

# **REDISCOVERING THE LOST MESSIANIC WORLD**

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When we think about lost worlds, the Jurassic Park movies come to mind. Or it might be the legendary but unconfirmed world of Atlantis, or the indigenous tribe called the Nephites that the book of Mormon claims to have existed, although there is no archaeological evidence to back it up. However there is one culture that actually existed but has been relegated considerably to the same imaginary realm of Hollywood, mythology and false religions. It is the existence of believers in Yeshua who lived Torah-observant lives after the death and resurrection of Yeshua. It is a story that is mostly unknown today.

## **The message of Yeshua**

Imagine that you are one of the people following Yeshua, listening to His teachings and observing His example. And one day, as you are sitting on a hillside above the Sea of Galilee, you hear Him say:

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Torah or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Torah, until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” (Mat 5:17-19)

In this passage known as the Sermon on the Mount, Yeshua used a term translated as “fulfill” but the Greek word in the original Scripture, πληρόω (*pleroo*), literally has the sense of something being filled to the top. Or to put it another way, Yeshua came to establish the fullness of the Torah. He would live it perfectly and thus demonstrate the purest way possible of loving God and your neighbor as yourself as the Torah requires. And He would die to it perfectly, thus satisfying the sacrificial aspects of the Torah regarding sin, never needing to be repeated again. And both of those aspects will continue for all time, “until heaven and earth pass away” as He expressed it. The fullness of Torah will always be found in Yeshua regarding our daily living and His death providing atonement for sin. Without question He was highly critical of the burdensome additions and distortions that the elders of Israel had piled on top of the Torah over the centuries. But at no time did Yeshua ever contradict any aspect of the Torah as it was given by Moses.

So if you were one of those people following Him in that day, what would your response be? Would you try to follow Yeshua’s example of righteous living that is consistent with God’s commandments and to acknowledge that His death satisfies God’s conditions in the Torah for sin? Or would you ignore what he declared and decide on your own that it is permissible to annul the commandments?

## The testimony of the Apostles and early believing community

What about after His death on the cross? Did that change anything? If the commandments of God as recorded in the Torah became null and void when Yeshua died on the cross, as some claim, there would be no reason for His followers to continue living and worshiping as they had done all their lives.

- Yet in Acts 2, fifty days after the resurrection of Yeshua, His disciples were in Jerusalem observing the feast of Shavuot/Pentecost (“Weeks”) just as they had done each year in the past.<sup>1</sup> These Jewish believers were right beside the rest of the Jewish people who were keeping the commandment of God when the Holy Spirit came upon them.
- In Acts 3, Peter and John followed the Jewish custom of praying three times a day—*shacharit* (morning), *minchah* (afternoon), and *ma-ariv* (evening).
- In Acts 9 the believers called themselves The Way. It is a term that relates to Yeshua’s declaration: “I am **the way**, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (John 14:6). But it is also a term with a deeper foundation. For as Moses said regarding the Torah:

“You shall observe to do just as Adonai your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right or to the left. You shall walk in all **the way** which Adonai your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may be well with you” (Deut 5:32-33).

Likewise, the Psalmist confirms: “Teach me, O LORD, **the way** of Your statutes, and I shall observe it to the end” (Ps 119:33). We also know that Yeshua taught how to live out the commandments in a pure manner, especially emphasizing the importance of loving God and loving your neighbor. So the term The Way is a reflection of being both a follower of Yeshua and remaining faithful to God’s commandments.

- At the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 the Apostles rejected the teaching that Gentiles were required to be circumcised and to adopt the Torah in order to be saved. They made it clear that salvation was by grace through faith alone. But they did require Gentile believers to observe four requirements specifically applied to Gentiles that came from the Torah in Leviticus 17-18 and would enable them to be in fellowship with Messianic Jews who were fully Torah observant.<sup>2</sup> If there ever was a time to renounce keeping God’s commandments because the Torah was null and void, the Jerusalem Council was the time to do it. But they did not rule that Torah observance was invalid for Jews. And they did not prohibit Gentiles from living a Torah observant lifestyle just like their Jewish brothers and sisters in the Lord. What they did establish was complete Torah observance was not *binding* on Gentiles. So it is important to recognize that, like Yeshua, the Torah was not abolished by the Apostles.
- In Acts 16 Paul had Timothy circumcised because he was a Jewish man who had never received the sign of the Abrahamic covenant according to the Torah (Gen 17:9-14). And later

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<sup>1</sup> Along with *Pesach* (Passover) and *Sukkot* (Tabernacles), *Shavuot* is one of the three feast that required adult males to be present in Jerusalem for observance.

<sup>2</sup> Those requirements were abstaining from things sacrificed to idols, fornication, meat that is strangled, and blood. The universal nature of the last prohibition is especially evident, for it is based on the fact that “the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Lev 17:11), which applies to all human beings, not just Jews and addresses the sanctity of life itself.

Paul would write to Timothy exhorting Him to remain faithful to the sacred writings, which at that time meant the Torah, Prophets and writings of the *Tanakh* (Old Testament).

- In Acts 18 Paul took a Nazirite vow in keeping with the commandments in Number 6 as a way of demonstrating his total dedication to God's calling, as well as continuing to identify with his Jewish heritage.
- In Acts 20 Paul rushed to get back to Jerusalem so he could observe *Shavuot*. So once again, 27 years after the Apostles observed it in Acts 2, Paul kept the commandment to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the feast..

So once again, put yourself into the shoes of the believers of that day. How would you respond? Altogether the book of Acts is very clear that Jewish believers in Yeshua continued to live their lives culturally and morally as they always had done. They never stopped being faithful to God's commandments. They kept Shabbat and observed the feasts, they kept kosher,<sup>3</sup> they loved the Lord God and their neighbors as themselves, and they showed how all of these things pointed to Yeshua. They lived as Jews and believed in the Jewish Messiah, while sharing the message of salvation with the Gentiles who otherwise would die in their sins. But while many people will acknowledge the blessing of Gentiles being included in the kingdom of God, not many will recognize the reality of the continuation of the Jewish way of life and worship throughout the New Testament era.

## The testimony of the leaders who followed the Apostles

What about the next generation of believers in Yeshua—those who came right after the Apostles? One of them, named Polycarp, was born around 69 A.D. right before the destruction of the second temple. He was a Gentile who became a believer in Yeshua as a youth, and was personally discipled by John before the Apostle was exiled on the island of Patmos. So Polycarp was taught directly by one of the Apostles who made up the inner circle of Yeshua's disciples, along with Peter and James. Later Polycarp became the bishop or head of the church in Smyrna in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey).<sup>4</sup>

One of the things that Polycarp learned from John was when to commemorate the death and resurrection of Yeshua.<sup>5</sup> He, and other leaders of believing communities in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, followed John's teaching that it should be observed on the 14th day of Nisan, the first month according to the Hebrew calendar, which was also consistent with God's instructions in Exodus 12 and Leviticus 23.

Why would John's teaching on the matter be so strong? He wasn't just the last of the Apostles to survive, and thus extended the Apostolic message the longest in terms of time. John and Peter were the ones instructed by Yeshua to prepare the Passover at the beginning of the fourteenth of day of Nisan and Yeshua would be crucified at the end of that same day (Lk 22:7-8). So for John, it was a day of great spiritual significance that he had experienced firsthand. He

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<sup>3</sup> In Acts 10 Peter received a vision in which a voice from heaven instructed him to take and eat animals that were ritually unclean. In light of the context of this chapter, we can see that Peter's vision was not actually dealing with the dietary laws of the Torah, but was used to communicate symbolically God's desire for the Gospel to be taken to the Gentiles. Moreover, there is no evidence in Scripture of any believers, including Peter, ever ceasing to eat in a kosher manner.

<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, III.3.4.

<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus, *Letter to Victor*.

then taught Polycarp and others to commemorate that holy day in the same fashion.<sup>6</sup>

Polycarp and other eastern leaders of the church called this commemoration *Pascha* in the Greek, which is derived from the Hebrew word *Pesach*, the same word usually translated as “Passover.” This understanding is significant because it shows the continuity of Messianic practices from Yeshua to the Apostles to those who followed afterward.

But church leaders at that time in the western part of the Roman Empire who had no personal contact with the Apostles, did not feel it was important to keep the holiday according to the Jewish/biblical calendar. They began observing the Resurrection on the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox.

It is important to recognize the cultural heritage of Rome that centered around observances related to the sun. In that society celebrations were common at the time of the spring equinox for fertility and later in the year at the time of the winter solstice for veneration of the sun god Sol Invictus. So the Christians in Rome were influenced by this cultural predisposition by linking the commemoration of the death and resurrection of Yeshua to the solar cycle. Evidence also shows that this change began around 135 A.D., which was the time of the Bar Kokhba rebellion of Jews against the Roman Empire.<sup>7</sup> Thus it seems likely that the leaders of churches in the western part of the empire sought to distance themselves from the Jewish people and Judaism for their own safety. By separating the commemoration of the death and resurrection of Yeshua from Passover, Christians could demonstrate their allegiance to Rome and their repudiation of “disloyal” Jews. As a result, there were two strong factors that would predispose the Roman church toward adopting a manner that departed from the biblical practice.

Anicetus, who was the head of the church of Rome, tried to persuade Polycarp to abandon his manner of observance according to the biblical calendar, but Polycarp refused because he had learned it from John.<sup>8</sup>

Sixty years passed and new leaders came on the scene. The controversy between western and eastern leaders came to a head around 195 A.D. when Victor, the new head of the church of Rome at that time, declared the practice of linking the Resurrection to the day of the Passover as being heretical. The response from the eastern churches was led by Polycrates, head of the church of Ephesus. He followed in the biblical position established by Yeshua and John and then Polycarp. Here is what he taught:

“We therefore observe the genuine day, neither adding thereto nor taking away. For in Asia great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again in the day of the Lord’s appearing, in which he will come with glory from heaven, and will raise up all the saints; Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who sleeps in Hierapolis, and his two aged virgin daughters. His other daughter also, who having lived under the influence of the Holy Ghost, now likewise rests in Ephesus. Moreover, John, who rested upon the bosom of our Lord; who also was a priest, and bore the sacerdotal plate, both a martyr and teacher. He is buried in Ephesus also Polycarp of Smyrna, both bishop and martyr. Thaseas, also bishop and martyr of Eumenia, who is buried at Smyrna. Why need I mention the bishop and martyr Sagaris who fell asleep in Laodicea, or the blessed Papirius, or Melito, the Eunuch who lived altogether in the Holy Spirit, and who lies in Sardis. . . All of these observed the

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<sup>6</sup> Another disciple of John named Papias became the bishop of Hierapolis and maintained the biblical practice commemorating the death and resurrection of Yeshua on Passover (*Adv. Haer.* V.33.4).

<sup>7</sup> *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilius*, Bk. 5, Ch. 24:11-18.

<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus, *Letter to Victor*.

fourteenth day of the Passover according to the gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith.”<sup>9</sup>

Like Polycarp who preceded him, Polycrates made the connection to the Apostle John, but also added another connection to the Apostle Philip and his daughters. Polycrates lived in the same city of Ephesus as one of those daughters and not far from the city of Hierapolis where Phillip lived and died, along with two more daughters. That meant there were ample opportunities for church leaders in the vicinity, like Polycrates, to learn their conviction directly about maintaining the biblical way, not the traditions of men, and he cites their names as well.

So put yourself in the shoes of Polycrates. Powerful church leaders who never had any connection to the actual people of the Bible, wanted to change the way things were done. But you know that people who were actually there in the days of Yeshua and the book of Acts had convictions to remain true to the way the death and resurrection of Yeshua was commemorated, and they went to their graves holding strong to those convictions. What would you do?

Polycrates held his ground. Victor, the head of the church of Rome, and now considered to be one of the Popes, still held that it was heresy. But in spite of his ruling, he let them worship just as the eastern believers had always done on the fourteenth day of Nisan.

The story was not over, however. These two different ways of commemoration in the west and the east continued for another century. But as time passed, the leaders I mentioned in the east all died and new leaders rose up who ignored the connection to the Apostles and the earliest church leaders. This set the stage for the final act in this ecclesiastical drama.

That was when Constantine became emperor of Rome in 312 A.D. Thirteen years later, in 325 A.D. he convened 318 Church leaders to Nicea in present-day Turkey. The stated purpose of the Council of Nicea was to address a heresy instigated by an Alexandrian theologian named Arius who denied the deity of Yeshua. The bishops produced a creed that clearly affirmed the long-standing belief that Yeshua was fully God and fully man. But they went even further in their actions by addressing the Passover-Easter controversy. By that time, there were no Jewish leaders present, and none who supported the biblical position. The Nicene Council unanimously declared that the Resurrection could no longer be observed in conjunction with the Passover date of Nisan 14. To do otherwise was now considered heretical. Constantine himself had this to say at the council:

“It was declared to be particularly unworthy for this, the holiest of all festivals, to follow the custom of the Jews, who had soiled their hands with the most fearful of crimes, and whose minds were blinded. In rejecting their custom, we may transmit to our descendants the legitimate mode of celebrating Easter, which we have observed from the time of the Savior’s Passion to the present day [according to the day of the week]. We ought not, therefore, to have anything in common with the Jews, for the Savior has shown us another way; our worship follows a more legitimate and more convenient course (the order of the days of the week); and consequently, in unanimously adopting this mode, we desire, dearest brethren, to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews. . . it would still be your duty not to tarnish your soul by communications with such wicked people [the Jews]. . . it is right to demand what our reason approves, and that we should have nothing in common with the Jews.”<sup>10</sup>

With their work completed and the desired result obtained, Constantine sent all of the

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<sup>9</sup> *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilius*, Bk. 5, Ch. 24:2-6.

<sup>10</sup> “Constantine’s Letter to the Churches respecting the Council of Nicea,” Eusebius, *Vita Constantini.*, Book 3, Ch. 18.

bishops home with generous gifts.

From that day forward it was decreed by church leaders that the Resurrection should be celebrated on the Sunday immediately following the full moon that occurred on or after the vernal equinox on March 21. As a result, Passover and Easter are now celebrated in the same season, and often within days of one another, but are viewed as being independent holy days. The break from biblical tradition became a new tradition that is now assumed to be the only tradition that ever existed. But the record of history shows otherwise. In this regard, the real world has become a lost world.

What followed was a systematic suppression of the Jewish foundation of Christianity. It wasn't just Passover that was repudiated. Virtually anything in the Jewish cultural practices, even if it was derived from the Bible, was purged from the church. And the manner of worship for the past 1700 years has been very different than what took place in the Bible, including the days after the cross described in the book of Acts.

Nevertheless a remnant of Messianic Jews has continued to exist. Theirs is a story that is also largely forgotten.

## The remnant of Messianic Jews

Fifty years after the council of Nicea, Epiphanius, the head of the church of Salamis, wrote about Messianic Jews in his day, saying:

"They make use not only of the New Testament, but they also use the Old Testament of the Jews; for they do not forbid the books of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. . . They preach that there is but one God, and his son Jesus Christ. But they are very learned in the Hebrew language; for they, like the Jews, read the whole Law, then the Prophets. . . They differ from the Jews because they believe in the Messiah, and from the Christians in that they are to this day bound to the Jewish rites, such as circumcision, the Sabbath, and other ceremonies."<sup>11</sup>

The early fifth century historian Jerome also described the existence of what he called Nazarenes "who accept Messiah in such a way that they do not cease to observe the Old Law."<sup>12</sup>

There is archaeological evidence as well. For example, Susya is a site that is in the northern part of the Negev desert region of Israel. The dig shows that a thriving community existed there after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. And as this Mosaic with the name of Yeshua reveals, the evidence, including a mosaic in the synagogue with the name of Yeshua shows that they were a Messianic community. They believed in Yeshua and they continued to live their lives as Jews. And they endured for centuries until Islam came and Susya was abandoned.

We also know that the Messianic way of life was still being practiced in the late eighth century because in the year 787 a second council of bishops was convened in Nicea, in which they banned all forms of Jewish practice. In addition, at that same council they also required the veneration of images and icons, such as the virgin Mary, and if you refused to do so, you were also excommunicated from the church. That's how far they had come.

But what would you have done in that day? Venerate statues of Mary and saints, or take your Messianic faith underground? In spite of great risks, believers in Yeshua continued to remain faithful to God's commandments. They kept alive a connection that spans unbroken from

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<sup>11</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 29:7.

<sup>12</sup> Jerome; *Commentary on Isaiah*, 8:14.

Moses to Yeshua to the Apostles and to those who were taught by the Apostles and then passed on to the generations that followed. Their numbers may have reduced over time. But as we know from the testimony of the Word of God, the Lord is pleased to work with a remnant of faithful believers.

Centuries passed and the remnant quietly persevered from generation to generation, while Christianity grew and grew, all-the-while mostly not knowing about the lost Messianic world. That is, until, our present day when it is being rediscovered in greater and greater ways all over the world. The modern Messianic movement has declared that it is not just okay to worship in a Jewish cultural manner derived from the Torah and its fullness in Messiah, but that it is biblical to do so.

If observing the biblical feasts and other elements of Messianic worship were approved and practiced by Yeshua and the Apostles and the believing community that followed after them, it is equally valid for us today, regardless of the claims of those who really do not know history. We all can deepen our walk with the Lord when we take into account the full measure of God's Word and His commandments, not in a legalistic manner, but in one based on truth, seasoned with grace.

### **The precedent in the days of Nehemiah**

Of course we also have Scripture as our ultimate guide. And within its pages we find that there was another time long ago when a lost godly way of life was rediscovered. When Israel entered the Promised Land under Joshua, the commandments of God as recorded in the Torah were greatly on the minds of the people:

"This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success" (Josh 1:8).

Indeed that was the case for the people as they lived out successfully what God had instructed. But over time, their faithfulness faded away, and many centuries later they had forgotten virtually everything written by Moses, replacing that understanding with the worship of false gods and practices that Adonai abhors. And, as we know, that resulted in the people being taken captive into Babylon. But then, after seventy years, the Jewish people were allowed to return to Jerusalem.

The book of Nehemiah primarily recounts the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. But in chapter 8 it tells a remarkable story of what happened when Ezra the scribe read from the Torah to the people. It is very likely the first time in their lives that they had ever heard what Moses put into writing, and thus the commandments of Adonai. For them it was truly a lost world. On that day, everyone—men, women and children—assembled. Ezra stood on a platform above the people and read for hours. Learned men stood on either side of him and translated the Hebrew into Aramaic so they all could understand what was written.

Ezra had to tell the people not to weep. That indicates the people realized what they had missed all these years, and how God's commandments had been disobeyed. It was a mixture of grief for the sinfulness of their nation and tears of joy for having the privilege of hearing God's words read to them for the first time. I believe that if you were standing there on that day, you would have done the same thing.

But the life-changing effect of reading the Word of God is evident because "they understood the words which had been made known to them" (Neh 8:12). They were ready to do

something about what they had heard.

The next day they came back and Ezra kept on reading. He must have reached Leviticus 23 because we are told:

They found written in the law how Adonai had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month (Neh 8:14).

That's the feast of *Sukkot* (Tabernacles), and the proper time for observing it according to the biblical calendar was a few days away. So they made preparations according the specific instructions God had given and they observed the feast:

The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day (Neh 8:17).

That means eight hundred years had passed without keeping the totality of God's commandments. Now that is rediscovering a truly lost world. And what was the result? Verse 17 goes on to say: "And there was great rejoicing."

I believe that we live in a similar day. As part of the Messianic movement, we are demonstrating that an apparent lost culture and way of worship has been rediscovered in these late days. And it is our privilege to praise our Creator and Lord in this manner, to study His Word and to be faithful to His commandments in a way that finds their fulfillment in Yeshua. We are able to consider these things just as the people in Nehemiah's day took to heart the discovery they had made.

You may be Jewish and have been told all your life that believing in Jesus is not for us, He's just for the Gentiles. But Yeshua is very much the Jewish Messiah, from the tribe of Judah and the royal lineage of David. He is exactly who the prophets foretold in great detail. He came to give life everlasting to all who believe in Him. And He never said you would stop being Jewish or have to forsake your Jewish heritage and culture by following Him.

You may be a Gentile believer and have been told that anything related to the Law is legalism. But as the historical record demonstrates, that position is inconsistent with what has been declared by Yeshua, the Apostles and those who sat under the Apostles.

I trust that we all have a desire to know what is true in this world today and in the past. And may we all have the courage to live it out in a way that is honoring to the good Lord who calls us to follow Him in faithfulness.