

# Does the New Testament Annul the Biblical Appointments?

We as Messianic Believers need to lament over the fact that most of our Christian brothers and sisters do not honor and observe our Heavenly Father's appointed times<sup>1</sup> or *moedim* (מוֹעֲדִים),<sup>2</sup> listed in Leviticus 23. Instead of remembering *Pesach*/Passover, *Chag HaMatzot*/Unleavened Bread, *Shavuot*/Pentecost, *Yom Teruah-Rosh HaShanah*/the Feast of Trumpets, *Yom Kippur*/the Day of Atonement, *Sukkot*/Tabernacles, and *Shemini Atzeret*/the Eighth Day Assembly, in addition to the weekly seventh-day *Shabbat*/Sabbath—Christians today celebrate Christmas and Easter and assemble on Sunday. They have missed out on much of what the Lord has to show us, by avoiding to meet when He wants to meet with His people. Certainly, if anyone is truly committed to God and wants to honor and celebrate Him as much as possible, the advantage of remembering His appointed times over various human replacements is obvious. Eight appointed times versus two holidays and about two hours on Sunday. *It is obvious by the numbers alone that what He intended is better!*

All too often, we as Messianics can be unfairly chastised by Christians for wanting to obey the Lord by observing His appointments. It is not uncommon to be called legalistic for celebrating the Biblical festivals. In fact, some say that we are going too far, or are perhaps

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<sup>1</sup> This article is reproduced from the author's book *Torah In the Balance, Volume I* (Kissimmee, FL: TNN Press, 2003/2009).

<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew term *moedim* (מוֹעֲדִים) is translated variably as "appointed times" (NASU), "appointed feasts" (NIV), "fixed times" (NJPS), and "appointed festivals" (ATS). *CHALOT* defines the singular *moed* (מוֹעֵד) as "meeting assembly," and "appointed time, fixed day," indicating that it is used in the Tanach for the "tent of meeting" where the elders of Israel met with the Lord (p 186).

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trying to earn our salvation, and in a few cases that we are not even saved. These claims against us are completely unacceptable if we are reasonable Believers united around a common hope of salvation in Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus).<sup>3</sup> There is nothing wrong with obeying God or His Word and in following the instructions that He has laid out for us. By remembering the Biblical appointments, we as Messianic Believers are following the example of our Messiah Yeshua and the early First Century Jewish Apostles and Believers who likewise observed them as a part of their faith practice.

Contrary to popular opinion, the First Century Apostles and Believers did not celebrate “Christmas” or “Easter,” or even a “Sunday Sabbath”—especially as we know them today. They observed the *moedim* of Leviticus 23 and the weekly *Shabbat*,<sup>4</sup> and on these special days remembered who Messiah Yeshua was as the Savior of Israel. As James the Just attested to the Apostle Paul, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law” (Acts 21:20). Now, the same is being said of many non-Jewish Believers who likewise have faith in Yeshua and who are zealous for the things of God’s Torah, eagerly partaking of their heritage in Israel (Ephesians 3:6). God is bringing all of His people together in a very unique and special way.

But there are those who say otherwise. There are those who say that because of Yeshua’s sacrifice at Golgotha (Calvary), the Torah or Law of Moses has been abolished, and thus the *moedim* or appointed times are likewise done away with, annulled, and abolished. Some think that they might be important for us to study for understanding the Bible in an historical sense, but are not to be followed as standard elements of our orthopraxy.<sup>5</sup> Others think that by remembering things like the Passover, we have actually turned our heads away from Yeshua, and bring dishonor to Him as our final sacrifice. Those who frown on Messianics keeping the appointed times, regardless of the degree of how strong they speak against them, or frown upon them, say that the Apostle Paul gave us specific instruction in his epistles that we are no longer to celebrate the “Old Testament holidays.”

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ephesians 4:1-6.

<sup>4</sup> Consider varied references in the Apostolic Scriptures to *Shavuot*/Pentecost (Acts 20:16; 1 Corinthians 16:8) and *Yom Kippur*/the Day of Atonement, “the fast” (Acts 27:9). Why would these holidays even be referenced if the Believers in the First Century were not observing them to some degree? Furthermore, Acts 17:2 tells us that it was Paul’s custom to go to the local synagogue on the Sabbath day *first*, when he went into a new community, to reason with those assembled to present them with the gospel.

<sup>5</sup> The term “orthopraxy” “literally [means] ‘right practice,’...living out the known and experienced truth in the Christian faith in love and justice” (Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999], 94). For our purposes as Messianics, it means how our faith is to be properly lived out and how Torah observance is practiced in the world.

## Does the New Testament Annul the Biblical Appointments?

Do the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) truly tell us not to celebrate the Biblical holidays? Are the Biblical holidays no longer of any value to us as Believers? **What might a closer reading of the Biblical text reveal?**

It is important that we examine the three common Scripture passages (Galatians 4:9-11; Colossians 2:16-17; Romans 14:5-6) which are often given to support the premise that Believers today are not supposed to remember the *moedim* or appointed times of the Torah, placing them in proper context.<sup>6</sup> These words were originally given to distinct ancient audiences with some specific issues facing *them*, and not necessarily Twenty-First Century people. Knowing that Yeshua the Messiah upheld the validity of the Torah as a standard for good works (Matthew 5:16-19), and that remembering the appointed times is a simple matter of outward obedience, is it possible to see how the majority view out there has missed some things? Let us read these verses and investigate their background a bit more fully.

### Galatians 4:9-11

**“But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.”**

These verses, from Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, are part of a grossly misunderstood letter that is often not interpreted by Christian laypersons in light of Yeshua's words regarding: (1) the fact that the relevance of the Torah still stands (Matthew 5:17-19), (2) the later Jerusalem Council ruling of Acts 15:19-21 of how the non-Jews coming to faith were anticipated to go to the local synagogue and hear Moses' Teaching,<sup>7</sup> and (3) that the Galatians were relatively new Believers who were being (easily) led astray by outsiders using a position of perceived importance to exert ungodly influences.

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<sup>6</sup> I have chosen to address these passages in the order of frequency in which Messianic Believers often hear them quoted, *not* their order of composition (Galatians-Romans-Colossians).

<sup>7</sup> Acts 15:21 specifically says, “For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.” This verse appears after the non-Jewish Believers in Antioch are told to “abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:20), concepts deeply rooted in the Torah (Exodus 3:15-17; Leviticus 18:6-23; 3:17; 7:26; 17:10, 14; 19:26; Deuteronomy 12:16, 23; 15:23). These were the four minimum requirements to be observed for the new non-Jewish Believers to interact with the Jewish community, where in the local synagogue they could be exposed to the Torah and Tanach.

For a more detailed discussion, consult the author's commentary *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic*.

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How are people to be reckoned as a part of God's covenant community? Why did outside influences sneak in, once Paul had finished his ministry activity in Galatia (Acts 13:13-14:28), requiring him to issue a sharp rebuke? What were some of the specific things warned against?

It can be very easy without any background information, both from other Scripture passages and from Ancient Galatia, to misinterpret Paul's words. While it is rightfully thought that the Galatian false teaching was that many of the Galatians were being told that strict obedience to the Law and circumcision would bring them salvation and inclusion among God's people, as proselyte converts—the common conclusion that Paul's letter is a treatise against the relevance of God's Torah for born again Believers is simply not true. Paul clearly asserts in Galatians 3:21, "Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be!"

Rather, Paul's letter is a clarification of how various doings are not to be considered as a way of salvation and inclusion among God's people—actually placed over and against faith in God! One's justification is not to be found in any human or sectarian "works of law" (cf. 4QMMT),<sup>8</sup> but instead "through the faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah" (my translation)<sup>9</sup>—meaning His obedience to the Father unto death on our behalf (Galatians 2:16). From such a revelation of what Yeshua has done, proper obedience to the Lord was to come forth.

Placing one's trust in what Yeshua has accomplished for us is a major overriding theme of Galatians. Yet, because of some misinterpretations of Paul's letter to the Galatians—and specifically for

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<sup>8</sup> Grk. *ergōn nomou* (ἔργων νόμου).

Consult the author's article "What Are 'Works of the Law?'" for a further discussion, especially with how modern Pauline scholarship has made connections between *ergōn nomou* and the *ma'sei haTorah* (מעשי התורה) appearing in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The latter defined "works of law" composed the sectarian identity markers of the Qumran community, and would thus have been various doings that defined the Judaizers'/Influencers' sect of Judaism. "Works of law" in Galatians would not necessarily be "observing the law" (NIV), but how the Torah was applied in a particular sectarian way, perhaps even contrary to the imperatives of written Scripture (Galatians 3:10; cf. Deuteronomy 27:26).

For a broader view in contemporary scholarship, also consult T.R. Schreiner, "Works of the Law," in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), pp 975-979; James W. Thompson, "Works," David Noel Friedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1387; "deeds, works," in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 159.

<sup>9</sup> Grk. *dia pisteōs Iēsou Christou* (διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ).

Consult the author's article "The Faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah," evaluating various opinions as to whether an objective genitive (case indicating possession) "faith in Yeshua the Messiah," or a subjective genitive "faith(fulness) of Yeshua the Messiah," is used in Galatians 2:16, and other passages in the Pauline corpus.

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failing to consider some of its significant First Century Jewish background—it is simply and wrongly thought that in Galatians 4:9-11 Paul desperately feared for the Galatians, because they actually began to remember the Biblical appointed times as laid out in the Law of Moses. Donald K. Campbell's thoughts on these verses in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* are fairly typical of mainstream Christian opinions:

“Under the influence of the Judaizers the Galatians had at least begun to observe the Mosaic calendar. They kept special days (weekly sabbaths), and months (new moons), and seasons (seasonal festivals such as Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles), and years (sabbatical and jubilee years)....They observed these special times, thinking that they would thereby gain additional merit before God. But Paul had already made it clear that works could not be added to faith as grounds for either justification or sanctification.”<sup>10</sup>

I certainly agree with the comment here that human works are not to be grounds for salvation, as salvation is a free gift of God available through Messiah Yeshua. “Keeping the feasts,” as it were, will not gain a person eternal salvation. But the free gift of salvation does not negate the need for obedience, as obedience to God is to follow a true salvation experience, and I would disagree with the comment here that obeying His Torah should not be a part of the sanctification process. We learn about God's holiness by remembering the days He considers to be important.

The Galatians were not following the Torah as a part of the sanctification process. The non-Jewish Galatians were being errantly influenced by the Judaizers that their salvation had to be preceded by circumcision and Torah observance (and perhaps even observance of the Oral Law), being reckoned as ethnic Jews, and only then they could be a part of God's covenant people.

Paul's epistle was written concerning a serious situation in Galatia where these outsiders had sneaked in, and imposed strict legalisms on the non-Jewish Believers, leading them astray. While there is nothing wrong with physical circumcision in and of itself, nor is obeying the Torah wrong, doing these things with a legalistic attitude and improper motives will not bring eternal salvation. Only following the Torah the way that a particular Jewish sect prescribed—“works of law”—was certainly *not enough* to be reckoned as a part of His covenant people. **The Epistle to the Galatians establishes how covenant status with God has always been defined by faith in God, and now His Messiah** (Galatians 3:6; cf. Genesis 15:6).

Was Paul really concerned that the Galatians were being instructed by God's Law? Or was Paul concerned about *their motivations* for doing

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<sup>10</sup> Donald K. Campbell, “Galatians,” in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 602.

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what they were doing? Was the Galatians' attitude one of trying to grow via the natural pace of the Holy Spirit, or to prove themselves superior to others? What did the outside Judaizers/Influencers come in and really want them to do (cf. Galatians 6:12)?

Salvation only comes through being spiritually regenerated through the atoning work of Messiah Yeshua. Who we are in the Lord is because of what the Lord has done for us! After salvation, good works should follow and be a *natural evidence of the changes brought of the Holy Spirit* (Ezekiel 36:26-27). There are certainly some Messianics today who may teach, or by their actions demonstrate, that they believe that their human-prescribed works are necessary to precede salvation, rather than salvation preceding works—the same paradigm paralleled in Galatians. We are to heed Paul's words to the Galatians so that we **never fall into this trap**.

But what is Paul saying in Galatians 4:9-11? Is he telling his audience that they were falling away because they were keeping the appointed times of the Torah? Is he telling them that they were wrong to observe “The LORD's appointed times which” are “holy convocations” (Leviticus 23:2)? If the non-Jews coming to faith, later addressed in Acts 15, were anticipated to go to the local synagogue to hear Moses' Teaching—and indeed keeping the appointed times is a key element of following God's Torah—is there something that we have perhaps missed or glossed over? Even though this ruling came after Paul's letter was written to the Galatians, they would still have known about it and would have been expected to follow it.

In the text from Galatians, Paul prefaces his statements about the appointed times, by reminding his audience about their previous life:

“However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?” (Galatians 4:8-9).

In v. 8 Paul describes the previous condition of the Galatians prior to coming to faith in the Messiah of Israel. He says that “you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods” (RSV). Now that they knew the God of Israel and the salvation of His Son, he asked them why they were returning “to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world” (ESV).<sup>11</sup> The Greek verb *epistrephō* (ἐπιστρέφω), rendered as “turn back again” (NASU), means “**to return to a point where one has been, turn around, go back**” (BDAG).<sup>12</sup> This is a

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<sup>11</sup> Grk. *ta asthenē kai ptōcha stoiceia* (τὰ ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα).

<sup>12</sup> 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), 382.

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good textual indicator that the Galatians were returning back to religious practices that were either (1) the exact same pagan practices that they followed before their conversion experience, or (2) practices that were similar in scope to the pagan ones that they followed before their conversion experience. Either way, they were turning to things that were **not of God**. There has to be a viable alternative explanation to the one that is often accepted.

To assert that these are the Lord's appointed times of Leviticus 23, and that Paul is equating Biblical practices and pagan practices as being quantitatively indifferent, would be to claim that things established by God *are not of God* but really of the world. Such logic is baffling and must be rejected.<sup>13</sup>

Samuel J. Mikolaski, in *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, explains that in v. 8 the reference to "no gods" designates "celestial and demonic powers which control destiny, as in ancient astrology and mythology...the devotee was related to these as a slave, not like the Christian to the true God as a son. The elemental spirits are by nature excluded from being God, and were served only, because the Galatians did not formerly know God."<sup>14</sup> These words confirm that prior to the Galatians' knowing Yeshua they were practicing things that were not only not of God, but rooted in things like astrology and mythology, which were directly prohibited by the Torah (Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:10). When the Galatians were returning back to their previous ways, these are the sorts of ways that they were returning to.

If indeed so, then what were the "days and months and seasons and years" (v. 10) referred to here? Are they the appointed times of God's Torah? Or, if the Galatians were returning to their previous ways left behind in Greco-Roman paganism, were these things something else? There are several possibilities. Ben Witherington III is keen to note how, "Commentators have often tried to parallel this list with various Jewish sources, but in fact there is no Jewish list that actually matches up with this list...Paul has provided here a generic list that could apply equally well to Jewish as well to pagan observances."<sup>15</sup> **Automatically**

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<sup>13</sup> There are, sadly, Galatians commentators who do advocate this view. Richard N. Longenecker is one who actually concludes,

"[B]y taking on Torah observance Gentile Christians would be reverting to a pre-Christian stance comparable to their former pagan worship," and he goes on to say "Paul's lumping of Judaism and paganism together in this manner is radical in the extreme" (*Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians*, Vol. 41 [Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1990], 181).

<sup>14</sup> Samuel J. Mikolaski, "Galatians," in D. Guthrie, et. al., *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1100.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 299.

Witherington does, though, believe that these are the Torah-prescribed appointed times.

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assuming that Galatians 4:9-11 abolishes mainline Biblical practices is a bit too convenient, especially given what Paul says about the Galatians returning to things they were supposed to have left behind.

The first possibility is that what is being referred to are non-Biblical, pagan holidays. The foolish and young Galatians, falsely believing themselves to be securely saved by their circumcision and now a formal part of Judaism, could be returning to something like the Emperor Cult in order to maintain a connection to their non-believing extended family and the Greco-Roman community, and there are commentators who hold to this view.<sup>16</sup> A second, and I believe more likely possibility, is that “the days and months and seasons and years” involved fringe Jewish practices that were legalistically imposed by the Judaizers/Influencers, somehow similar to pagan Galatian practices, involving astrology or mysticism. They could actually be the standardized *moedim* or appointed times, yet infused with ungodly rituals that bore little difference to what the Galatians had previously observed prior to hearing the gospel. They were not God’s “appointed times,” per se, but rather the appointed times infused with pagan-influenced superstitions.

It is often easy for people today to overlook the fact that parts of Ancient Judaism had been influenced by the pagan world around it, and that there were aberrant branches of Judaism that made the spread of the gospel quite difficult for the Apostles (just consider the Jewish magician Elymas in Acts 13:6-12).<sup>17</sup> While speaking of the overall, fallen human condition in Galatians 4:3—“while we were children, [we] were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world”<sup>18</sup>—this *Zeitgeist* could affect Judaism equally as much as it could affect paganism. The historian Josephus attested how there were Pharisees and Essenes who both believed in the force known as Fate:

“Now for the Pharisees, they say that some actions, but not all, are the work of fate, and some of them are in our own power, and that they are liable to fate, but are not caused by fate. But the sect of the Essenes affirm, that fate governs all things, and that nothing befalls men but what is according to its determination” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 13.172).<sup>19</sup>

In ancient times, these “elemental things” or *stoicheia* (στοιχεῖα) were often considered to be forces like earth, water, air, and fire

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<sup>16</sup> This is a position held by Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), pp 268-269; and Tim Hegg, *A Study of Galatians* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2002), pp 158-160.

<sup>17</sup> Elymas was someone Paul encountered immediately prior to his visit to Southern Galatia (Acts 13:13-14:28). It is possible that Paul, telling the Galatians about his previous travels, would have relayed his encounter with this magician to them.

<sup>18</sup> Grk. *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου).

<sup>19</sup> Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 275.



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(corresponding to the Greek deities Demeter, Poseidon, Hera, and Hephaestus),<sup>20</sup> or perhaps other elements such as the sun, moon, stars and/or spirits, angels, and demons (referred to in Romans 8:38 as “principalities”). The Jewish philosopher Philo was one who recognized the function of these *stoicheia* on the breastplate of the high priest:

“Now of the **three elements** [*stoicheiōn, στοιχείων*], out of which and in which all the different kinds of things which are perceptible by the outward senses and perishable are formed, namely, **the air, the water and the earth**, the garment which reached down to the feet in conjunction with the ornaments which were attached to that part of it which was about the ankles have been plainly shown to be appropriate symbols; for as the tunic is one, and as the aforesaid three elements are all of one species, since they all have all their revolutions and changes beneath the moon, and as to the garment are attached the pomegranates, and the flowers; so also in certain manner the earth and the water may be said to be attached to and suspended from the air, for the air is their chariot” (*Life of Moses* 2.121).<sup>21</sup>

Here, Philo, albeit errantly, concludes that the basic elements of the world—in which the pagans believed—functioned on the breastplate of the high priest. Similar to Fate controlling the destinies of people, these basic elements here communicated messages to the high priest of Israel.

Paul’s remarks about the “the elemental things of the world” including not only aspects of First Century paganism, but also aspects of paganism that negatively influenced Judaism, seem likely. David H. Stern does point out, “Jews, though knowing the one true God, were sometimes led astray by demonic spirits.”<sup>22</sup> Tim Hegg further explains, “This demonic ‘worldview’ had also influenced the Judaisms of the day, and had, to one extent or another, become the thinking of the common man, whether Jew or Gentile.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. F.F. Bruce, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 193.

<sup>21</sup> Philo Judaeus: *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 501.

<sup>22</sup> David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 556.

<sup>23</sup> Tim Hegg, *A Study of Galatians* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2002), pp 142-143.

Hegg goes on to conclude that the “elemental things of the world” that had infected Judaism included elements of proto-Gnosticism that would later be seen in Medieval Jewish mysticism:

“If indeed a pre-Gnosticism was already extant in the Judaisms of Paul’s day, he could well speak of being under the ‘elemental principles of the world’ when he considered the manner in which the rabbinic interpretations of the day had combined Hellenistic thought with the study of Torah. But for Paul, the Hellenistic concept of the *stoicheia* was not merely an errant form of philosophy—it was pagan and the realm of demons. Not unlike the kabbalism that would captivate Judaism in the middle-ages, the nascent Jewish Gnosticism in Paul’s day was a mixing of things that essentially differ” (Ibid., 143).

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Is it impossible to think that what the Galatians were actually practicing were pagan rituals that had infected the Judaizers/Influencers' (fringe) sect of Judaism? If they were, then what Paul spoke against was the Galatians observing the appointed times saturated with ungodly rituals—possibly involving Fate, astrology, or some kind of mysticism. Mikolaski's comments are well taken:

“Are these Jewish or pagan observances? In writing to the Galatians, Paul clearly has Judaizers in mind. Did these worship elemental spirits? Astrological elements were at times infused into Jewish as well as pagan practices. The *elemental spirits* of this age refer probably to the ethos of an age traceable in part to pagan astrological mythology, but which had become a religious habit as much as, and perhaps more than, a metaphysical system.”<sup>24</sup>

This evangelical Christian commentator seems to imply that whatever days the Galatians were observing, the Judaizers could have integrated astrology into them. This being the case, Paul would have been deeply concerned that the Galatians were returning to the same kinds of practices that they followed in paganism. Paul's words, “I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain” (Galatians 4:11), would certainly be justified in this regard. Likewise, his words that the Judaizers/Influencers did not even keep the Torah they claimed to uphold, even though they were insisting upon proselyte circumcision (cf. Galatians 6:13), also make much more sense. The Galatians needed to return to Paul's guidance, and the path established for them by Yeshua (cf. Galatians 5:1) for appropriate obedience.

Paul's concern for the Galatians adopting pagan practices that had influenced a fringe sect of Judaism—the sect of the Judaizers/Influencers—is highlighted by his opening warning in Galatians 1:8: “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!” The *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* by

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<sup>24</sup> Mikolaski, in *NBCR*, 1100.

Daniel C. Juster, *Jewish Roots* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1995), pp 114-115 draws a related conclusion:

“The full context has prompted many commentators to hold that Paul here is not speaking of Jewish biblical celebrations. There must have been another problem in Galatia, it is thought. This problem is acknowledged to be connected with astrology. It is also known that heretical groups existed which *connected some of the Jewish holidays to astrology* and superstition. Paul could not be speaking of celebrations given by God as putting people under the bondage of evil spirits! Nor could he be speaking of Jewish holidays in saying that they, a non-Jewish group, are *turning back* to weak and beggarly elemental spirits.

“Apparently, what Paul refers to is a drift into superstition connected to special years, days and seasons—akin to astrology. This is a bondage, for during such days, some actions are safe and others are unsafe, some endeavors are to be undertaken and will be especially fruitful, while others are especially dangerous. This actually brings bondage to evil spirits. There may have been a perverted Jewish content added to some of this.”

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Craig S. Keener, states, concerning Galatians 1:8, “Some Jewish mystics of the period claimed revelations from angels (especially in the \*apocalyptic literature)...Paul may allude here to the curses of the covenant leveled against those who failed to keep Moses’ law (Deut 27-28).”<sup>25</sup>

If the Judaizers who errantly influenced the Galatians were in fact some kind of Jewish mystics (the forerunners of practicing what we today call Kabbalah) practicing astrology, witchcraft, or some other kind of mysticism (cf. Deuteronomy 18:10-14; 2 Kings 21:6)—perhaps even claiming to have been given revelations by God—then of course Paul would be warning the Galatians that they had returned to the same worthless and God-less practices that they followed before acknowledging Yeshua. His question to them is, after all, “who has bewitched you?” (Galatians 3:1), which might be a little more literal than we commonly give it credit.<sup>26</sup> Remember how it is “days and months and seasons and years” (Galatians 4:10) that are targeted, pagan influences on Judaism which could have been super-imposed onto the appointed times. (Of course, if the Judaizers errantly influencing the Galatians were mystics is true, then some commonly held interpretations of Galatians should be reevaluated.)

The good Apostle who says that the Torah’s main purpose is to lead people to the Messiah (Galatians 3:24), would not be speaking against the appointed times that depict the Father’s plan of salvation history. Paul would speak against their misuse, though, as the Galatians were returning to various practices that would not have been approved by God. Paul is greatly concerned that the Galatians were turning to things not of the God of Israel, being enslaved to them. These cannot be the Biblical holidays because the appointed times are of God; they are certainly not “weak and miserable principles” (Galatians 4:9, NIV). They are the special times when our Heavenly Father wants His people to meet and fellowship with Him, so that He may reveal Himself fully to us. But if the appointed times were saturated with any mystical pagan practices by the outsiders who had led them astray—for that Paul would have been definitely concerned!

It is important to note that many Christians, whether they know it or not, unfortunately fall into the same errors as these Galatians. When many Christians come to faith in Messiah Yeshua, they turn to keeping “days and months and seasons and years” not established by God. Most of the time they do so in ignorance, failing to understand the theological

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<sup>25</sup> Craig S. Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 520.

<sup>26</sup> Witherington, *Galatians*, pp 201-202, notes how this could easily be some kind of connection to the ancient concept of the evil eye (Deuteronomy 28:54, LXX; Sirach 14:6, 8; Wisdom 4:12). The evil eye was used in sorcery and witchcraft.

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and spiritual significance of the *moedim* given to us in the Torah. But then others, understanding the importance of the Lord's festivals, choose to say that they are not for today and are unimportant. And then, some Christians celebrate the utterly Satanic holiday of Halloween, and in spite of even the evidence against observing it compiled by evangelical Christian Bible teachers, still keep it.<sup>27</sup> The vast majority of Christians celebrate non-Biblical holidays. And a few, in spite of the richness that the Lord's appointed times have, defiantly refuse to honor them, and put others down who do. What do we do about this?

The Christians who criticize Messianics, saying that they are "concerned" because we honor God's appointments found in the Torah, probably need to read the verses they quote from Galatians a little closer and place them in proper historical context. They need to read these texts with a discerning eye. *What were the Galatians really returning to?* These verses may very well apply more to some of today's Christians than Messianic Believers, because today Christians observe holidays that were not established by God, but rather are human replacements for what He established. Thankfully in our day, the Lord is awakening many to the importance of His appointed times and many are indeed returning to His ways. People are seeing that what God has established for His people is better than anything that mortals can attempt to establish.<sup>28</sup>

### Colossians 2:16-17

**"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—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Messiah."**

This text from Paul's letter to the Colossians is often employed to demonstrate that no one is permitted to judge Believers in relation to "eating or in drinking, or in respect of a feast, or of a new moon, or of sabbaths" (YLT). These things, as Paul writes, are "only shadows of the real thing, Christ himself" (NLT). Those who think that the Biblical holidays of Leviticus 23, the seventh-day Sabbath, and kosher dietary laws, have been done away, often use Colossians 2:16-17 as a proof text.

While often considering observance of the appointed times to be an issue of personal preference or choice, many Christians who witness Messianics' observance of them, feel judged by the actions of us remembering the appointed times, even when we do not say anything

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<sup>27</sup> Consult the author's article "A Messianic Perspective on Halloween."

<sup>28</sup> For a further examination of Paul's letter to the Galatians, consult the author's article "The Message of Galatians" and his commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*.

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about it<sup>29</sup>—and Colossians 2:16-17 is often turned on its head to actually judge those of us who keep them. These two verses often not read in light of the wider context of Colossians 2, and the actual problem present in Colossae that Paul is having to address.

A number of evangelical Christian commentators have rightfully concluded that the main error present in Colossae, that the Apostle Paul had to address, concerned a false philosophy (Colossians 2:8) that was some kind of Gnosticized-Jewish amalgamation of errors—a dangerous socio-religious soup of ideas unique to the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor.<sup>30</sup> While this was not necessarily the full blown Gnosticism of the Second and Third Centuries, there are enough clues in Colossians that it was a kind of proto-Gnosticism. This is seen by the usage of terms like *gnōsis* (γνώσις), *plērōma* (πλήρωμα), and *sophia* (σοφία)—knowledge, fullness, and wisdom—directly used by Paul to subvert the errors of the false teachers (1:9-10, 26-28; 2:2-3; 3:10).<sup>31</sup> Their false philosophy involved some ascetic practices that involved worship of angels, and harsh treatment of the body (Colossians 2:18-21). The false philosophy advocated that Yeshua the Messiah was just one of various intermediaries between God the Father and humankind, and categorically denied that Yeshua was Divine (Colossians 2:9).

A typical Christian perspective of what Paul communicates in Colossians 2:16-17 is reflected in the *Ryrie Study Bible*, which remarks, “False teachers were evidently insisting on abstinence from certain foods and observance of certain days. These, Paul says, are shadows which have been dispersed by the coming of Christ.”<sup>32</sup> Subsequently, today’s Messianics who believe that by remembering the Sabbath, the appointed times, and eating kosher—we can learn things about the character of God—are thought by many to have looked backward in their faith and not forward to the Messiah. People like us are thus only able to grasp at shadows, and have lost the substance of the Lord.

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<sup>29</sup> This is not to say that there are not Messianic people out there who harshly condemn Christians who do not observe *Shabbat*, the appointed times, or eat kosher. There are, and they have frequently brought a great deal of discredit to our faith community.

For a further examination of this, consult the relevant volumes of the *Messianic Helper Series* by Messianic Apologetics.

<sup>30</sup> D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp 523-525; F.F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp 17-26; Douglas J. Moo, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp 46-60.

<sup>31</sup> For a summarization of Gnosticism, consult A.M. Renwick, “Gnosticism,” in *ISBE*, 2:484-490.

<sup>32</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, ed., *Ryrie Study Bible*, NASB (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 1800.

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The challenge, though, is in recognizing what things like the Sabbath or appointed times meant to the false teachers. How were these practices caught up in the false philosophy circulating in Colossae? Too frequently, Colossians 2:16-17 is just used as a sound bite, without any consideration for what the false philosophy actually was, and the other ascetic practices detailed (Colossians 2:18-21).

There were a wide variety of gross religious errors that had the real danger of affecting the Believers at Colossae. Before saying anything about the Biblical holidays or the Sabbath, Paul warns the Colossians, "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 Messiah" (Colossians 2:8). What would we define as "deceptive philosophy" (NIV) and "elemental spirits of the universe"<sup>33</sup> (RSV) here? What should we consider to be "according to human tradition"<sup>34</sup> (RSV)? Are the appointed times established by God in the Torah of human origin? Paul knew the Torah to be of Divine origin (Romans 7:7), and how it said "These are the appointed times of the LORD" (Leviticus 23:4). So, what the Colossians are warned against cannot be things established by God.

Ryrie correctly defines what is actually according to human origin as "the cosmic spirits of Hellenistic syncretism." He views that the Colossian false teaching was a "philosophy involved regulating their religious life by observing the movements of the stars, which they associated with the power of the angels who were worshipped by some."<sup>35</sup>

It is not very difficult to see that the philosophy and empty deception that Paul warned the Colossians about, are the base, humanistic, fallen religious beliefs of the world. This would first have pertained to the dominant religious system of Colossae and the Lycus Valley, that being standard Greco-Roman religion. This could have secondly pertained to any mystery religions or cults in the region. And thirdly, especially given the false philosophy's penchant for some kind of angel worship (Colossians 2:18), we can agree with Douglas J. Moo and how "The people combined this 'veneration of angels' with ascetic practices and rituals drawn from both paganism and Judaism, thereby creating a local syncretistic belief system that was being picked up and propagated by some Christians in Colossae."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Grk. *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου); the same as appears in Galatians 4:3.

<sup>34</sup> Grk. *kata tēn paradōsin tōn anthrōpōn* (κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων).

<sup>35</sup> Ryrie, 1800.

<sup>36</sup> Moo, *Colossians-Philemon*, 58.

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The most damning feature of this false philosophy was, of course, its denigration of the Messiah Yeshua as just another intermediary. This is why immediately after warning the Colossians not to be led astray (Colossians 2:8), Paul must assert “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). This is a very powerful statement made by Paul, as the Greek word *theotēs* (θεότης) appears only once in the Apostolic Scriptures, in this verse, affirming Yeshua as God: “This word, meaning ‘divinity,’ occurs in the NT only in Col 2:9 (cf. 1:19-20). The one God, to whom all deity belongs, has given this fullness of deity to the incarnate Christ” (TDNT).<sup>37</sup> And Yeshua, being the *only* intermediary between God the Father and humanity to entreat for help is **made clear because of the significant saving work that He has accomplished for us!** Paul continues, writing,

“[A]nd in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Messiah; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions” (Colossians 2:10-13).

These verses testify of the reality of how Yeshua’s salvation provides a circumcision of the heart that is different from that of the flesh. The act of baptism or water immersion is symbolic of passing out of the world of death into new life in Him (Romans 6:3-4). While previously being dead in sin, Paul writes the Colossians that they have now found forgiveness via the work of the Messiah.

Paul further comments in Colossians 2:14 that Yeshua “canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” While this passage is often interpreted as meaning that the Law of Moses was “nailed to the cross,” this is not what the verse is saying. The Greek term *cheirographon* (χειρόγραφον) means “**a hand-written document, specif. a certificate of indebtedness, account, record of debts**” (BDAG).<sup>38</sup> Traditional views of Colossians 2:14 dating back to the Protestant Reformation often rightly associated the certificate of debt as either the record of human sin, or the guilt of human sin incurred before God.<sup>39</sup> Another common view of Colossians 2:14, similar to this,

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<sup>37</sup> H. Kleinknecht, “*theotēs*,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 330.

<sup>38</sup> BDAG, 1083.

<sup>39</sup> For one example, see John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, reprint (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2000), 747.

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sees the certificate of debt as the pronouncement of condemnation that hung over Yeshua as He was dying on the cross (Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19).

The primary issue handled in Colossians 2:14 is the condemnation that stood against people by sin, a record of debt that has now been paid for via the sacrifice of Yeshua. Yeshua took our sin upon Himself and His work provides atonement for our sin. *The condemnation pronounced by the Torah against sinners has been remitted*—a free gift of redemption available to all people. Following this, Paul then speaks of the final victory that the Messiah has over sin and against all principalities and powers:

“When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him” (Colossians 2:15).

Any intermediary forces, such as the angels, that the Colossians were being tempted to either worship or entreat, were stripped of any authority they might have claimed over people by the Father resurrecting His Son, and Yeshua being supremely exalted to His right hand (cf. Philippians 2:9-11; Isaiah 45:21-23). It would have been entirely useless for any other intermediary to be sought, when it was Yeshua Himself who stood supreme over all principalities. In Paul’s paralleling letter, he affirms,

“He brought [this] about in Messiah, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (Ephesians 1:20-21).

Sandwiched between Paul’s assertion that Yeshua has triumphed supremely over the spiritual forces, and his remarks about the asceticism circulating in Colossae, is a short statement made about the Sabbath and appointed times:

“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—things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Messiah” (Colossians 2:16-17, NASU).

In what way were the Colossian Believers to whom Paul was writing not to take judgment? Were they not to allow themselves to be judged because they were not following these aspects of the Torah? Or, were they not to allow themselves to be judged because they did not consider the Sabbath or appointed times to have the same kind of value as the false teachers? If the latter is to be the accepted option, then not only would it concur with how the Jerusalem Council ruled in Acts 15 that the non-Jews coming to faith were anticipated to go to the local synagogue and learn from Moses’ Teaching—but that **things like kosher eating, the appointed times, and the Sabbath were *mainline practices***



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of the Colossian Believers living in accordance with God's Word. Various commentators have noted that when carefully read within its larger context, no condemnation of keeping the Sabbath or appointed times is intended, but rather how these things were taken up into the false philosophy—and the Colossians were not to feel judged because they viewed these things a little differently:

- Peter T. O'Brien: "For Israel the keeping of these holy days was evidence of obedience to God's law and a sign of her election among the nations. At Colossae, however, the sacred days were to be kept for the sake of the 'elemental spirits of the universe,' those astral powers who directed the course of the stars and relegated the order of the calendar. So Paul is not condemning the use of sacred days or seasons as such; it is the wrong motive involved when the observance of these days is bound up with the recognition of the elemental spirits."<sup>40</sup>
- Andrew T. Lincoln: "[T]here is no indication here that the motivation for abstinence from food and drink was due to observance of Torah....There is no hint that such special days are being observed because of the desire to obey Torah as such or because keeping them was a special mark of Jewish identity. Instead, it is probable that in the philosophy they were linked to a desire to please the cosmic powers."<sup>41</sup>
- Douglas J. Moo: "Only Sabbath observance that is connected inappropriately to a wider religious viewpoint is here being condemned. These interpreters [who agree] are quite right to emphasize the importance of interpreting contextually and historically. And they are also right, we have suggested, to argue that Sabbath was taken up into a larger, syncretistic mix."<sup>42</sup>

None of these commentators think that the Sabbath or appointed times are to be followed by Believers today, but they do recognize that we must read what is said in Colossians 2:16-17 in light of the larger issues being addressed. The Colossians were not to take any judgment for not adhering to the syncretistic false philosophy, which gave some sort of inappropriate significance to the Sabbath and appointed times. The Colossians were not to take judgment from these people, as they

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<sup>40</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians, Philemon*, Vol. 44 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 139.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Letter to the Colossians," in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 139.

<sup>42</sup> Moo, *Colossians-Philemon*, 221.

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would be looked down upon by the false teachers for somehow not being “enlightened” from their false philosophy (cf. Colossians 2:19). Inappropriate observance of the Sabbath and appointed times was the issue.

The false philosophy circulating in Colossae was taking people away from Yeshua the Messiah, and so Paul makes the point to remind his readers that the true meaning of things like the Sabbath and appointed times is found in Him: “These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Colossians 2:17, ESV). Yet as you have probably noticed, a relatively literal version like the NASU renders v. 17 by saying that the Biblical appointments were but “a *mere* shadow of what is to come.” Does this not imply that they are no longer important? Can things like the Sabbath or appointed times no longer inform God’s people about His plan of salvation history, and the Second Coming of the Messiah?

It is notable that the New American Standard translators took a liberty and placed the word “*mere*” in italics, meaning that the word was not originally in the Greek text. The important clause reads *ha estin skia tōn mellontōn* (ἡ ἐστὶν σκιά τῶν μελλόντων).<sup>43</sup> The placement of “*mere*” in the English text is not implied by the context of the sentence, unlike an understood verb or article that was not written by the original author and could legitimately be written in italics.<sup>44</sup> This is unseen in the Revised Standard Version rendering, which does not use italics: “These are only a shadow of what is to come...”

Even more important to be aware of is how the New International Version renders v. 17 with a past tense verb: “These are a shadow of the things that were to come...” The NIV might not add “*mere*” or “only,” but the present tense participle *mellontōn* (μελλόντων) means “things coming,”<sup>45</sup> not “things that were to come.” The argument presented for rendering a present tense verb as a past tense verb, is that Torah practices like the Sabbath and appointed times have reached their conclusion, and have nothing more to teach God’s people.

In O’Brien’s estimation, “The expression ‘things to come’...does not refer to what lies in the future from the standpoint of the writer...so pointing, for example, to the time of the Second Coming.”<sup>46</sup> The reason he gives, that *mellontōn* has to be translated in the past tense, is that

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<sup>43</sup> The Greek word *monos* (μόνος), which can appear “as adverb, *alone, only, merely*” (Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003], 418), rendered as “*mere*” in Mark 6:8 in the NASU, does not appear in the Greek source text of Colossians 2:17.

<sup>44</sup> Other unimplied usages of “*mere*” in the NASU, where *monos* does not occur in the source text, appear in: 1 Corinthians 3:3, 4; 1 Timothy 1:4; Hebrews 9:24.

<sup>45</sup> Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 465.

<sup>46</sup> O’Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, 140.

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“then the σκιά (‘shadow’) would not have been superseded and the ordinances referred to would retain their importance.”<sup>47</sup> O’Brien’s words are actually quite telling here: **if there are still things to come, then *Shabbat*, the appointed times, and even the dietary laws have lessons to teach God’s people today.** And this is exactly why today’s Messianic Believers remember them! There is no legitimate justification to misrepresent a verb tense to fit one’s theological presupposition as has been done here.

Colossians 2:17 raises an important question for us, because this text also says, regarding the Biblical appointments, that “the substance belongs to Messiah.” Rendered literally, *to de sōma tou Christou* (τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ) is “and the body is of the Christ” (YLT). This is reflected in the CJB rendering of “but the body is of the Messiah.” There is debate as to what the proper context of the word *sōma* (σῶμα) relates to in this verse. Some interpret it as meaning that while no outside person is to judge Believers in matters of eating, drinking, a Sabbath day, or festival, it is only the Body of Messiah that is able to judge. Others, however, interpret the word *sōma* in relation to the things that are coming, and that the “substance” (RSV, NASU) or “reality” (NIV) of the appointed times is found in Yeshua.

*Sōma* has a variety of meanings, including “*body, living body, physical body; the body* (of Christ), *the church; dead body, corpse; the reality or substance* (as opposed to a shadow)” (CGEDNT).<sup>48</sup> Is Paul comparing *sōma* to “body,” i.e., the Body of Messiah judging in regard to the appointed times? Or, is he comparing *sōma* to *skia* (σκιά) or “shadow,” meaning that the appointed times are a shadow, and the true substance or meaning of them, is found in Yeshua?

Given the tenor of the false philosophy circulating in Colossae, which denigrated the Divinity of Yeshua, His atoning work, and which sought intercession via other spiritual intermediaries—*sōma* as “substance” is to be preferred. The most that things like the Sabbath or appointed times could mean for the false teachers would be an incomplete shadow, because they had missed the whole point of why God gave them to His people. While *sōma* (σῶμα) can mean “body” as in the Body of Messiah, with *sōma* contrasted to *skia*, it has to mean “**substantive reality, the thing itself, the reality** in imagery of a body that casts a shadow, in contrast to σκιά [*skia*]” (BDAG).<sup>49</sup> The issue is, as properly extrapolated by the New English Bible, “the solid reality is Christ’s.”

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Barclay M. Newman, Jr., *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies/Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1971), 177.

<sup>49</sup> BDAG, 984.

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Contrary to recognizing the true reality or substance of the Sabbath and appointed times as being Yeshua the Messiah, the false teachers sought spiritual help and enlightenment from other sources. Paul warned the Colossians, “Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on *visions* he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind” (Colossians 2:18). Whether one takes “worship of angels” (Grk. *thrēskeia tōn angelōn*, θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων) to be worship directed to angels, or an ascetic attempt to join into the worship of angels in Heaven—the point is made that practices from God like the Sabbath or appointed times were being abused. They were caught up in a philosophy of “false humility” (NIV) that likely inflicted some physical harm on adherents via intense fasting,<sup>50</sup> in an effort to induce visions and pierce the inter-dimensional veil that was off limits for humans. And the most that adherents would be able to find, according to Paul, would be shadows.

But is there a proper way to honor things like the Sabbath and appointed times? Surely if the Apostle Paul only criticized their improper observance as part of the Colossian false philosophy, then there can be a proper way to remember these things—as their shadow or outline points us to the substance—and helps us to understand not only “what is to come,” but also *better understand* what has already come. The work of Yeshua does not eliminate or disperse the shadow, but rather shows the greater reality that the shadow prefigures or outlines. In making the Sabbath and appointed times a part of our weekly and yearly faith experience, *we can learn more about the Lord we love and serve.*

If we are convicted that the appointed times are still to be followed today, then as Messianic Believers we have to understand that the true meaning or substance of them is found in the Messiah. We honor the Lord by observing His appointed times, and by remembering what Yeshua has done for us. The true significance of the seventh-day Sabbath, the appointed times, and indeed all of the Torah’s practices are found in Messiah Yeshua, and the example that He lived for us. As Roger Bullard validly remarks, “Dietary laws and calendrical observances point beyond themselves to Christ, the reality.”<sup>51</sup> The Biblical holidays explain the pattern of the Messiah’s life, His Second Coming, and the themes of eternity. When we as Messianic Believers gather to remember them, we gather to not only remember the events they commemorate in the Torah, but also what they represent to us who believe in Yeshua. We do not just observe the Torah for the sake of

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<sup>50</sup> Rendered as “self-abasement” in the NASU, *tapeinophrosunē* (ταπεινοφροσύνη) is often related to fasting (BDAG, 989).

<sup>51</sup> Roger Bullard, “The Letter of Paul to the Colossians,” in Walter J. Harrelson, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, NRSV (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 2111.

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observing the Torah. We are to keep these things because they point to Yeshua, and speak volumes to us about who He is, what He has done, and what He will do for us.

The importance of keeping the Lord's appointments for Believers cannot be overstated because when speaking of the Exodus and events in the wilderness, the Apostle Paul wrote, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). The RVSV actually says that "these things happened to them as a warning." If we find ourselves being the last generation "upon whom the ends of the ages have come," or we at least are nearing that last generation—how are we expected to understand God's redemptive plan for humanity and the end-times if we do not learn about the appointed times He has specified for us? How are we supposed to properly understand what is to befall Planet Earth?

If we do not keep the appointed times as God has told us, are we libel to misunderstand His prophetic plan for the ages? The "fixed times" (Leviticus 23:3, NJPS) of the Lord tell us when He plans to meet with us, especially regarding the Messiah's Second Coming. By keeping the appointed times and knowing their significance, can concepts such as the any-moment, random pre-tribulation rapture be theologically supported? Or, will we understand that there is a definitive pattern in the set seasons of the God of Israel, that we can only fully understand by keeping, as opposed to just studying, the *moedim*?<sup>52</sup>

Evangelical Believers have swelled the Messianic movement in the past two decades (1990s-2000s) precisely because they have taken hold of the important lessons and spiritual significance in things like the Sabbath, Biblical holidays, and kosher eating. They have seen the substance of Yeshua in the weekly day of rest, the Passover *seder*, the giving of the Law and outpouring of the Spirit at *Shavuot*, the blowing of the *shofar* and future resurrection on *Yom Teruah/Rosh HaShanah*, tabernacling with the Lord at *Sukkot*, and even (although it is extra-Biblical) lighting the *menorah* at *Chanukah*. In eating kosher they have learned how God wishes us to separate holy and unholy things, even in our diet, and how it can benefit our health. These Messianic Believers have not embraced these important aspects of God's Torah to appease the elemental spirits (Colossians 2:8) or worship angels (Colossians 2:18), **but to do things that Jesus did.**

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<sup>52</sup> Note that while there are many Christian books written on the prophetic significance of the appointed times, almost all of them are written by those *who do not keep them* as a standard element of their praxis of faith. Should we accept prophetic interpretations related to the *moedim* by those who do not keep them, and hence do not understand them as fully as one who does keep them?

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In our remembrance of the appointed times, we do need to heed Paul's words to the Colossians, and not find ourselves remembering these things with any kind of ascetic ideas in mind. We keep the Sabbath and appointed times to obey the Lord, and to be instructed on how they depict His plan for the ages. If we can remember these things properly, then our faith community can influence others as to how important they are. Unfortunately, many Christians are unable to read Colossians 2:16-17 in light of the dominant issues circulating in Ancient Colossae, and they think that in learning to appreciate the shadow, Messianic Believers have completely forgotten the substance. Contrary to this though, if we are obedient via the love we have for God and for one another, then we can properly understand the role that the *shadow* plays in us recognizing the *substance*—our Messiah Yeshua!<sup>53</sup>

### Romans 14:5-6

**“One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.”**

Many of today's Christian laypersons, reading Romans 14, think that they automatically know what the circumstances being addressed are: the Apostle Paul does not consider matters of sacred days or eating to be that important any more. Romans 14:5-6 are quoted to Messianic Believers as an indication that not only are the days one celebrates as holy inconsequential to God, but so is what one eats likewise inconsequential. Messianic Believers can choose to keep *Shabbat* and the appointed times, and eat kosher, if they want to—but it is thought that these are no longer definite requirements for His people. These are now only matters of conscience that are to be left up to individual choice. Unfortunately, though, rather than letting Messianic Believers keep *Shabbat*, the appointed times, and a kosher diet without any interference or harassment, Romans 14:5-6 are verses often used to unfairly judge those of us who keep them—quite contrary to the tenor of what(ever) Paul says.

The *NIV Study Bible* reflects the most common evangelical Christian point of view of what Romans 16:5-6 says, stating, “Some feel that this refers primarily to the Sabbath, but it is probably a reference to all the special days of the OT ceremonial law...The importance of personal conviction in disputable matters of conduct runs through this

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<sup>53</sup> For a further examination of Paul's letter to the Colossians, consult the author's article “The Message of Colossians and Philemon” and his commentary *Colossians and Philemon for the Practical Messianic*.

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passage.”<sup>54</sup> From this vantage point, the days a person regards as sacred should be open for interpretation and application. Church tradition has determined that Sunday is an acceptable “Sabbath,” and that Christmas and Easter are acceptable holidays to celebrate in place of the Torah-prescribed holidays. If a person wants to follow the Old Testament in this regard, and not the traditions of today’s Church, he or she is not to be looked down upon, but neither is it to be mandated in any way. It is all a matter of one’s personal value judgments.

If one follows this conclusion to its logical end, however, then observing modern Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter are also totally a matter of conscience, and people can choose to opt out of them if they want, not being mandated in Scripture. They do not have to go to Church on Sunday. Tuesday could be an acceptable Sabbath, independent of either the seventh or first days of the week, and if someone wanted to, Christmas could be celebrated on the Fourth of July, as opposed to December 25. Dates or seasons when religious events are commemorated do not matter, as it is all an issue of choice, as opposed to God’s prescription. Yet it is safe to surmise that many Christians would not want to celebrate Christmas in the middle of the July Summer, much less consider holidays established by Church tradition to be “optional.” They would surely frown on people who do not go to Church on Sunday, choosing to dismiss assembling together as unimportant (cf. Hebrews 10:25).

Romans 14 is one of the most ambiguous chapters of Scripture for not only today’s Messianic Bible teachers, who largely ignore it, but also some of today’s Christian commentators. Everyone can easily agree upon a cursory reading of Romans 14:1-16 that some kind of issue regarding special days and eating is being addressed—but what those things specifically were, and how they divided the Believers in Rome, is something else. It is rightfully agreed that the Apostle Paul was warning the Roman Believers—a mixed group of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers—to not be divided over minor scruples, *but that might be about all we know for sure*. Romans 14:13 issues the instructive word, “Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.”

What these things actually involved for the Roman Believers may require a closer reading of Paul’s admonishment than is commonly seen by many who encounter Romans—precisely because “opinions” (Romans 14:1) are being addressed. These opinions may concern the Law of Moses, but not as directly as some may think. C.E.B. Cranfield issues a bit of caution in his Romans commentary, “Some recent commentators have exhibited great confidence in their approach to the

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<sup>54</sup> Kenneth L. Barker, ed., et. al., *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 1768.

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interpretation of this section. This we find surprising; for it seems to us to be extremely difficult to decide with certainty what exactly the problem is with which Paul is concerned in this section.<sup>55</sup> Our examination of Romans 14:5-6 cannot be divorced from the larger context, and most especially the larger themes seen in Paul's letter. And, it might be a bit hasty to automatically conclude that the Sabbath, appointed times, and dietary laws are being specifically considered—because they are commandments laid forth in God's Torah, and not "opinions" held by human individuals.

One of the main overarching themes of the Epistle to the Romans is not only for Paul to "promote" his theology and gospel presentation—as he is planning to use Rome as a hub for ministry outreach to Spain (Romans 15:24) and will need the Roman Believers' support—but for him also to express the necessity for the Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Rome to all be united. This was in no small part complicated by the Jewish expulsion from Rome by Claudius in 49 C.E. (cf. Acts 18:2), and how the Jewish Believers were now returning to fellowships where they were no longer the dominant group of people and/or the leaders. The clash of cultures created by significant numbers of Greeks and Romans now coming to faith, caused many of them to look down on the Jewish people, who were largely not answering to the gospel as much as the nations at large were. Paul wants to assure these non-Jews that they are dependent on the salvific root of Judaism (Romans 11:17-18), and that they *rely more* on the Jews than the Jews rely on them. Paul is absolutely concerned about the unity that is required within the *ekklēsia*, and so he takes it upon himself to discuss issues that divided the Believers in Rome, and/or their sub-assemblies.

One of the main issues that could have been very divisive would have been what to eat at the various fellowship meals, as eating is the main issue addressed in Romans 14:1-16. Was the Apostolic decree being followed, should meat be served (Acts 15:20), which required a degree of kosher to be respected? Did the meat being served have its blood properly removed? Where did the meat come from: a Jewish slaughterhouse or the Roman marketplace? Even if the blood were removed from the meat, some Jewish Believers could have been highly cautious about where the meat was purchased, if the Jewish meat sources were not selling to the Believers.<sup>56</sup> Some Jewish Believers could have easily frowned on any meat from the Roman market, even if it

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<sup>55</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield, *International Critical Commentary: Romans 9-16* (London: T&T Clark, 1979), 690.

<sup>56</sup> Consult Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp 334-345, for a summary of the different options.



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were acceptable according to Biblical law, and was specially butchered for clients who were Believers.

Paul begins this vignette by contrasting the eating of meat versus only eating vegetables. He states, “Now accept the one who is weak in faith, *but* not for *the purpose of* passing judgment on his opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables *only*” (Romans 14:1-2). The issue as first seen here is not that of following the *kashrut* laws of clean and unclean, but rather of eating just vegetables and/or eating meat. The Torah does not require a person to be a vegetarian, even if there are some restrictions placed on eating meat. Yet those who have the faith to eat all, meat and vegetables, are not to pass judgment upon those who follow a vegetarian diet out of conviction. Philip F. Esler confirms how the scene depicted, is what was being served during Roman fellowship meals:

“Paul seemed to be responding to dysfunctional gatherings of the Christ-movement in Rome rather than the total isolation of one group from another. Perhaps we should imagine gatherings in a strong person’s house where there is a meal with meat and vegetables, but the weak will only eat the vegetables and are abused by the strong for doing so.”<sup>57</sup>

The one interesting clue that Paul gives about what is being eaten is, “All things indeed are clean” (Romans 14:20), the Greek term *katharos* (καθαρός) having been employed in the Septuagint to describe those animals considered ritually clean and acceptable for eating (Heb. *tahor*, טָהוֹר).<sup>58</sup> Seeing this, it would be most unlikely that the meat served at the fellowship meals fell outside the guidelines of clean and unclean animals of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. But how acceptable would the meat be for some Jewish Believers—with clean meat possibly having to come from Roman sources?

The high point of this instruction is clear: Paul does not want brethren to judge one another (Romans 14:13), as it is a relatively minor issue in comparison to other aspects of faith. But is Paul really discussing the continued validity of the Sabbath, appointed times, and kosher dietary laws, now no longer being necessary for Believers in Yeshua—or is he talking about something else? Many think that the validity of *kashrut* is the issue, because later Paul will describe how “I know and am convinced in the Lord Yeshua that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean” (Romans 14:14). Yet there is a significant translation issue with this verse, because the flesh of animals that is declared “unclean” in the Torah is not in view.

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<sup>57</sup> Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul’s Letter* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 350.

<sup>58</sup> Genesis 7:2-3, 8; 8:20; Leviticus 4:12; 6:11; 7:19; Ezra 6:20; cf. Moo, *Romans*, 860 fn#63.

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Almost all Bible versions read with “unclean” in Romans 14:14. The Hebrew word rendered as “unclean” in the food lists of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 is *tamei* (טָמֵא), employed in direct relation to “ceremonially unclean animals” (HALOT).<sup>59</sup> In the LXX, *tamei* was rendered by the Greek word *akathartos* (ἀκάθαρτος), “*impure, unclean,*” specifically “of foods” (BDAG).<sup>60</sup> *Akathartos* does not appear in Romans 14:14, and the rendering of “unclean” is inaccurate. The Greek word that appears instead is *koinos* (κοινός), “This word means ‘common’...in the sense of common ownership, property, ideas, etc” (TDNT).<sup>61</sup> *Koinos* relates “to being of little value because of being common, common, ordinary, profane,” and can concern “that which ordinary people eat, in contrast to those of more refined tastes” (BDAG).<sup>62</sup>

*Koinos* is employed in the Apocrypha where “swine and unclean animals” (1 Maccabees 1:47) were sacrificed in the Temple precincts. Yet these *ktēnē koina* (κτῆνη κοινά), in addition to the swine, were likely Biblically clean animals sacrificed by the Seleucid Greeks, but not at all being *tamim* (טָמִים) or fit for sacrifice in God’s holy place.<sup>63</sup> Although being pagans they did sacrifice pigs, traditional Greco-Roman religion did use Biblically clean, albeit common, animals in their sacrifices as well. Similarly, a Greco-Roman diet would have involved the eating of cattle, sheep, goats, and various fowl, which are listed as “clean” on the food lists of the Torah.

The LITV renders *koinos* properly with “common,” noting the careful nuances communicated in Paul’s instruction to the Roman Believers:

“I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing by itself is common; except to the one deeming anything to be common, it is common” (Romans 14:14, LITV).

“Common food,” possibly served at some of the fellowship meals, would not be the same as “unclean ‘food’” (which itself is an oxymoron as God does not consider “unclean food” to be food). “Common food” would include those things that are Biblically clean, but perhaps were considered inedible by a highly conservative sector of Jewish Believers in Rome.<sup>64</sup> Paul instructs the “strong” Roman Believers that they are not to put any of the “weak” Roman Believers down for abstaining from such meat at fellowship gatherings. We can safely assume, especially

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<sup>59</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 1:376.

<sup>60</sup> BDAG, 34.

<sup>61</sup> F. Hauck, “*koinós*,” in TDNT, 447.

<sup>62</sup> BDAG, 552.

<sup>63</sup> I.e., Exodus 12:5; Leviticus 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6, 9, etc.

<sup>64</sup> Such “common food” today would be Biblically clean meats, but meats that would probably not have a Rabbinical stamp of approval on them.

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given the orientation of meat as prescribed by the Apostolic decree, that the meat was that of Biblically-clean animals, yet something has arisen because certain people are not going to eat the meat. If the meat were butchered properly with the blood removed, but if it came from a Roman meat source, the “weak” could have chosen not to eat it. Paul instructs how *they are not to be looked down upon*, because they hold to such a conviction.

Paul’s discussion here concerns “disputable matters” (Romans 14:1, NIV). Unless we are prepared to discount Paul’s previous word about Believers upholding God’s Torah in Messiah (Romans 3:31), this would involve issues for which there was no definite Biblical solution, unlike the flesh of animals that was definitively declared “unclean” in the Torah (*tamei/akathartos*). Noting that opinions or disputable matters is the issue (Romans 14:1),<sup>65</sup> Stern comments, “Where Scripture gives a clear word, personal opinion must give way. But where the Word of God is subject to various possible interpretations, let each be persuaded in his own mind.”<sup>66</sup> Romans 14 discusses such *halachic* opinions between conservative Jewish Believers and the more moderate non-Jewish Believers. Hegg further concludes,

“This in itself should...put to rest the notion that Paul is discussing issues of Sabbath and kosher food laws, for though in our times these might be considered matters of ‘opinion,’ they surely could not have been so construed in Paul’s day. What must fall under the category of ‘opinions’ are those things for which both sides could equally be considered righteous and worthy.”<sup>67</sup>

What a person eats—especially at fellowship meals—is ultimately not as important as being united in the love and hope of the gospel. *We are to be identified as changed people by the work of the Lord within us*. In this light, eating is a relatively minor matter, even if **all of the food available to be eaten is clean or “kosher,”** because there are other things that are far more important in the Kingdom of God. Paul says, “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). “Drinking” is also added to the mix here, and it is notable that we consider how the Torah includes no general prohibition on consuming alcohol as a part of normal life. Many, however, could easily have held to the opinion that drinking alcohol was not for them.

Paul himself would have had no problem eating any of the “common” food served at the Roman fellowship meals, but he strongly

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<sup>65</sup> Grk. *dialogismos* (διαλογισμός); “content of reasoning or conclusion reached through use of reason, *thought, opinion, reasoning, design*” (BDAG, 232).

<sup>66</sup> Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, pp 434-435.

<sup>67</sup> Tim Hegg, *Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, Volume 2: Chapters 9-16* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2007), 408.

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warned against those who considered themselves “strong,” who looked down upon the “weak,” who would not eat their meat out of personal conviction. Such unnecessary judgment could only cause problems for the *ekklēsia*.

Within this discussion of eating (Romans 14:1-2 and 14-17), as Moo indicates, “Paul interrupts his theological argument to cite another point,”<sup>68</sup> and so he discusses the secondary issue of sacred days, to show the supposed “strong” why they should not be looking down upon those they considered “weak.” But does his discussion about eating meat get interrupted with the statements about sacred days in v. 3 or v. 4, or even v. 5? Paul’s instruction simply details how there is to be no judgment taking place between the Believers in Rome:

“The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand” (Romans 14:3-4).

The issue that I would like to raise is whether vs. 3-4 are a continuation of the remarks made in vs. 1-2, or if they help to introduce the statements about sacred days in vs. 5-6. V. 3 employs the participles *esthion* (ἐσθίων) and *mē esthion* (μὴ ἐσθίων), referring to the “eater” and “non-eater.” Is this referring to a person who eats all, and one who does not eat all at the fellowship meals—or a person who eats, versus one who does not eat or fasts? Does this relate to the actions described in vs. 1-2 preceding about meals involving meat and vegetables, or the actions following in vs. 5-6 about sacred days and eating/not eating?

Paul wants the non-Jewish Believers in Rome to be very sensitive to some distinct Jewish needs. Vs. 1-2 lay out the general principle of not looking down on those who do not eat everything at the fellowship meals. Vs. 3-4, however, raise the stakes on looking down on some of the sensitivities of these Jewish Believers. These are people who are convicted in their hearts that what they are doing is right before the Lord. While both are to respect the others’ opinion, Paul specifically wants the non-Jewish Believers to know, “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand” (Romans 14:4, NIV). All are certainly servants of the Lord, but *only to the Lord* are individuals ultimately accountable for their opinions—not flawed human beings.

Asserting that both the “weak” and “strong” will answer to the same God for their convictions or opinions, Paul issues his instruction about sacred days:

“One person regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He

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<sup>68</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 841.

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who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God" (Romans 14:5-6).

The Lord is honored by those who consider certain days special, and those who consider all days alike. The eater (*esthiōn*) thanks Him, and the non-eater (*mē esthiōn*) thanks Him.<sup>69</sup> So, a majority of commentators extrapolate this and conclude that the Sabbath, appointed times, and dietary laws are now, at most, just a matter of choice (for Jewish Believers in Yeshua).<sup>70</sup> It is asserted that God accepts those who keep these Torah rituals, but He also accepts those who do not. We should probably pause here for a moment and take a look at two commentators who hold to this view, should any evangelical Christian reading this have ever looked down upon a Messianic Jew or a Messianic non-Jew, who is convicted of the Lord that these practices are indeed for today:

- Douglas J. Moo: "The believer who sets aside certain days...or who observes the Sabbath, does so because he or she sincerely believes this honors the Lord. Similarly, both the believer who eats anything without discrimination and the believer who refuses to eat certain things 'gives thanks' to God at their mealtimes and are motivated in their respective practices by a desire to glorify the Lord."<sup>71</sup>
- Ben Witherington III: "The attitude expressed here is much like that expressed by John Wesley and others: in essentials unity, in non-essentials one thinks and lets think, all in all things charity and love. While Paul believes in persuasion and in imperatives, he also believes in allowing people the freedom to make up their minds on a host of things, so long as it is within the realm of what could reasonably be said to be in accord with the will of God..."<sup>72</sup>

While neither one of these theologians thinks that keeping the seventh-day Sabbath or dietary laws is necessary for today—I do not think that they would look down with resentment or harsh judgment toward those who do. They would consider it an issue of personal choice and preference, and hopefully wish Messianics the best in their

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<sup>69</sup> Note how the NIV adds "meat" to v. 6: "He who eats meat, eats to the Lord." However, *kreas* (κρέας) only appears later in v. 21.

<sup>70</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), pp 231-232; James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans* 9-16, Vol 38b (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), pp 804-807; Moo, *Romans*, pp 841-843.

<sup>71</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 843.

<sup>72</sup> Witherington, *Romans*, 336.

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trying to honor the Lord. This does not mean that there are not Christians who look down with disdain at Messianics, because there are. And, much of this is reciprocated with some disdain toward Christians on the Messianic end, which is equally wrong and reprehensible, and needs to be remedied by Messianics who encourage their fellow Believers to change via a positive testimony.

**The challenge we have to consider is what Romans 14:5-6 meant to the Romans.** While it is easy to just jump ahead and automatically conclude that the Sabbath, appointed times, and kosher are being discussed—this may be a little too convenient. While a Jewish orientation of things being eaten and sacred days is certain, it concerns matters of disputable *halachah*. N.T. Wright, one of today's leading Pauline scholars, points out how "It is interesting...that he does not refer to the sabbath explicitly."<sup>73</sup> Moo also has to indicate how "Whether the specific point at issue was the observance of the great Jewish festivals, regular days of fasting, or the Sabbath is difficult to say."<sup>74</sup> Indeed, there is no mention at all of the word "Sabbath" (Grk. *sabbaton*, σάββατον) in the Epistle to the Romans, much less in ch. 14! James R. Edwards makes a valid observation, stating, "Paul leaves *day* undefined, perhaps out of deference to the arguing parties. It may refer to Jewish fast days (Monday, Thursday)."<sup>75</sup>

Are the days that some Jewish Believers might regard as being a bit "more sacred than another" (Romans 14:5, NIV) some kind of fast days? Both observing special days and eating or not eating, are tied together, which means that fast days are definitely within the window of possibilities. V. 6 compares and contrasts the eater (*esthiōn*) and the non-eater (*mē esthiōn*), which could easily be viewed as one who eats on a day considered very special to some people, where those people do not eat, or fast:

"The one minding the day, he minds it to the Lord. And the one not minding the day, he does not mind it to the Lord. The one eating, he eats to the Lord; for he gives thanks to God. And the one not eating, he does not eat to the Lord, and gives thanks to God" (Romans 14:6, LITV).

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<sup>73</sup> N.T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans," in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 10:736.

<sup>74</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 84.

He does, however, conclude "we would expect that the Sabbath, at least, would be involved."

<sup>75</sup> James R. Edwards, "Romans," in *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 2030.

John Reumann similarly notes how this could be "the sabbath or holy days for fasting or feasting" ("Romans," in James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 1308), indicating the range of possibilities in the sacred days mentioned.

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Hegg summarizes how “Paul...kept the Sabbath (Acts 17:2) and walked strictly according to the Torah (Acts 21:24)....[I]t is unthinkable that with such a passing statement Paul could abolish a Torah commandment that was one of the central issues in his day. And all without even the slightest hint or backlash! If Paul had taught that the Sabbath was no longer viable, this would have been added to the offenses his opponents listed against him...”<sup>76</sup>

So indeed, if some kind of optional fast days are the issue in Romans 14:5-6, as both Hegg<sup>77</sup> and I conclude, they would have been some serious opinions and convictions for which any non-Jewish Believer in Rome would have needed to be highly sensitive to his or her fellow Jewish Believers. When considering what they could have included, these fast days **would have been far more serious to consider than the vegetables and/or meat served at fellowship meals.**

The only Biblical time God’s people are explicitly commanded to fast is on *Yom Kippur*. Leviticus 23:27 specifies, “On exactly the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be a holy convocation for you, and you shall humble your souls.” It is clearly identified in Acts 27:9 as “the fast.” However, other than references in the Scriptures to *Yom Kippur*, there is not very much more that the Bible has to say about fasting—even though fasting can be a very beneficial spiritual procedure. Fasting on certain days are often times when each individual must be convinced in his or her own mind. Fasting is often a matter solely of individual choice and spiritual conviction, from which one can clearly benefit.

The tradition of “Monday and Thursday are set aside for public fasts” (t.*Ta’anit* 2:4)<sup>78</sup> was established in Second Temple Judaism, because fasting was largely prohibited for the Sabbath and festivals (b.*Eruvin* 41a). The more likely, more serious days of fasting to be considered, though, were some fixed fast days established by the Jews who returned from the Babylonian exile, established to remember important events in Jewish history. Jacob Milgrom summarizes,

“Fixed fast days are first mentioned by the post-Exilic prophet Zechariah who proclaims the word of the Lord thus: ‘The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth...’ (Zech. 8:19; cf. 7:3, 5). Jewish tradition has it that these fasts commemorate the critical events which culminated in the destruction of the Temple: the tenth of Tevet (the tenth month), the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem; the 17th of Tammuz (the fourth month), the breaching of the walls; the ninth of Av (the fifth month), when the

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<sup>76</sup> Tim Hegg, *It is Often Said*, 2 vols. (Littleton, CO: First Fruits of Zion, 2003), 1:18.

<sup>77</sup> Hegg, *Romans Vol. 2*, pp 416-417.

<sup>78</sup> Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Tosefta: Translated from the Hebrew With a New Introduction*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 1:625.

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Temple was destroyed; and the third of Tishri (the seventh month), when Gedaliah, the Babylonian-appointed governor of Judah, was assassinated" (EJ).<sup>79</sup>

If these are the days remembered by the one who does not eat in Romans 14:6, then the sensitivity that the “strong” would have to demonstrate toward the “weak” is definitely intensified. Keeping these fasts would be something that was entirely optional as far as one’s faith practice was concerned. Yet remembering the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, by fasting and entreating the Lord for such events never to happen again, are worthy things to reflect upon—still largely observed in Judaism today. They may not be required, *per se*, but no mature Believer would ever in his or her right mind look with disdain upon others who are convicted that these times are worthy moments to abstain from food and pray before God. *They are high convictions deserving of respect.*

Viewing the sacred days of Romans 14:5-6 as fast days observed by many of the Jewish Believers in Rome, the Apostle Paul was very clear on how these things are done as unto the Lord. His instruction is quite clear to those who would look down with any disdain on those who would treat these times as being serious:

“For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Messiah died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, ‘AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD’ [Isaiah 45:23]. So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way” (Romans 14:7-13).

Paul is much more serious about the issue of those who observe certain days as sacred, not choosing to eat on them—then over what the Roman Believers eat or do not eat at their fellowship meals, mentioning how we both live and die for the Lord. Many of the Jewish Believers in Rome would have considered fast days like the Ninth of Av, for example, to be very important times of spiritual intercession and prayer, so that great catastrophe never befell the Jewish people again. The non-Jewish Believers, perhaps not having that close a connection to the Temple in Jerusalem, should certainly have not frowned upon them remembering the destruction of the First Temple via a fast, as they too

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<sup>79</sup> Jacob Milgrom, “Fasting and Fast Days,” in Encyclopaedia Judaica. MS Windows 9x. Brooklyn: Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd, 1997.



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were a part of the community of Israel. They may have not felt the compulsion to fast themselves, but if they were mature Believers they would have understood its importance. (Evangelical Christians today are certainly very sensitive to Jews and Messianic Jews who observe the Ninth of Av, even if they do not similarly fast.)

And so if the non-Jewish Believers in Rome would not look down on their fellow Jewish Believers for remembering some of these extra fast days—why would they criticize any Jewish Believers for not necessarily eating the meat available at some of their fellowship gatherings? What one chooses to eat, especially if food is being passed around at a table, or is laid out in a buffet, is entirely one's personal preference. If you are not going to judge a brother or sister for a major matter, why would you judge a brother or sister on a much smaller matter? If a non-Jewish Believer chooses to be unfair to a Jewish Believer over what is eaten at a fellowship meal, what could that communicate to the same Jewish Believer's other actions of faith? The Apostle Paul says,

“Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another” (Romans 14:13, NRSV).

Harsh judgment of other people, by putting unnecessary stumbling blocks in front of others, is somewhat tantamount to appropriating a job that only God Himself has. The Lord is the only One who can fairly judge a person, so the so-called “strong” judging the presumed “weak” in Rome needed to stop. What Paul described as dividing them were disputable opinions (Romans 14:1), to which each person will individually answer before Him.

Paul returns to the original issue, after making some points by talking about sacred days and not eating/fasting, and states what his opinion is on what is eaten in the fellowship meals:

“I know and am convinced in the Lord Yeshua that nothing is [common/*koinos*] in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be [common/*koinos*], to him it is [common/*koinos*]. For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Messiah died. Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:14-17).

The Apostle Paul himself was not going to have a problem with what the Roman Believers might serve him when he comes to visit at their fellowship meals. If the Apostolic decree was being followed (Acts 15:20), even if the meat they served was from Roman sources—being “common”—such a status of being “common” is a disputable opinion. Yet Paul is very clear to emphasize to the Romans: those who eat such meat are not to use it as a tool to ruin other Believers. Yeshua the

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Messiah died for the so-called “weak” Believers, who eat vegetarian, as much as He did everyone else, who might (arrogantly) consider themselves “strong.” The Roman Believers needed to understand how “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17) are what are to make God’s people different—far more than food. When this is the proper emphasis, than the people that God has made us to be can be realized:

“For he who in this *way* serves Messiah is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another” (Romans 14:18-19).

In closing up this vignette over the fellowship meals in Rome, Paul instructs,

“Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to *do anything* by which your brother stumbles” (Romans 14:20-21).

Paul affirms that whatever was being served at the fellowship meals among the Roman Believers was clean (*katharos*) by Biblical standards, but a person who uses the food with the intention of being an offense—because it might be “common” to some—commits evil. Rather than being an offense, it might be better to just not eat meat, drink wine, or make a huge issue out of something small, but large enough to cause another to stumble. Understanding the more conservative dietary opinions of some of the Jewish Believers in Rome, and the required sensitivity that the non-Jewish Believers should have had toward fast days, should enable these “strong” to restrict themselves in disputable matters should the situation require it. The issues are just not big enough to require any (more) significant divisions in the *ekklēsia*. In the words of James D.G. Dunn,

“Paul lays out the principle of self-restricted liberty in the most far-reaching terms: what applies to eating meat and drinking wine applies also to *anything* which causes a fellow believer to stumble and fall on his or her own pathway of discipleship.”<sup>80</sup>

There were Jewish Believers in Rome, having returned after the expulsion of Claudius, who were going to have to get used to themselves being the minority. The non-Jewish Believers were not to complicate this due to disputable issues.

In the closing words of Romans 14, Paul finishes this instruction with a reminder on the individual’s responsibility over the disputable matters of eating common meat, and sacred days of fasting:

“The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

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<sup>80</sup> Dunn, *Romans* 9-16, 833.

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But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because *his eating is not from faith*; and whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:22-23).

When we decide to consider the background issues behind the whole of Romans 14, is it really about things like the Sabbath, appointed times, and even the kosher dietary laws now being issues of personal choice? Or, does it concern unnecessary divisions the Roman Believers were having at fellowship meals, and how if some Jewish Believers who fast on certain days were not to be criticized over their severity—why would anyone criticize some of them over the much more minor issue of not eating “common” meat? Too many of today’s Christian readers of Romans 14 forget that a mixed grouping of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, in First Century Rome, is being addressed. They also forget that the religious and social climate of that ancient time and setting is not the same as today.

The contemporary application can very much be seen in the spiritual and social dynamics of today’s Messianic congregations. There are many Messianic Believers who are hyper-sensitive about the type of meat they eat. They will not eat clean meat unless it has a Rabbinical seal of approval on it, whereas at many Messianic congregations or homes more common meat from the local supermarket is served during fellowship times. This is the meat of Biblically clean animals, where the blood has been drained and soaked out with saltwater. But, the opinion of some is that it is too common, and that they will instead eat around. These are largely the same Messianic Believers who will be more prone to observe the many extra-Biblical fast days of Orthodox Jewish tradition, being convicted that it is helpful in their relationship with God.

The circumstances, that Romans 14 really does describe, are encountered in today’s Messianic congregations all the time. How are we to handle them? Like Paul, I would eat at someone’s table where “common,” albeit Biblically clean meat, was being served, without any problem. As a teacher and spiritual mentor to many, just like Paul who served the Lord (cf. Romans 14:14a), I do not have the luxury of staying secluded to myself, in a protected environment where everything has to be certified “kosher”; I have to interact with the world at large. Yet I would be sensitive to the needs of those who are more cautious with what meat they eat. I would not at all look down upon certain Messianics who would not eat meat without a Rabbinical seal of approval, any more than I would look down upon them for not eating on various extra-Biblical fast days. I would pray that in their level of observance that they be blessed for their honoring of the Lord, and that I not unnecessarily offend them for their convictions.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> For a further discussion, consult the author’s article “How Do We Properly Keep Kosher?”

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Many of today's evangelical Christians will be unable to consider this perspective of Romans 14. This is partially because resting on the Sabbath (much less observing the appointed times) has lost most of the significance it had for previous generations, including that of my parents—even if those previous generations of Christians kept a rigid “Sunday Sabbath.” But most significantly, it is because the Christian Church of the Twenty-First Century is not the mixed body of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers as the *ekklesia* of the First Century. Yet, Romans 14 does speak profoundly to the circumstances that many of today's Messianic congregations must work through—and so we must take important notice of Paul's word to the Romans, and not be unnecessarily divided over what are ultimately disputable matters. We must learn to uphold the Torah's instruction in Messiah (Romans 3:31), but similarly give grace to those who hold to different applications of it in terms of things like eating and fast days.<sup>82</sup>

In our efforts to keep *Shabbat*, the appointed times, and dietary laws—let us also not find ourselves unfairly judging our Christian brothers and sisters who do not keep them at present. Let us invite them to participate in them with us—as we are surely remembering these things as unto the Lord! Let us welcome them into our homes and congregations to experience His blessings!

### What are we to do?

The interpretations that we have just considered of Galatians 4:9-11, Colossians 2:16-17, and Romans 14:5-6 will likely not be too popular in some parts of today's Christian community. These views do challenge some widely held opinions, but most especially they assert that many of today's evangelical Believers have not read these verses closely enough for what they meant to their original audiences. Are the appointed times really discounted in these verses as being important to Believers? Or are the misuse of the appointed times in false philosophy and pagan-influenced Judaism, and *halachic* matters regarding special fast days not explicitly required by the Torah, what compose Paul's original instruction?

When these verses are read a bit more carefully, for more than just sound bytes taken out of context, we are confronted with the reality that the Lord's appointed times were not annulled in the Apostolic Scriptures. They can easily be misused by various religious systems totally forgetting what their significance is as depicting God's plan of salvation history. And sadly, many people who keep the appointed times, and many people who do not keep the appointed times—often unfairly judge and criticize the other. Today's Messianic community

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<sup>82</sup> For a further examination, consult the author's article “The Message of Romans.”

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needs to get beyond this, and needs to learn to become a voice of reason that can encourage all of God's people to take a hold of what the *moedim* represent for us who know Yeshua as Savior. These are not to be times of the year where we beat people over the head, or look down on others, but where we entreat the Lord to reveal Himself to us!

The Galatians were returning to practices not of God; the appointed times of the Torah *are* of God. The Colossians were being persuaded by an errant Gnosticized-Jewish philosophy against the Divinity of Yeshua that had hijacked Biblical practices as a part of its asceticism; they are told not to let the false teachers judge them because they see the Sabbath and appointed times differently, the Messiah being their substance. The Believers in Rome were told not to look down on others in the faith who chose to regard some days as sacred, choosing not to eat, because this is a matter of personal opinion; keeping the Sabbath and appointed times are commandments of God and are not human opinions.

The Biblical appointed times of the Torah in Leviticus 23 are things of the Lord and they are important for His people to observe—even more so as the Messiah's return draws near. They provide us every year with new insights as to how He will return, and the prophetic pattern that our Creator has set for the universe. They allow us significant opportunities to pause, and consider His plan for the ages. Most importantly they serve as important seasons that allow us to reflect on our spiritual standing before Him.

What are those of us who are Messianic to do about Christians who tell us that the Biblical holidays are no longer for us today? *They might not be willing to hear this exegesis of Galatians 4:9-11, Colossians 2:16-17, and Romans 14:5-6.* So, we must demonstrate by our praxis of faith—our faith lived out in the world—that celebrating the Lord's appointed times brings great blessings, spiritual insight, and above all enables us to express His love in unique ways.

Many Christians speak against the appointed times of God and do not know what they are speaking against. People such as these, sadly, often look down on us for obeying Biblical commandments that Messiah Yeshua likewise obeyed. In so doing, these people will reveal themselves to be, at the very least, immature in their spiritual walk. **They require our prayers;** they do not need mean-spirited criticism.

We need to take the higher road and not embroil ourselves in endless controversies with people such as these. We have to demonstrate to them that we are spiritually mature. Let God be the Judge of them if they do not share the convictions that we share. He as the Almighty Creator can certainly handle them better than we can. But let us also pray that these people will indeed repent and ask for forgiveness if they have wronged us. *And when that time comes, let us eagerly forgive them!* In the meantime, however, when criticized we

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need to be willing—through the power of the Holy Spirit—to forget it and move forward.

Many Christians do not judge Messianics at all for celebrating the Lord's appointed times, whether it be Messianic Jews honoring their heritage or non-Jews appreciating their Hebraic Roots. They are intrigued by them, and see some importance in them, but they just do not fully understand why we celebrate them and do not observe the holidays of Church tradition. In time, I believe that those loving evangelical Believers, who believe in fully following Scripture—not too dissimilar from my late father who brought the Passover into our Methodist Church—will be wooed by the Holy Spirit as we have. They will partake of the goodness of realizing the importance that the Lord's appointed times have for us, and will be convicted to keep them.

On the whole, we have much to look forward to, but helping others see the truth begins with us demonstrating a positive example, and not one of condemnation.