

# **Pentecostal Reinventions of the Passover: Contextual Reflections on the End of Year Night Worship Festivals in Uganda**

**Alexander Paul Isiko and Enock Kisekka**

**alexisiko@yahoo.com**

**ekisekka@kyu.ac.ug**

## **Abstract**

Pentecostal scholarship in and about Africa is a vibrant arena in world Christianity, with an upswing in the proliferation of scholarly works on Pentecostal Churches and its centrality in the political and social fabric of African societies. Pentecostalism has been hailed for revival of Christian conservatism in Sub-Saharan Africa, predominated by the nominal Roman Catholics and Protestant Christianity. While some authors have studied African Pentecostalism with prejudgments based on other Christian traditions, some have hailed the theological innovations in healing and evangelism. The study of the Pentecostal end of year worship festivals unravels one of the innovations that justifies the uniqueness of African Pentecostalism, promulgating theologies and traditions on the one hand, and reinventing Judeo-Christian practices in African perspectives, which in a sense give African Pentecostal Churches a claim to divine originality, on the other. In another way, theologies, traditions, and practices emerging from the observance of the annual Pentecostal worship festivals place African Pentecostal Churches among the towering African Christian traditions, which then borrow rather than debunk such Pentecostal theological innovations. This article therefore discusses the Pentecostal Church reinvention of the ancient Jewish Passover festival to mirror the lives of African Christians in contemporary contexts. The ‘contextual theology’ analysis is employed to reflect on both the Jewish Passover and annual Pentecostal worship festivals, with a view of establishing how Passover (non-)parallels and reinventions have produced African

Pentecostal theologies, traditions, and practices defining the uniqueness of African Pentecostalism.

**Keywords:** Pentecostalism, neo-Pentecostalism, Passover, worship festivals, African Pentecostalism, Passover night, Passover Namboole, Uganda

## **Introduction**

Pentecostal Churches in Africa have been hailed for their theological ingeniousness in generating a Christian theology relevant to the spiritual and physical lives of African Christians. The theological creativities comprise the reading, interpreting, and understanding the scriptures in their own cultural contexts and engendering domesticated theologies (Wariboko 2017:5). The innovation of mega-prophets and mega-churches with the accompanying competition for religious markets among themselves has been a center of scholarly attention too (cf. Chitando 2021). These are an addition to a re-invigoration of a liturgical viewpoint and re-interpretation of Judeo-Christian traditions and practices that mirror the spiritual and physical lives of contemporary African Christians (Kgatle 2023:542). Whereas many of these Pentecostal reinventions have been subjects of debate in theological discourses, Pentecostal reinvention and interpretations of the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Passover have not received their due attention. The cause of this position can be traced back to three inter-related factors: The observation of Passover activities with Pentecostal nuances being a new phenomenon in African Pentecostalism having taken shape in 2002; the Judeo-Christian Passover's pertinence lagged behind in African Pentecostalism whose prominence is on 'theologies' which attend to the spiritual and practical needs of Christians; and lastly, the fear to contradict with the dominant Anglican and Roman Catholic Church traditions from which they 'fish' their converts. African Pentecostals have therefore all along been pre-occupied with the traditional celebrations of Easter and Christmas as the significant hallmarks of the Christian faith as a whole.

However, the emergence of a 'cult' of emphasis on the annual end of year worship festivals by Ugandan Pentecostals, prior to the traditional Christmas and Easter portrays the ever-growing redefinition of African Pentecostalism and its theology which necessitates scholarly interrogation.

This article initiates a dialogue on the Judeo-Christian Passover between the experience of Judeo-Christians as recorded in scripture and the church's traditions over the years, and the experience of Pentecostal Christians in contemporary Uganda (Bevans 2010). Using the 'contextual theology' perspectives of Stephen Bevans (2002; 1985), this article articulates how the Pentecostal Church annual observance of the end of year worship festivals on December 31 reflects the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Passover and how it has been reinvented to articulate theologies and practices that are of significance to Ugandan Christians in contemporary contexts.

### **Conceptual Contexts**

It is paramount to identify conceptual parameters to delineate the specific contexts in which they are deployed in this article. These include the concepts of 'Judeo-Christian' tradition/s and reinvention/s. The concept 'Judeo-Christian tradition' relates to the theological continuities and discontinuities between Judaism and Christianity as religious traditions. Judeo-Christian notions underscore the belief that the Christian tradition stems from Judaism and that there is a dialogical relationship between the two traditions. By reading Christianity through Jewish lenses, one may discover and rediscover sidelined truths that may be key in demystifying God's plan of salvation (Moyaert 2016:146). In the case of continuity, there is an appreciation of the Jewish roots of Christian tradition, with the Jewish Passover being adopted into Christianity although with modifications. The concept 'discontinuity' relates to the church's own developed self-understanding as a people of God and heir to God's promises by denying Israel a lasting place in God's plan of salvation. The church disentangles itself as the new people of God, abrogating the covenant between God and Israel (Moyaert 2016:147). In this specific context, the Passover is presented as a principally Jewish tradition adopted by and adapted to the Christian religious faith, continued through Jesus' celebration of the Last Supper with his apostles to mark the genesis of the salvation of mankind through Jesus Christ. The celebration of the Last Supper is hence routine in subsequent Christian practices. However, Christianity has witnessed discontinuities with this Jewish tradition, abandoning it and replacing it with the celebration of Easter (Pascha) and Christmas. Within the Christian tradition, various kinds of continuities and discontinuities of the Passover

tradition are noticeable, with African Pentecostals having variations of its observance from mainstream Christian sub-traditions such as Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism. The concept of ‘reinvention/s’ relates to the notion that ‘traditions’ like the Jewish Passover continually change over time. This description is borrowed from postulations by theorists of the ‘invented tradition’ who argue that traditions are not of the past but simply invented by the present generation (Hobsbawm 1983; Isiko 2018:15).

Christian traditions are also in transition, which is the norm in a constantly changing world that progresses, develops, renews, and reinvents itself (Pears 2010:1). The concept of reinvention is deployed in such a way that the Pentecostal observance of the Passover is a response to ancient Judeo-Christian Passover traditions relevant to them. This is done through a reconstruction of the Passover festival into an ‘end of year worship festival’, influenced by Pentecostal theological leanings and African environments. A Pentecostal reinvention of the Passover does not mean a creation of a completely new Passover festival but rather involves three things: The adoption of certain elements of the ancient Judeo-Christian tradition; casting away invalid practices; and reformulating new elements that depict an ideal Pentecostal philosophy of the Passover. What then is celebrated as the ‘end of year worship festival’ is a contextual theological reformulation of the Judeo-Christian Passover which is in concordance with the norms, values, and theologies of Pentecostals in contemporary African contexts. The ‘contextual theology’ perspective is presented in the next section as the framework through which Pentecostal Christians are adapting to reinvent the Passover into celebrations which address their contexts as both Africans and Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Theory and Method**

While several African theologians and scholars of religion have produced contextual theologies, this article aligns to the contextual theological perspective of Bevans (1985; 2002; 2010). Contextual theology is a way of comprehending the Christian faith not only on the basis of scripture and tradition but also on the basis of concrete culturally conditioned human experience (Yuzon 2022). Contextual theology relates to how cultural contexts affect the interpretation of Christianity. Contextual theology explicitly

positions the recognition of the contextual nature of theology at the forefront of the theological process. This is mediated by translocal social and cultural processes. Cultural contexts and interpretations of how God acts, affect each other in a variety of ways that one describes using the model of a reciprocal ‘circle of function’. This results in expressions of faith in contextual ways (Bergmann & Vahakangas 2021:2). Theology that is contextual realizes that culture, history, contemporary thought forms, and so forth are to be considered, along with scripture and tradition, as valid sources for theological expression. Contextual theology therefore appreciates and performs the theo-drama in terms of a particular context and it is accountable to both the canonical texts and the contemporary cultural situation (De Vries 2016:5 of 12). Among the six models of contextual theology advanced by Bevans (2002), the translation and anthropological models are well-matched to appreciate the Pentecostal end of year worship festivals related to the Judeo-Christian Passover. The end of year worship festivals is an integral part of the Pentecostal liturgical calendar as the translation model adapts and accommodates liturgical practices in culturally appropriate and comprehensible ways (Blandon 2021:2).

Using the translation model, an interrogation is made of how the Pentecostal observance of end of year worship festivals carry meanings to depict the Judeo-Christian Passover. This involves the interrogation of ways and means where Pentecostal Churches have accommodated and adapted the Judeo-Christian Passover into their annual end of year worship festivals, without necessarily a change in meanings attached to the tradition/s. This is fulfilled through a contextual analysis of the Judeo-Christian experience of the Passover – an experience of the past and present of the Passover by Pentecostal Christians through their keen observance of annual end of year worship festivals.

To analyze the present experience of the Passover, an analysis is made of the human experience, culture, social location, and social change within which Pentecostal Christians are operating in Uganda’s context. The anthropological model also approaches contextual theology from a creation-oriented perspective, in which it is believed that the context with which human beings adhere and the experiences they garner within the context are generally categorical and are about individuals and their fulfilment within the Christian community (Blandon 2021:12). By using the anthropological model therefore, an attempt is made to illustrate how end of year worship festivals have been created to the fulfilment of the Pentecostal Christian community. The

contextualization of the theology of Passover to Pentecostalism will help to understand and appreciate the reformulation of the Passover adapted to African Pentecostal ethics.

Apart from an analytical literature review on the Judeo-Christian observance of the Passover, including the biblical passages covering this subject (discussed in the next section), we have also engaged with the lived experiences of scholars and students of religion as well as commentators on public religion in Uganda. Subjective as it might seem, we will argue with personal and empirical experiences of these end of year worship festivals being participant observers for the past 22 years. We have been critical observers of several neo-Pentecostal ministries in Uganda, especially those of Pastor Dr Joseph Serwadda and keenly observed the initial Passover festivals from 2002 to the present. Undoubtedly so, this could be the first scholarly piece of writing on annual end of year worship festivals in Uganda, although there are abundant articles on this subject written in both mainstream and social media. Several other narratives on this subject exist in personal internet blogs. We have relied on these sources to construct the contextualization of the Passover tradition in Uganda's contemporary Christian era.

## **Passover: Biblical and Historical Context**

In order to analyze the parallels and contemporary contexts of neo-Pentecostal observation and practices of the Passover in the form of 'end of year worship festivals', it is important to understand the biblical and historical context and framing of the Passover. This is in resonance with Bokser (1985:8) who acknowledges that since its inauguration, different groups of people associated with Passover have performed it differently at different times in their specific settings, enlisting different meanings. The concept 'Passover' is an English equivalent of the Judeo-biblical *Pesach*, referring to the skipping, omitting, sparing, or passing over of the tradition. This meaning clearly connects with the inception of the Jewish Passover festival as documented in Exodus 12, where Yahweh's angel of death passed over the houses of Jewish families and caused the death of the first-born sons of the Egyptians (Biyanwila 2020:1-4). It is believed that it was from this act that the name 'Passover'/'*Pesach* originates.

In the Exodus 12 narrative, Yahweh gave Moses instructions on the ritual procedure to be followed by members of the Jewish family during this event. It resorts under the theme of God's liberation of the Israelites from the Egyptian bondage. The Passover marked an epoch in the history of the Israelites and their formation as a nation. It served as the first regulated religious ritual that the Israelites engaged in even before their departure from Egypt. It is a ritual that was instituted by Yahweh through Moses. Its procedures and practices were all dictated by Yahweh (Potest 1977:1-20). The Passover did not pass as a one-off occasion, but rather became an annual in-house ritual festival, restricted only to the Jews and proselyte Jews. The Jews were instructed to observe the Passover festival for seven days, commencing on the evening of the fourteenth day to the evening of the twenty first day of the month of Nisan. This marked the first account of observation of the Passover.

Numbers 9:1-14 offers an account of the second Passover observance in the desert of Sinai during the first month of the second year after the Israelites have exited Egypt. In this narrative, the celebration was liberally extended to the fourteenth day of the second month of the Jewish ecclesiastical calendar (*Iyyar*). This provision was given by Yahweh to cater for only the Jews who may have missed out the Nisan Passover celebrations. Such individuals were to celebrate the Passover in a different month, but following the same regulations that guided the Nisan Passover festival. Any member of the Jewish family who was neither impure because of contact with a dead body or being away on a journey was required to strictly observe the Passover in the month of Nisan. One such celebration is recorded in 2 Chronicles 30:1-15 where King Hezekiah observes the Passover in the *Iyyar*. However, scholars like Chavel (2009) and Talmon (1958:59) argue that these second Passover legislations as cited in Numbers 9:1-14 were a mere representation of King Hezekiah's political attempts to incorporate the northern Israelites' calendar into that of Judah.

Notably, this second Passover narrative is the only account of the Passover given during the Israelites' journey in the wilderness. It is uncertain whether the Israelites observed the Passover from the third to the fortieth year of their journey in the wilderness: The narrative in Joshua 5:2-12 seemingly suggests that the Israelites did not celebrate the Passover during that time. The indication that all the male Israelites born in the wilderness had not been circumcised can serve as evidence since the Passover festival could only be

celebrated by the circumcised. Had they been celebrating the Passover in the wilderness, the mass circumcision as recorded in Joshua 5:2-12 would be unjustifiable.

After settling in the promised land, the Jews continued observing the Passover as an ordinance following the instructions stipulated in Exodus 12:17-20. Contrary to the Exodus 12 instructions for an in-house festival, the Passover festival was institutionalized and its celebrations were centralized in Jerusalem as instructed in Leviticus 23:4-8, Numbers 28:16-25, and Deuteronomy 16:1-8. The Passover observance turned into a pilgrimage to Jerusalem since Jerusalem was deemed the sacred place for Yahweh, while all the Jews outside Jerusalem were expected to congregate in Jerusalem for these festivities (2 Chr 30:1-5; 2 Ki 23:21-23; Ezra 6:19-21; Ez 45:21-24). This introduced a shift in the chronology of the Passover celebration from a household observance to a celebration for the united nation. The theology of liberation was preserved through the generations – it was this kind of Passover that Jesus and his family participated in (Lk 2:41-42).

The first major theological reinvention of the Jewish Passover accompanied the New Testament birth of Christianity and the Christian theology as initiated by Jesus. With this reinvention, Jesus proclaimed himself as the Passover lamb, superseding the blameless lamb of Exodus 12. This reinvention pinpoints the Passover theology from the celebration of the Israelites' liberation from human oppression to the universal human liberation from sin. Jesus' sacrificial death as reenacted in the Eucharist then became the nucleus of attention. Though Jesus as a devoted Jew participated in the Jewish Passover festivities of his time, his followers elevated the Last Supper and his crucifixion as the supplant of the Jewish Passover rituals (Marcus 2013:318). Jesus' command, 'Do it in memory of me' made the Last Supper become a pivotal ritual in Christianity. The new Passover thus became inclusive: It also incorporated the non-Jewish Christian communities. It is, however, noteworthy that while the Jews continued observing the pilgrimage and sacrificial Passover, the Christian Jews held both celebrations, with a second theological interpretation of the Passover.

There are various attempts to link the Last Supper to the Jewish *Seder*, hence introducing the Christian Passover (Marcus 2013). Such attempts are, however, misguided, as Jewish history scholars contend. The *Seder* and the *Haggadah* are later reinventions of the Passover festival within the Jewish community itself, consequent of the destruction of the temple. The destruction



of the temple necessitated the Passover festivities to be decentralized back to the original in-house setting. In conservation of this festival of central importance, the Jews developed an elaborate ritualistic commemoration of the Passover that could warrant holding the festival without the sacrificial rituals that required the temple (Bokser 1985:4). The salient feature in this reinvention was the Passover *Seder*. *Seder* is a Hebrew term for order. It is a home ritualistic service and ceremonial dinner held in the evening of the first or the first and second day of the Passover.

The *Seder* meal is characteristic of the Passover meal of Exodus 12. Its constituents vary from one tradition to another, but the habitual items on the *Seder* plate comprise the shank bone (*zeroa*), bitter vegetables, and bitter herbs (*karpas*) plus roasted charoset or hard-boiled egg, salt water, and unleavened bread. Unlike the ordinary meal, the *Seder* meal is accompanied by an anthological guide commonly known as the *Haggadah*, which stipulates the order of the Passover *Seder*. Its design facilitates the retelling of the Jewish Exodus Passover narrative.

In adaptation, the early Christians invented the Easter festival as the new Passover. Considering Jesus as the new Passover lamb, the early Christians celebrated his death and resurrection during the Easter festivals. Though the scholars suggest an earlier celebration of the death and resurrection, the initial record of the Easter celebration is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century (Bradshaw 1999:81). Based on the canonical gospel accounts in the earlier days, the Easter celebrations coincided with the Jewish days of the Passover. It was also a seven-day festival, currently known as the 'holy week'. Though there is no generalized explicit standard date for the celebration of Easter in Christianity, the theology behind Easter celebration is invariable in all Christian observing communities (Bradshaw 1999).

With the coming of European missionaries to the African continent, a one-size-fits-all Euro-Christian theology was introduced to the Africans. This theology emphasized much of the Eucharist and Easter as important Christian rituals. These two rituals are highly traceable in the contemporary mainstream Christian churches in Africa. With the establishment of the African Independent Churches, the African Christians elevated the Easter festivities, but vitiated the Eucharist. The Eucharist became a more occasional ritual. The development of the Afro-Pentecostal movement brought a new adaptation and reinterpretation of the Bible that midwived the reinvention of the Jewish Passover festival into the Pentecostal end of year worship festivals.

## **Pentecostal End of Year Worship Festivals – Uganda’s Context**

The annual end of year worship festivals, also called ‘Passover nights’ were birthed by the neo-Pentecostal Churches in Kampala in 2002, initially organized under the National Fellowship of Pentecostal and Born-Again churches (NFPBC), the umbrella organization bringing together neo-Pentecostal Churches in the country. It was then popularly referred to as ‘Passover Namboole’ in reference to the physical setting, Mandela National Sports Stadium in Namboole, where the worship festival was held. It signified being liberated from the ills and transgressions of the ending year to an anticipated year of blessings and good health. This was likened to the Jewish Passover where the Israelites were liberated from their Egyptian oppressors into the land of freedom. The worship festival is held every December 31, overnight to January 1 of the following year. This marks a transition from one year to another, characterized by thunderous prayers and spiritual applause. Pastor Serwadda, under the auspices of the Victory Church Ministries, is notably identified as the mastermind of the initiation of the ‘Passover Namboole’ (Isiko 2020:631). He mobilized fellow pastors under the NFPBC to hold joint overnight Passover prayers. It was fondly described as ‘national celebrations’ at Namboole to render it both a nationally appealing and Christian inclusive event. Indeed, an estimated number of more than 100,000 Christians across the religious divide, together with non-Christians, seeking sorts of breakthrough gathered at Namboole for the Passover night (Isiko 2022:15 of 32).

This article positions the Passover night at Namboole as a rendition of Jesus’ era of the Jewish Passover in which Jews all over the world gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover jammed with merrymaking activities. The mammoth gathering of churchgoers from across the country turn Namboole and Kampala city into Jerusalem for the Ugandan believers. Not only is this a theological innovation but also a complete departure from the Ugandan Christian tradition/s. It is a middle line simply because Ugandan Christians, including Pentecostals, have always observed Easter as the adapted celebration of the Jewish Passover. Christmas celebrations during December significantly marked a transition from one year to another but the real calendar end of the year day had never before been given significant attention by Ugandan Christians to enlist theological thinking.

The annual end of year worship festivals were birthed by both theological and political motivations. Theologically, the myths and conspiracies that surrounded the coming of the year 2000 (popularly abbreviated as Y2K) that marked the genesis of the new millennium, was universally punctuated by panic and anxiety due to the uncertainties of the sustenance of human life in the coming millennium. Myths and conspiracy theories of the second coming of Jesus Christ on the eve of the new millennium and subsequent the end of life and the world influenced Ugandans to undertake new ways of seeking God's intervention to save their lives. This necessitated a reconstruction of the myths and transformed people's mindsets to create an optimistic vision in the uncertain millennium (Hinchcliff 1996:198).

Christian communities responded differently to the year 2000 (McMinn 2001:208). The Ugandan situation was part and parcel of the Y2K panic and millennialism drive which engulfed the whole world. The Y2K problem became an emotional issue around which the expectations of the apocalypse formed. The apocalypse was regarded as an opportunity to recreate society (Tapia 2002:267). While none of the anticipated catastrophes became a reality, the Y2K panic left a socio-religious lasting impact all over the world, especially among Christian societies. It is contended here that the inauguration of the Passover end of year worship festivals was in part an attempt to recreate the Ugandan society in general and the Christian community in particular.

The initial Passover night of 2002 was to mark a transition of a 'political Uganda' from one generation to another (Mugalula 2023). In Pastor Serwadda's personal testimony he received the vision to organize such special prayer festivals on the eve of Uganda's 40<sup>th</sup> Independence Day. The theology of visions and spiritual inspirations to initiate such special prayers and events is typical of neo-Pentecostal pastors. Pastor Serwadda's testimony, anchored in Uganda's independence celebrations – a political event – is, however, suggestive of two gists: First, the Ugandan society, despite its independence, needed redemption from bad governance; second, the deafening noise and ululations which Pastor Serwadda claimed to have experienced on the eve of independence, point to a Ugandan society devoid of order. Mythologies about the new millennium, political motivations of 2002 and the subsequent organization of the second Passover night in 2003 are suggestive that the Passover Namboole was not crafted to be an annual event but a buffer and palliative to the existing uncertain events (Basudde 2003). However, the unexpected high level of organization, a united and supportive group of pastors

under the NFPBC, and an enthusiastic and thirsty Christian community for the festival provided the organizers with the crave to annually scheme it henceforth.

The Passover Namboole had launched an unprecedented unity among neo-Pentecostal pastors. For the second Passover festival in 2003, a total of 600 pastors were anticipated to grace the event (Basudde 2003). However, by 2005 a dread by other pastors that they would forfeit their followers to Victory Church in Ndeeba with a collective Passover night festival, created fractures within the NFPBC leadership. This led to the observance of ‘Passover nights’ at various places within the country. Nonetheless, regardless of their spatial settings, the annual end of year worship festivals have masterminded some form of religious and theological identity of the Ugandan neo-Pentecostal strand.

### **Hallmarks of the Neo-Pentecostal Passover Night**

The neo-Pentecostal ‘Passover night’ boasts with hallmarks synonymous with the legendary Jewish liberation from Egyptian captivity. Pre-occupied with enlisting a copious number of attendees, public advertisements for the event was critical, and it intensified from October onward. Special media programming for the Passover night festivals emphasized the healing and deliverance miracles.

Typical of the Judeo-Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, there is a purposeful trek to and a consequent Pentecostal congregation in a designated place of worship in anticipation of the Passover night. An insistence of attending the Passover night celebrations in designated places has rebirthed the Jewish notion and belief in a ‘God of places’. The designated ground is exceptional as it is believed to be ‘sacred and blessed’. Those standing on it are favored with divine revelations and blessings. The competition and contestation of authenticity by each pastor and the congregation of different designated places for the Passover night cast doubt on the claim of divine choice of such designated places. To ensure attendance of the expected faithful, organizers provide special means of transport. During this time there is a resurgence of tele-evangelism in Uganda, facilitated by the overflow of Pentecostal owned radio and television stations, as ‘Pentecostalized’ social media spaces make virtual participation possible.

Whereas the aim is to have as many people attend physically in the designated places of celebrations, those incapacitated are encouraged to follow the proceedings over social media spaces, radio, and television. Those in virtual attendance electronically transfer their tithes and offertory to the account of either the church or the pastor, yet followers must guard against switching to alternative digital spaces by rival pastors. Neo-Pentecostal Passover night celebrations are therefore much more church institutional and pastor based than being based on personal belief and conviction.

Prayer requests have been systematized and institutionalized through Passover night celebrations. Christians write their prayer requests and anticipated socio-economic transformational ventures for the new year in the 'vision book'. The theological innovations of the 'vision book' take variant descriptors depending on the different pastors. In some cases, special envelopes are distributed which include a paper on which one could write their prayer request/s and also to enclose a seed/offertory (Interview Nairuba 2024). For the Passover in Namboole, the distributed envelopes contain 'special' invitation to its recipients. Agents in both metropolitan and inland churches aid in the distribution of the special envelopes where the centrality of offertories and 'seeds' is underscored, just as it is in mainstream and social media advertisements. The possession of God's special monetary gift is hegemonic and epitomizes the ultimate significance of the encounter between the worshiper and God at the overnight vigil. Believers are waving the envelopes containing both the special monetary gift and prayer requests, appreciating God for the transition. This has indeed promoted the disguised monetization of prayers grounded on the belief that God's blessings are *quid pro quo* for human efforts.

The overnight vigil prayers start from the early evening of December 31 (usually at 18:00) to January 1 (usually at 06:00). This is anchored in the socio-cultural construction of time requiring believers to wait upon the new year constructed to begin at 00:00 (midnight) and the urge to enter the new year in the presence of God. This neo-Pentecostal practice resonates with the Jewish belief in a localized God, limited by space and time, similar to the Jewish 'holy hours of the Sabbath' and Yahweh whose residence is Zion.

Neo-Pentecostals therefore have restructured the timing of the Passover based on the prevailing socio-cultural conception of time, which dictates the day to begin at midnight as noted above (Interview Sserubidde 2024). The anxiety that one might die in their sleep, experience a terrible and

unproductive coming year, or would be excluded from the benefits of God's blessings for sidelining the celebrations is held high among neo-Pentecostals (Interview Mukwana 2024).

A focus on deliverance and redemption acts as a central theological theme during the Passover night celebration (Interview Mukisa 2024). An anticipation of good health and wellbeing in the new year is anchored in the belief that God is the giver of life and therefore their health entirely depends on his mercy. As a sign of transition, neo-Pentecostals have adopted the largely Western notion of celebration of blowing fireworks in the air (Mugalula 2023). While fireworks may not be theologically significant, they demonstrate the Pentecostal Churches' swift ability to adapt to prevailing conditions of society while making themselves relevant to youths – a big constituent of these churches.

## **Pentecostal Theological Reinventions of the Passover**

The Pentecostal Passover jubilations have birthed innumerable theological innovations, although their manifestations and nomenclature may vary, hinged on the theological uniqueness of a particular neo-Pentecostal Church. Neo-Pentecostals are neither commemorating the Jewish Passover nor Jesus' triumphal Passover over death but rather their own triumph over sin and human and societal hardships in the previous year and imploring the gracious Almighty reign throughout the New Year. However, one theological thought – the theology of futurism – binds the Jewish and neo-Pentecostal perspectives of Passover: That the best is in the future, just as the Jewish exodus into the future provided a better life and opportunities in the land of Canaan (Interview Sserubidde 2024). Relatedly, the neo-Pentecostal ideology that the coming year will supersede the previous one speaks to the theology of futurism shared with the Jewish tradition. However, the irony of the situation over the years is the neo-Pentecostal portrayal of the new year as better than the old one, as there would be proclamations at the past Passover night of a better year ahead, which undermines the theology of futurism.

The ritualistic nature of the Jewish Passover, also contextualized in the mainstream Christian traditions, has further been re-contextualized to match with the Pentecostal theological thinking. The shading of blood and eating of the sacrificial ritual meal – the *Seder* – is replaced by the monetary seed, for

God's protection and as a requirement of the covenant that the believer makes with God to have their wishes in the 'vision book' fulfilled. The contextualization of the Passover by mainstream Christian traditions as Jesus' death on the cross, being the Christian Passover lamb, links to the Last Supper of Jesus Christ and has been sidestepped, using the Pentecostal theological outlook that Jesus resurrected and is living. Neo-Pentecostals in Uganda have further departed from these notions by infusing the Passover night with charismatic practices such as intense worship, speaking in tongues and a focus on personal renewal in the new year (Interview Ebiachu 2024; Interview Asienzo 2024). Whereas the people who celebrated the Jewish God's dictation of the Passover constituted only Israelites or converted Jews through circumcision, the all-embracing nature of the neo-Pentecostal Passover night festivals speaks to attempts towards universalization and inclusivity. The prophetic promise of the Christian God attending to the challenges of both Christians and non-Christians is well sounded by the pastors.

However, Pentecostal reinventions of the Passover have made the pastors stand in the place of Prophet Moses who brokered the transition of the Israelites from Egyptian oppression to the land of Canaan. In the Jewish version of Passover, it is the Lord who instigates the Passover, for its initial and subsequent observance originates from God as a command (Interview Afaki 2024). The pastors have indeed taken the place of Jesus, the paschal lamb in the Christian sense. The strict terms within which the Jews were to exuberate the Passover had been divinely instituted by God through Moses. The pastors with selected senior figures of the church design the distinct form and content of the Passover night celebrations (Interview Akankwasa 2024).

A further point of departure is that the initial Jewish Passover entailed a geographical movement from Egyptian bondage to the land of Canaan and freedom. The Ugandan neo-Pentecostal Passover symbolizes a 'periodical' transition. Over time, in the Christian tradition, the Passover marked Jesus' liberation of people from the bondage of sin, and introducing a new era of forgiveness and mercy. It is, however, asserted that even though the Jews celebrated a 'geographical transition', the celebration was to be at a specified time. The Jewish Passover has continued to be celebrated during springtime in the northern hemisphere, while the neo-Pentecostal Christian strand in Uganda celebrates the same at the end of December. It has been suggested that this departure in time is likely due to the influence of Western Christian practices which traditionally celebrated Christmas and Easter on fixed dates rather than

based on the Jewish calendar (Interview Asienzo 2024). For theological emphasis, the traditional Jewish and Ugandan mainstream Christian – Roman Catholic and Anglican – traditions’ Passover celebrations underscore the historical event of the exodus and the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Neo-Pentecostals emphasize the spiritual and redemptive aspects of the Passover. They do not only focus on Jesus’ resurrection as the ultimate act of liberation and salvation but also that these will manifest in their own lives in terms of physical and socio-economic redemption.

Arguments have emerged that the Pentecostal annual end of year Passover night is devoid of reasonable theological significance and that to envelop the end of year day into a divine event is a misnomer, as nothing divinely significant is portrayed with the activities that accompany the celebrations and no change is guaranteed. Believers still cross over to the new year burdened with bank loans, loss of property, and poor health. At the least it can be argued that pastors are economically redeemed through monetary gifts while the believers endlessly toil from abuses of all nature (Interview Afaki 2024; Interview Akankwasa 2024). It suffices that since both non-Pentecostal Christians and Jews celebrate the end of year and beginning of a new year, it is an acknowledgement that the Lord enables people to cross to the new year. This nullifies the notion that such celebrations are an equivalent of a Passover, since not every ‘crossing’ is a ‘Passover’. According to Peter Sserubidde (Interview 2024) and Rev Emmanuel Akankwasa (Interview 2024), the most significant point of departure from the point of both a Jewish and a neo-Pentecostal conception of Passover is that for the Jews, the Passover refers to when God ‘passed over’ them and saved them from death, while for the neo-Pentecostals this has been recontextualized anachronistically to be the Pentecostals themselves who are ‘crossing over’ – passing from one calendar year into another year. This is indeed much more like a ‘cross over’ than a ‘pass over’.

The Jews view the celebration of the Passover as an event, yet to the neo-Pentecostals it points to the celebration of calendar time. Neo-Pentecostals in Uganda have transformed the passage from one calendar year to another, ‘a jubilation of transition of time’ into ‘sacred observance’ of the same. This is enshrined in the theological origin of sacred days that are never decreed by the phonetic utterances of God. However, tradition originates with human beings attaching a sacred perception, just as the observance of the Sabbath by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Sunday by the rest of the Christendom, and



Friday by the Islamic world, among others (Interview Sserubidde 2024). Although the phenomenon of the new year has existed over a millennium, it did not become a theological significance in Uganda until the early 2000s. The neo-Pentecostal ideo-theological beliefs and values about end of year worship festivities have made such prayers gain ‘holiness’.

The focus and reinterpretation given to offerings during the Passover night festivals deserve further theological reflection. The Pentecostal reinterpretation of offerings connotes a lot of psychological-emotional lenses, not instituted by God but rather humanly instituted by the neo-Pentecostal pastors. Health and wellbeing are anchored in God alone. To appease the ‘unpredictable’ God, the neo-Pentecostals propose a monetary gift to God, which replaces the blood sacrificial system prevalent in Jewish mythology. The preaching that God will double what you give him is a recurrently published theology at most Passover night sermons in Uganda. The hegemony, mystification, fear, and manipulation cause believers to exalt monetary gifts over any human basic need expected in the household. This emanates into financial extortion by pastors through the concretized sermon on tithing and offertories. Indeed, the theological outlook around the neo-Pentecostal Passover night is more emotional than it is a spiritual awakening.

## **Impact of Pentecostal Passover Night Celebrations on the Ugandan Society**

The Passover night celebrations have become a big brand in Uganda’s religious realm. The influence of the celebrations has been witnessed across the Ugandan society regardless of religious affiliations and beliefs and other ideological differences. Spending the entire end of year night in congregational worship seems to be the new normal in Uganda’s current religious dispensation.

This neo-Pentecostal uniqueness has enlisted the attraction of new converts, especially from the mainstream Christian strands. This has been enhanced by the outreach activities and services brought at the Passover night congregation grounds, pulling non-Pentecostals, who benefit from the free outreach services like health camps. Neo-Pentecostal Churches themselves enjoy the public trust to mobilize basic goods from not only the followers but the wider public which are distributed to the needy in society. Government

departments take advantage of the event and day to roll out the usually inaccessible and/or neglected public services like national identity registration, as well as birth and death registration, among others. Successful business brands have found it convenient to partner with neo-Pentecostal Churches to market their products during the Passover worship celebrations as well. Thus, the material culture of African neo-Pentecostalism presents a dominant, vibrant, and complex domain of production and consumption (Ukah 2003:205). These have in the end strengthened the neo-Pentecostal Christian brand as a socio-theologically inclined people's church. By doing so, Passover night worship festivals reinforce Pentecostalism's presence in society (Mayrargue 2008:14).

The concert-like structure of the worship festivals attracts sublime gospel musicians, some of whom are internationally acclaimed gospel artists much sought after by the young people – both Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals. Passover nights have come into vogue in Ugandan society, being broadcasted live by the most influential media houses in the country. The event's media coverage has been amplified by the advancing digital society who finds them captivating, hence rendering Passover night one of the most mediated religious events in the country.

Passover night celebrations have become central in influencing the political direction of Uganda and church politics itself. In the run for presidential elections, President Yoweri Museveni paid courtesy calls to various Passover night grounds and megachurches to literally canvass political support. He attended the 2016 crossover prayers in more than four locations across the country. In the midst of a presidential election of 2011, the national broadcaster – Uganda Broadcasting corporation television – broadcasted the entire Passover Namboole festival in what was speculated to be a political syndicate to avail him leverage over his competitors. Very often, churches invite influential politicians to address the mammoth gatherings at the Passover nights. Prophecies of prosperity are made in favor of reigning politicians, especially by pastors with a particular leaning to the National Resistance Movement, which is the ruling party. In one unique case, during the Passover night of 2005, about two months to the presidential elections, Pastor Robert Kayanja of Miracle Center in Lubaga falsely prophesied about the death of one of the presidential candidates and with some others quitting the race, leaving the winner with 61.8% (New Vision 2006a; 2006b). Just like in other African countries, neo-Pentecostal pastors in Uganda have been manipulated and taken

advantage of by politicians to advance their interests, using such well sought after days by the populace (Manyeruke & Hamauswa 2013:288-294). On rare occasions, some bold pastors have used the Passover night platform to castigate corruption in government and other dictatorial tendencies (Luggya, Nakaweesi, Nyanzi, & Wossita 2006). Neo-Pentecostal Church politics have manifested before, during, and immediately after the Passover night celebrations. The obvious manifestation is the cut-throat competition between the different neo-Pentecostal Churches for Passover night attendees, reflected in the ferocious media advertisement. The claim to have attracted the biggest number of worshippers, sometimes scrupulously reflected in photoshopping, is commonly held by leading city pastors or their public media allies. Leading city pastors find it prestigious to host the President which demonstrates the pastor's political favor, which is necessary to access public resources. It is therefore argued that the Passover worship celebrations do not bring any innovations except pseudo-theology in favor of enhancing personal and socio-political might among Pentecostal pastors.

Mainstream religious traditions, especially the Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church, have copied the Ugandan neo-Pentecostal reinvention of the Passover. The zeal and resilience exhibited by neo-Pentecostal Churches in preparation of the worship festivals have been envied by non-Pentecostal and non-Christian religious traditions alike. The theology and message around which the worship festivals have been coined, prove the Pentecostal tradition as capable of influencing the Ugandan religious sphere. In 2023, at St. Gonzanga Gonza shrine in Bugonza in the Kaliro district, one of the major Roman Catholic Church of pilgrimage sites in Uganda organized a poster inviting people for the end of year prayer festivities, which they dubbed 'Passover night'. At St. Paul's Cathedral in Namirembe and St. Mary's Cathedral in Rubaga – the main seats for Anglicans and Roman Catholics respectively – it is now customary to hold annual cross over prayers in their church gardens. Whereas the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Uganda has followed suit, they have a day of fasting and a congregational day worship without overnight prayers (Interview Sserubidde 2024).

The Ugandan Passover night celebrations have gone global by attracting participants from across the East African subregion. The 2018 Passover night attracted an internationally acclaimed South Korean group of singers, the Gracias Choir. The choir performed at both the Passover night in Namboole and the Miracle Center Cathedral (Uganda Christian News 2019).

As the media in South Korea hailed the Gracias Choir for their performance, they described the Ugandan Passover night celebration as ‘a massive religious end of year event’ (Korea Herald 2019). With only the annual celebrations of the Uganda martyrs on June 3 being more robust, the Passover night worship festivals might in the future become a national tourist event of Uganda.

## **Conclusion**

Neo-Pentecostalism in Africa continues to highlight its prowess in contextualizing Christian traditions, beliefs, and practices to the African society. The creativity and innovations punctuating Passover night worship festivals in Uganda attest to the ever-growing neo-Pentecostal contextualization of Christianity in Africa. The branding and blending of theologies and practices of the biblical and historical Passover with annual celebration of end of year and beginning of another further culminate in the growing relevance of African Pentecostalism in the whole of Christendom. The organization and major aspects that constitute the Passover night worship celebrations are an embodiment of the core theology and practices which define and epitomize African neo-Pentecostalism – a prosperity and futuristic theology with deliverance, exorcism, tithing, and offertories (seeds) as a bait for God’s blessings, and ecstatic prayers at the midnight time of transition, as well as the centrality of a charismatic pastor as the new Moses orchestrating the cross over. These are blended with contemporary forms of celebration including music and the blowing of fireworks, hence recontextualizing and Africanizing the Passover.

This has reinvented the Jewish Passover to articulate spiritual, political, and socio-economic challenges that abound not only among the Christians but also among the entire society. African Christians are not transiting geographically as the Jews did through the Passover, but they are transitioning in time from personal and societal hardships to an anticipated era of ecstasy and prosperity. The previously, casually-celebrated day to mark the end of a year and beginning of another has been transformed into a sacred day of observance by people across the religious divide, enlisting it among the national tourist events of Uganda, hence fostering religious tourism. This event has gone beyond the religious confines of theological creativity and referent power over liturgical practices in other Christian and non-Christian religious

traditions to influencing national politics, popular culture, and societal organization, causing neo-Pentecostal Churches to have an indelible footprint in such African societies.

This article is not exhaustive of the nitty-gritties which embody the Passover night festivals but rather breaks ground for an academic and theological inquiry of Passover night worship festivals in an African society, with several aspects of the festivals necessitating further and deeper scholarly interrogation. A deeper analysis of the ‘political worship festivals’ is required to draw the inter-related relationships of political motivations and influences of the festivals. Liturgical practices emerging from such Passover night worship festivals require scholarly investigation too. While efforts have been made to bring to the fore the basic theological creativities associated with the neo-Pentecostal Passover night worship festivals in Uganda, the discussion and analysis is methodologically limited since it excludes ordinary Pentecostal Christians who engage in the annual festivals. A reliance on scholars and students of religion provided the most technical and realistic interpretation of the Passover night festivals but could not rule out their subjectivities on the topic since these subscribed to diverse religious traditions. With specificity to key informant interviewees subscribing to both the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches, their analysis of the subject was obviously based on prejudice which they held about the Christian sub-tradition of Pentecostalism.

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Dr. Alexander Paul Isiko

Senior Lecturer

ORCID link: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0941-8131>

Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Kyambogo University, Uganda

[alexisiko@yahoo.com](mailto:alexisiko@yahoo.com); [pisiko@kyu.ac.ug](mailto:pisiko@kyu.ac.ug)

Mr. Enock Kisekka

Assistant Lecturer

ORCID link: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6658-0474>

Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Kyambogo University, Uganda

[ekisekka@kyu.ac.ug](mailto:ekisekka@kyu.ac.ug)