

Miketz **At The End Of** **The Tables Are Turned**

Torah: Genesis 44:1-44:17

Haftarah: I Kings 3:15-4:1

Brit Chadashah: Matthew 27:15-46

We are not told precisely how long Joseph was in Potiphar's house or how long he was in prison before the cup bearer and the chief baker were incarcerated. But we are told that Joseph was 30 when he was presented to Pharaoh, so he already spent 13 years in Egypt. At the end of the seven years of abundance, Joseph would have been 37. He spent 20 years in Egypt before his brothers journeyed to Egypt to buy grain. It was some two years after Joseph helped the cup bearer and the chief baker that his fortunes changed and that his prophetic dreams began to be fulfilled.

He took a risk by interpreting Pharaoh's dream. If he was wrong, he faced the death penalty. Pharaoh's other spiritual advisors did not want to risk their lives by making up a meaning for the two dreams. Joseph had already proven himself in both Potiphar's house and in the prison. Over the years Egypt had at least 48 different dynasties, and this Pharaoh was not sure who to trust, so he appointed Joseph to be his prime minister. If his plans did not work, Joseph could be used as a scapegoat.

Joseph went to work right away and during the seven good years, he gathered so much grain, that the Egyptians ran out of numbers for the counting. They did not possess the concept of zero, which allows us to count to infinity and never run out of numbers. Usually, Egypt was not impacted by the lack of rain and could always rely on the water of Nile, both for drinking water and for irrigation. If the sources of the Nile did not get rain, the river would not flood and it could not be used for irrigation.

The famine affected most of the Middle East and it was worse than the famines that occurred during the lives of Abraham and Isaac. Seven years is a long time to survive multiple crop failures, especially for a grain based diet. Domestic animals had to be fed and the possibility of losing most of their flocks and herds would be a sad blow, especially for shepherds. When it became known that there was grain for sale in Egypt, Jacob sent ten of his sons to go and buy some. They went together for protection, so the grain could not be stolen on the way home.

Joseph supervised the sale of the grain and he sold it first to the Egyptians and then to the foreigners who came for relief when their grain supplies were exhausted. When Joseph saw his brothers and when they bowed down before him, he remembered his dreams and decided that it was time for a little pay back.

He got them to speak about their extended families. He accused them of being spies who were sent to discover weaknesses in Egypt in preparation for an invasion. When an invasion succeeded in conquering Egypt, the entire royal family was slaughtered, along with any nobles who supported them. Many other countries may have had designs on Egypt and her supply of grain.

He arrested them and put them in prison for three days and then put them to the test. One of them was to remain behind as a hostage until they brought their youngest brother to Joseph. He selected Simeon, who was chained before them, but we are not told which prison he was put in. Joseph also had their money placed at the entrance of their grain sacks and when it was discovered they asked what G-d had done to them.

When they return to their father, Jacob, he refuses to send Benjamin with them and considers Simeon lost. He thought he only had ten living sons because Simeon would likely be killed when his brothers did not come back with Benjamin. Reuben was losing his position of leadership and says that if Jacob releases Benjamin into his care and something happens to him, Jacob could kill Reuben's two sons.

Jacob of course refuses and when the grain they had brought was used up, he wants the brothers to go and buy some more. Judah reasons with his father and comes up with a better solution than Reuben did. He said that if anything happened to Benjamin that he would forever be guilty and that if Jacob had not been stalling, that they could have been back twice. Jacob realizes that he has no choice, unless he wanted to see his family starve and see his flocks destroyed.

They take back the money which Joseph had ordered to be put in their sacks and Benjamin goes with them. While they are feasting, Joseph orders their money to be placed in the front of their sacks, along with Joseph's divining cup. Judah pleads innocence, but once again Joseph has out manoeuvred them. They rashly say that anyone who has the cup will die and that remaining brothers would become Joseph's slaves. When the cup is found in Benjamin's sack, he decides not to execute Benjamin, but to keep him as his slave.. Their only recourse was to plead for mercy, which Judah does in the next portion.

The issue of him using divination is not discussed, but it may have been a ruse by Joseph to convince the superstitious Egyptians that his ability to interpret dreams came from a source they were familiar with. He is making his brothers experience a little of the panic and despair he felt when he was sold as a slave and taken to Egypt. YHVH will always eventually make the tables turn, but how will you live until this happens in your life? And if the tables never turn, will you still walk with YHVH in faith and obedience? We serve the almighty table turner.

Sermon: First Winter Series: Yeshua was Born When the Time was Right

As I deal with the Messianic Jewish origin of Christmas, it is important to admit that the actual date is not as important the fact of His birth. Many feel that December 25th was a pagan date and that the Messiah was either born in the summer or during the festival of Sukkoth. First of all, in order to have a regular supply of sacrificial animals year round, special sheep were kept grazing through the winter, under the Care of shepherds who were also Aaronites.

Next, Yeshua could not have been born during the festival of Sukkoth because if he were, his parents would have travelled to Jerusalem and He would have been born in a Sukkah and not in a stable. The census also had to be taken between the festival of Sukkoth and Passover, so as not to interfere with the Festival Cycle. Chanukah and Purim are not part of the biblical festival cycle, so the census could be taken even if it interfered with either of these festivals. So who established the currently accepted date for Christmas?

I like to read the scholarly works of Alfred Edersheim, who lived in the 1800's and was a Jew who converted and became a Presbyterian. He wrote an amazing book, called the Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah. Almost every aspect of Yeshua's life is examined, along with the historical context of the time. My copy of this book has some 1,700 pages and while I have read sections of it, there are still parts I want to read.

When Mr. Edersheim was speaking about the date of Messiah's birth, he points out that Jews came to believe that Messiah would be born on one of the three fasts related to the destruction of the first temple. On the tenth of Tevet (December, January) the final siege by the Babylonians began. On the 17th of Tammuz (July), the walls of Jerusalem were finally breached. On the 9th of Av (August), the holy temple was burned and all of its treasure was taken.

Now the 10th of Tevet coincides with December 25th, several times a century. When Julius Caesar forced his modified calendar on the empire, the 10th of Tevet may have coincided more with the 25th of December than in our modern calendars. Before the Hebrew calendar was standardized, years were remembered by important events which occurred that year. The census which Augustus Caesar mandated, the Roman province of Syria was under the jurisdiction of a man known as Quirinius.

History does not tell us exactly when the census started, but under Herod, he would not have counted the people in a village or town until of of its people returned to the place of their birth. Mary and Joseph arrived just in time for Yeshua to be born. Because of the census, there was no room in the Inn.

By the time the Magi (wisemen) arrive, the family is staying at the Inn, so it is likely that the census was completed. Much of the information about the Messiah's birth is found in the first two chapters of both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke, but why was the actual date of His birth not given?

Neither our modern calendar nor the standardized Hebrew calendar, existed the year Messiah was born, so people remembered dates by the events which occurred during that time.. People would have known when the census was taken and when Quirinius was governor of the Roman province of Syria. The authors of all four Gospels were Jewish and both in Matthew and Luke, birth narratives were given and likely read when the early Messianic shuls celebrated Messiah's birth.

The history of how the Gentile church is a story of persecution of the Jews, but the early church was not like that. The Messianic community started out as almost entirely Jewish and the first Gentile converts were well treated and not required to convert. Judaism has gone through many changes since the days when Messiah walked among us and even though there were many competing versions the faith which came down to us through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Gentiles were becoming Jews in their thousands.

When Gentiles became believers and joined Messianic congregations, while they were not required to convert, they had to avoid all forms of paganism and fornication (Acts 15:29). They would have kept the Sabbath because this observance is found in the Ten Commandments. These Gentile believers would have also observed at least two Jewish Festivals: Christmas and Passover. In the Book of Acts we find the early Messianic Jewish community in Jerusalem participating in temple worship. We are not told whether Gentile converts joined the Messianic Jews in temple worship.

We know that there was a sign on the gates which led to the temple proper, warning Gentiles that they were not allowed in. They could have gathered in the huge court of the Gentiles, but there were any number of synagogues in every area of the Roman Empire. Gentile converts would have joined Messianic Jewish synagogues and Jewish and Gentile believers worshipped together until Judaism lost its special status.

Then, congregations with a large Gentile membership broke with Judaism and even started worshipping on Sunday, the Roman day of rest. They did take with them Both Christmas and Passover and they had access to all or part of the Torah and the apostolic documents which were circulating at that time. They wrongly turned on their Messianic Jewish fellow believers and eventually severed any link between Christmas and Judaism.

Their celebration of Passover centred around both the Last Supper, which originally was a full Seder Meal and the Resurrection which occurred after three days. The Last Super was the only Jewish element which Gentile believers kept in their celebration of Passover. Some change the name, others, like the French kept it, but distinguished between Jewish and Christian Passover.

The celebration of the birth of the Messiah moved away from any connection with the 10th of Tevet and was celebrated on December 25, the Gentile date which was closest to the Tenth of Tevet. There are just as many legends and traditions which have become part of how people observe both Chanukah and Christmas. December 25th is the right date, but apart from the birth narratives, no connection with Judaism was maintained.

What should we do as Messianic Jews and Gentiles? First of all there is no strict rule that we have to celebrate Christmas on the 25th or on any other date you choose. Next, Chanukah should not be seen as being in competition with Christmas. The two celebrations recognize two entirely different sets of events. I feel privileged to be able to celebrate both, even if many Messianic believers, Jew and Gentile, choose to ignore Christmas completely. When I ask how and when they celebrate the birth of our Messiah, I haven't really received a straight answer yet.

Most of what I hear is how pagan and secular Christmas has become and many do not want to have anything to do with it. Nearly everybody in our modern western world celebrates Christmas, but fewer and fewer people do so as an expression of their faith in the Messiah. When I was growing up, Christmas was all about presents, fancy food and maybe the occasional carol. We never went to church and one year my father wanted to escape the Christmas hype and our family spent Christmas at the Sunshine Ski resort. While many of the people staying were Gentiles, there was a big contingent of Jews as well and we all got a Christmas turkey dinner.

It was not like this in my wife's family. They read the birth narratives, gave thanks to YHVH for the Messiah and sang several devotional Christmas carols. Presents were opened one by one and even with their decorations, their faith in the Messiah was expressed. When I came to faith, 52 years ago, I kept on celebrating Christmas, but with a difference. I celebrated Christmas as the birth day of our Saviour and even attended special Christmas day services.

When I discovered that I was Jewish, I was already involved in the Messianic Movement and I did not see any problem with continuing to celebrate Christmas, even though many of my Messianic friends just ignored it.

It is true that many of the symbols used at Christmas were borrowed from pagan religions, but no one who uses them is participating in any form of pagan worship. Christmas did not come from Saturnalia, which was celebrated on December 21st. If a believer borrows from a non believing source, they must make sure that no paganism comes along with it.

In pre-Christian Germany, fir trees were set up because they were a symbol of everlasting life. They were decorated and pagan prayers were recited. When believers adopted the custom, some even put manger scenes under the tree. They are not worshipping the tree and no pagan prayers are recited. I do not set up a Christmas tree because of my allergies, but we do have a marvellous Manger scene. We have a big family meal and exchange gifts. We read the birth narratives and sing devotional carols.

There is, however, one element of Christmas that we have never embraced. Santa Claus started out as a holy man who gave poor children presents. Santa Clause is Spanish for Saint Nicolas. Though there are still many versions of what he looks like and what he does, for too many in our world, he has become the central figure of Christmas. He is said to dwell at the North Pole and on Christmas Eve, he has a special flying sleigh, drawn by flying reindeer. It is kind of creepy, but he is also said to watch children all year long to see if they are naughty or good

The first time my son saw a Santa, we were living in Montreal and an old man from the English congregation was dressed in a red suit, was handing out candy to the kids. My son was six years old and cowered behind me until I said that the old man wanted to give him some candy.

Legends have no place among believers, so we never taught our kids about a tooth fairy or about an Easter Bunny. The Messiah has always been the invisible head of our home and all and any festivals must have Him as the centre. We even want to make Him the Lord of our celebration of Canada Day and of Remembrance Day. How about you?

We are all free to choose whether or not we celebrate Christmas, but those who do not, should not judge those who do and those who do, should not judge those who do not. Paul said that anything we do that is not based on a conviction is a sin (Romans 14:23). He also said that we should all be fully persuaded in our own minds (Rom. 14:5).

I have never enjoyed the materialistic hype that our society wallows in at Christmas time. For me and mine, Christmas is a celebration of the Messiah's birth, as it is recorded by two Jews, Matthew and Luke. May you all have a blessed holiday season, whether or not you observe Christmas. As we bring our service to an end, let's read the first 20 verses of Luke Chapter Two. Shabbat Shalom and Shavua Tov, campers. And maybe even, Merry Christmas?