of their former faith. The dietary laws prevent them from fully participating in their former feasts and fellowship, which generally incorporate non-kosher things. The observance of pagan feast days prevents them from getting as close to those they love as they used to be when they participated fully in them. Somehow, there is a separation between them – and it’s all because the new God they are embracing requires their leaving their old pagan practices and ways behind to follow a new way – His way. No longer can they follow the traditions they were raised with and that their families and friends are still practicing.

This is what the Apostle Paul was addressing in his writings to the Colossian believers.

Consider that the cited passage (page 5) in Colossians (verses 16 and 17) falls between verses 8 and 20: “⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. ²⁰ If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ²¹ “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” ²² (which all *refer to* things destined to perish with use)--in accordance with the commandments and teachings

of men? ²³ These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are* of no value against fleshly indulgence.”

In context, Paul is writing against “philosophy and empty deception, according to the *tradition of men*, according to the *elementary principles of the world*,” and “the *commandments and teachings of men*.” Evidently, they were also blending these things with the Biblical ordinances of their new faith. That’s the nature of the Colossian heresy that Paul was dealing with.

NEVER does God’s Word allow the blending of the commandments and statutes of God with worldly religion and philosophy (syncretism)! God’s Word always tells His people not to practice the religion of the pagan nations surrounding them!

We are to leave our former religious practices that we observed in ignorance behind. When we came into the faith, we no longer are pagans; we are no longer to observe what we used to in our former practice. Like the Colossians, we are not to let those who still practice these things judge us for our observance of the Biblical practices.

We should not feel guilty for our non-observance of what we used to observe, instead, we are to realize the joy of serving the Lord in the way He chooses for us!

So, as for us, we shouldn’t observe Christmas, Easter, Halloween or the other pagan originated, non-Biblical practices. But, how should we handle the situations when we are invited by family, friends and co-workers to participate in them?

How Should We Handle Them?

When someone on the street greets me during these seasons and says, “Happy Halloween, or Merry Christmas, or Happy Easter” I do not make a big deal over it. I return the greeting to them without making this an issue.

For those who know me, or who I deal with on a more or less regular basis, the response is a bit different. I will return the greeting, but then gently inform them that I do not celebrate these holidays anymore, but that I follow the Biblically ordained days.

With family and friends, I have become a bit more direct – in fact, after I have made it clear that I don’t celebrate Christmas, Easter, Halloween or any of the other pagan-originated feast days (and why I don’t), when they send me a Christmas card or an Easter card, I will send them a Chanukah or a Passover Greeting card in return.

You may laugh, but it does make a point. As much as I don’t want to be associated in observing the pagan-originated days, I want others in my family to understand that it’s not personal, but that I have made a conscious decision not to participate in these things.

It is important that I treat them in a friendly way and not be a jerk about it, but yet let them know that I desire to walk more like Jesus (using their terminology) and the Disciples did.

If they want to learn more, I am happy to tell them (and they will likely be more receptive to listen to me if I have treated them with respect and not been an antagonist about it).

In conclusion, as lights in this world, we need to shine and walk holy lives. This means that we are in the world, but that we don't need to be of the world. We are all sinners and fall short of the glory of God, we need to approach others in humbleness, not in arrogance.

We can love those who are homosexuals without becoming homosexual. We can love those who are adulterers and thieves and those who are sinners without practicing in their sins. We can love those who practice paganism and pagan-originated days without practicing in their practices.

We need to learn here to be like Messiah, who, after forgiving the woman caught in adultery told her to, "Go and sin no more." (John 8)

Here, we love the sinner, but we don't become like the sinner. We need to walk the high road and live as examples to those who are seeking God, living as people redeemed from the sins that so easily beset us.

Let us live according to our calling and encourage others to live according to the calling as well.