

The Early Church and the Quartodeciman Passover

In the early centuries of the Church, a controversy raged over the Passover. The Church at Rome observed a day now called Easter on the first Sunday After the spring Equinox. The churches in Asia, led by Polycarp, observed The “Quartodeciman” Passover. This was observed at the very time and date That the Jews observed Passover. What day was this? Just what was the “Quartodeciman” Passover? On what day should we observe Passover today? The teaching and practice of the EARLY CHURCH is extremely important in settling this controversy.

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Let's look into the historical evidence concerning the Passover in the early church, and see what all the controversy was about at that time. Few realize it, but there was an ongoing controversy from the first till the fifth centuries in the visible Church concerning Passover. That controversy has historically been referred to as the “Quartodeciman Controversy.”

Let us notice what led up to this controversy, and what all the fighting and wrangling were about. A true understanding of this important historical controversy will go a long way to clearing up the truth about the right time to observe the Passover!

Paul's Personal Practice

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church these words: “For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth” (I Cor.5:7-8, NIV).

Notice! Paul said plainly enough, “Let us KEEP THE FESTIVAL”! The footnote of the NIV Bible on this verse states: “Keeping the Feast of Unleavened Bread (which followed Passover) symbolizes living the Christian life in holy dedication to God.” Not only did Paul in this verse exhort the Corinthians – many of whom were Gentile believers – to observe this Passover festival season, but he himself did so, setting them an example.

Notice again! Paul and his companions spent the Feast of Unleavened Bread at Philippi. The historian Luke records, “But we sailed from Philippi AFTER THE DAYS OF UNLEAVENED BREAD, and five days later joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days” (Acts 20:6). This clearly implies that Paul was still observing the festival ordained by God forever (Exo.12:15-18).

On another instance, Luke writes, “It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened DURING THE FEAST OF UNLEAVENED BREAD” (Acts 12:1-3). Luke writes plainly as if he regarded the Feast of Unleavened Bread as an existing fact – not something which had been done away, or abolished at the death of Christ! He speaks of it as being REAL, something he regarded as an important reference point.

Did Paul observe the ancient annual holy days of God? Remember, he was the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal.2:7-9). Anything he did would indicate the Gentile believers should do so also, since he conunanded them plainly: “FOLLOW MY EXAMPLE, as I follow the example of Christ” (I Cor.11:1).

These references to the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread in the New Testament, clearly show that they held enormous importance to the early Church, including Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. He observed them. And he commanded the Gentiles to follow his example, as he followed Christ's, who also observed them, along with the Jews of His time (see, for example, Luke 2:41-43; John 7:2, 10, 37). There is absolutely no indication in all the New Testament that they were ever abolished!

The Testimony of Scholars

Samuel Bacchiocchi, in his landmark scholarly book, *From Sabbath to Sunday.- A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity*, writes concerning Paul's remarks in I Corinthians 5:7-8 concerning the Feast of Unleavened Bread: “The passage, moreover, provides limited support for a *LITERAL OBSERVANCE* of the FESTIVAL. . .” He continues, “The fact that Paul himself spent the days of Unleavened Bread at Philippi (Acts 20:6) and that he 'was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 20:16; cf. I Cor.16:8), suggests that the Apostle STILL RESPECTED AND REGULATED HIS LIFE BY THE NORMATIVE LITURGICAL CALENDAR OF THE TEMPLE” (p.81).

Did the early Christians, then, observe the feast of Passover, with the Jews, albeit with the new understanding and new emblems Jesus gave at His last supper with His disciples?

Bacchiocchi asserts: “Moreover we know from the Quartodeciman's sources (i.e. those who kept Passover on Nisan 14 according to the Jewish reckoning), which APPARENTLY REPRESENT A DIRECT CONTINUATION OF THE CUSTOM OF THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH, that the *PASCHAL FEAST WAS INDEED OBSERVED BY CHRISTIANS*. Its celebration, however, did not take place on Sunday . . . but rather, as well stated by J. Jeremias, 'at the *SAME TIME AS THE JEWISH PASSOVER*, that is, *on the night of the 15th of Nisan*, and by the date rather than the day” (*From Sabbath to Sunday*, p.81).

Notice these incredible words! The Christians observed Passover at the very same night as the Jewish people – that is, on the night of the 15th of Nisan!

This is the record of scholarly research. This constitutes a powerful rebuttal to those who attempt to observe Passover on the previous evening of the 14th of Nisan, that is, at the beginning of the 14th!

Bacchiocchi adds to this statement, by J. Jeremias: “In a passage we shall later examine, Epiphanius (ca. A.D. 315-403) suggests that *until A.D. 135 CHRISTIANS EVERYWHERE OBSERVED PASSOVER ON THE JEWISH DATE, NAMELY, ON NISAN 15*, irrespective of the day of the week” (*ibid*).

Three pages later in his book, Samuele Bacchiocchi asserts, “The . . . Passover . . . initially celebrated Christ's passion and was observed by the FIXED DATE OF *NISAN 15* rather than on Sunday . . .” (p.84).

The History of the Early Church

There is not a great deal known about the early Church. After the deaths of the apostles, Jesse Lyman Hurlbut church historian, writes, “We name the last generation of the first century, from 68 to 100 A.D., 'The Age of Shadows,' partly because the gloom of persecution settled over the church; but more especially because of all periods in the history, it is the one about which we know the least. We have no longer the clear light of the book of Acts to guide us; and no author of that age has filled the BLANK in the history. . . . For fifty years after St. Paul's life a CURTAIN HANGS OVER THE CHURCH, through which we strive vainly to look; and when at last it rises, about 120 A.D. with the writings of the earliest church-fathers, we find a church in many aspects very different from that in the days of St. Peter and St. Paul” (*Story of the Christian Church*, p.41).

After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the headquarters of the early Church, which was at Jerusalem, was no longer existent. “From the prophetic utterances of Christ the Christians received warning, escaped from the doomed city, and found refuge at Pella, in the Jordan valley. But the great effect upon the church of this destruction was that it put an end forever to all relation between *Judaism and Christianity*. *Up to this time the church had been regarded by the Roman government and by the people at large as a BRANCH OF THE JEWISH RELIGION*, but henceforth Jews and Christians were apart. A small section of Jewish Christians endured for two centuries, but with ever-decreasing numbers . . .” (p.42-43).

After the end of the war, the Church re-established itself in Jerusalem for a while. Says Hurlbut, "Simeon (or Simon, Mark 6:3), the successor of St. James as head or bishop of the church in Jerusalem, and like him was also a brother of our Lord; said to have attained the age of one hundred and twenty years. He was crucified by order of the Roman governor of Palestine in 107 A.D. during the reign of Trajan" (p.53).

The Christians who fled to Pella, who were known as the Jewish Christian sect of the Nazarenes, existed on into the fourth century. Samuele Bacchiocchi tells us that according to M. Simon, “they are characterized essentially by their TENACIOUS ATTACHMENT TO *JEWISH OBSERVANCES*. If they became heretics in the eyes of the Mother Church [at Rome], it is simply because they remained fixed on outmoded positions. *THEY REPRESENT*, though

Epiphanius is energetically refusing to admit it, THE VERY DIRECT DESCENDANTS OF THE PRIMITIVE COMMUNITY, of which our author knows that it was designated by the Jews by the same name of Nazarenes” (quoted in *From Sabbath to Sunday*, p. 156).

As Bacchiocchi says, if they are indeed the “direct descendants of the primitive community of Jerusalem,” then we would expect them to have “retained the *ORIGINAL PRACTICE OF JEWISH CHRISTIANITY*” (p.156-157).

Epiphanius, who accused them of heresy, admitted of them, “The Nazarenes do not differ in any essential thing from them [the Jews], since THEY PRACTICE THE CUSTOM AND DOCTRINES *PRESCRIBED BY JEWISH LAW*, except that they believe in Christ” (*ibid*).

Obviously, then, these early true Christians celebrated the Passover and holy festivals of God, at the very same time the Jews did! Accordingly, they did *NOT CHANGE* the date or time of keeping the Passover!

The Nazarenes represent the “ethnic and theological legacy of primitive Jewish Christianity,” and retained Sabbath-keeping as “one of their distinguishing marks” (*ibid*). In fact, the Jews of that time period introduced a “curse” which was regularly pronounced in the synagogues against the Nazarenes or Christians, to keep them from attending the synagogue services. This indicates plainly that “many Jewish-Christians in Palestine still considered themselves *essentially as Jews*” (p.159).

The Persecution of Hadrian

In A.D. 135 Emperor Hadrian ruthlessly destroyed the city of Jerusalem, because of the Bar Kochba rebellion among the Jews, who regarded Bar Kochba as the Messiah. The Emperor rebuilt on the ruins of Jerusalem a new city, Aelia Capitolina, and expelled all Jews from the city. He prohibited them from entering the city, and proscribed the practice of their religion, including Sabbath keeping and circumcision.

In many respects, Hadrian was an anti-type of Antiochus Epiphanes, the great persecutor of 165 B.C., and a type of the coming “Antichrist” or “Beast” of the book of Revelation! His reign is commonly referred to as “the age of persecution.” The Roman government forbade the study of the Torah, forbade circumcision of children, and commanded profanation of the Sabbath.

First Controversy over Passover

The early Church historian Eusebius writes of this period: “And thus, when the city had been emptied of the Jewish nation and had suffered the total destruction of its ancient inhabitants, it was colonized by a different race, and the Roman city which subsequently arose changed its name and was called Aelia, in honor of the emperor Aelius Adrian. And as the Church there was now composed of Gentiles, the first one to assume the government of it after the bishops of the circumcision was Marcus” (*NPNF* 2nd, I, pp.177-178).

It was at this time, says Epiphanius, that the controversy over the correct date of the

Passover, first arose.

He wrote, “The controversy arose [literally, “was stirred up”] after the exodus of the bishops of the circumcision [A.D. 135] and it has continued until our time.” According to Epiphanius, the fifteen Judaeo-Christian bishops who had administered the Church in Jerusalem up to 135 A.D. had, up to that time, practiced the Quartodeciman Passover – the *Jewish* Passover. They based this observance on a document known as the “Apostolic Constitutions.”

According to that document, the following commandment is given: “You shall not change the calculation of time, but you shall CELEBRATE IT AT THE SAME TIME AS YOUR BRETHREN who came out from the circumcision. WITH THEM OBSERVE THE PASSOVER.” (see Bacchiocchi's *From Sabbath to Sunday*, p.161. I strongly suggest all readers who are concerned with this issue, read Bacchiocchi's book and especially this section dealing with the early church!)

This document is cited by Epiphanius in his work *Adversus haereses*. It constitutes overwhelming evidence that the early Jewish Christians, directly descended from the very headquarter's Church in Jerusalem, observed the ancient PASSOVER at the historically correct time, and did not change the calculation of the time. They did not keep it a day early, a night early, or every year on a Sunday, or invent any other new calculation.

But remember – these words were written by a Catholic church leader and historian -- not as a friendly commentary, but as a diatribe, accusing them of following Jewish customs! Epiphanius was merely pointing out that the Nazarenes, descended from the primitive headquarter's church in Jerusalem, celebrated Passover at the same time as the Jews! This, to him, was an abominable heresy! He was merely commenting on the fact. As far as he was concerned, Christians should have nothing whatever to do with Passover. He wasn't arguing for observing it a day or night earlier. Not at all! He was merely stating an observed fact.

Since Epiphanius clearly says the controversy over Passover arose “after the time of the exodus of the bishops of the circumcision” from Jerusalem in 135 A.D., this clearly implies that “prior to that time the Quartodeciman reckoning was UNANIMOUSLY FOLLOWED,” points out Samuel Bacchiocchi (p.162).

Bacchiocchi continues:

“The fact that the controversy over the Passover date arose not prior to but at the time when the new anti-Judaic policy of the Emperor caused a reconstitution of the Jerusalem Church with Gentile members and leaders suggests, first, that up to that time the Church, composed primarily of Judaeo-Christians, had been *LOYAL TO BASIC JEWISH RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS, SUCH AS PASSOVER AND THE SABBATH*; and secondly that certain changes, particularly in the liturgical calendar, were occasioned by the new repressive measures taken by the Emperor against Jewish religious practices.”

Thus up to 135 A.D. the Jerusalem headquarters Church of God held closely to the Jewish religious traditions. History shows that there were in existence two rival religious communities, one Jewish-Christian and the other Gentile-Christian, well into the fifth century

A.D. Writes Bacchiocchi, “The survival in Jerusalem of such strong Judeo-Christian influence for centuries after the first destruction of the city, discredits any attempt to make A.D. 70 the historical breaking point between Sabbath and Sunday” (p.163).

History shows that the Judaeo-Christian community continued observing Passover at the end of the 14th of Nisan centuries after the first destruction of Jerusalem. But controversy continually flared up over it, because the Church at Rome wanted to divorce itself from any and all Jewish influence!

The Easter-Passover Controversy

Eusebius relates that Polycarp, a disciple of John, who had known several of the original apostles, strongly resisted the introduction of Easter in the place of Passover. He visited Rome in 154 A.D. to discuss the growing heated controversy with Anicetus, the Roman bishop. Polycarp was bishop of the Church of God at Smyrna. He was baptized by John, the brother of James. He held to the Passover as an institution handed down by John, the last living original apostle of Christ.

At the meeting nothing was resolved. Eusebius records: “For neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp not to observe it [the Passover] because he had always observed it with John the disciple of our Lord, and the rest of the apostles, with whom he associated; and neither did Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it who said that he was bound to follow the customs of the presbyters before him.”

Eusebius relates that Polycarp was later taken and executed “on a great sabbath day.” The marginal note explains that the “GREAT SABBATH DAY” was the Feast of Unleavened Bread!

Controversy Explodes Again

The controversy flared up again toward the end of the second century. The two major protagonists of the controversy were Victor of Rome (A.D. 189-199) who championed the Easter-Sunday tradition, on one side, and Polycrates, the disciple of Polycarp, who was the bishop of Ephesus and representative of the Asian Churches, who strongly advocated the traditional Passover date of Nisan 14. Victor attempted to “*cut off whole churches of God, who observed the tradition of an ancient custom,*” the true Passover, says Eusebius.

According to Eusebius (ca. 260-340 A.D.), Polycrates, claiming to possess the genuine apostolic tradition transmitted to him by the apostles Philip and John, refused to be frightened into submission by Victor's threats.

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon from about 176 A.D., tried to intervene as peacemaker in the controversy. He warned Pope Victor not to break the unity with “the many bishops of Asia and the East, who *WITH THE JEWS CELEBRATED THE PASSOVER* on the fourteenth day of the new moon” (*NPNF*, 2nd, III, p.370). In addition, Apollinarius, bishop of Hierapolis (ca. A.D. 170), declared: “The 14th Nisan is the *TRUE PASSOVER OF OUR LORD*, the great Sacrifice;

instead of the lamb, we have the Lamb of God” (Bacchiocchi, p.199, footnote).

However, around 400 A.D. those Christians who maintained the Jewish Passover ritual were strongly attacked by Severian, bishop of Gabala. Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis (ca. A.D. 315-403) declares that the "heresy," as he called it, of the Quartodeciman Passover was still rising up in the world in his own time.

Notice the words of Eusebius in his Church history:

“A question of no small importance arose at that time [the close of the second century]. For the parishes of Asia, as from an OLDER TRADITION, held that the FOURTEENTH DAY OF THE MOON, on which day the Jews were commanded to sacrifice the lamb, SHOULD BE OBSERVED AS THE FEAST OF THE SAVIOUR’S PASSOVER . . . the bishops of Asia, led by Polycrates, decided to HOLD TO THE *OLD CUSTOM* handed down to them. He himself in a letter which he addressed to Victor and the Church of Rome, set forth in the following words the tradition which had come down to him.

“ *We observe the EXACT DAY, neither adding, nor taking away.* For in Asia also great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise on the day of the Lord's coming, when he shall come with glory from heaven, and shall seek out all the saints. Among these are Philip, one of the twelve apostles . . . and, moreover, John, who was both a witness and a teacher, who reclined on the bosom of the Lord . . . and Polycarp in Smyrna, who was a bishop and martyr . . . *Those observed the fourteenth day of the Passover according to the gospel, DEVIATING IN NO RESPECT, but following the rule of faith*” (*Anti-Nicean Fathers*, vol. 8, pp.773-774).

They observed scrupulously the EXACT DAY of the PASSOVER. This means they observed it at the end of the 14th of Nisan, as all **the** Jews had for centuries. They did not “change” it by observing it a night early, or take away from it. They did not “change” it to “Easter Sunday,” either. In fact, they deviated from the Jewish Passover time, calculation and date “*in NO respect*”!

How different from mainstream Christianity which embraces the pagan “Easter” Sunday, which stems from ancient Babylon! And how different from some Churches today who profess to observe the “Passover,” but confuse it with the “Last Supper” of Christ and His disciples. They not only change the date to the evening before the Jewish Passover, but also take away the Passover “meal” itself, the dinner, including the prescribed “bitter herbs” and lamb!

Sadly, faithful Polycrates’ letter did not persuade Victor, whose extravagant estimation of his own position led him to think of himself as the head of the entire worldwide Church, as the bishop of Rome. He “excommunicates the churches of Asia Minor for clinging to a usage in regard to the celebration of Easter [Passover, sic] which had been handed down to them from the Apostles,” wrote J. B. Lightfoot in *The Apostolic Fathers* (pp.68-70). Victor was furious. Nothing could stop his wrath. At this time entire churches were excommunicated, disfellowshipped, by the bishop of Rome, for adhering to the faith once delivered to the saints, and observing the Passover at the same time as the Jews!

Their whole problem, according to Victor, was their tenacious adherence to the JEWISH PASSOVER! It was anti-Semitism at its most virulent and pestilential form! It was every feature of "Jewishness" that the Romans wanted to expunge!

Anti-Semitism in the Roman Empire

The first non-observer of the 14th Nisan Passover, Irenaeus indicates, was actually bishop Sixtus of Rome (ca. 116-125 A.D.). But the 14th Nisan Passover was even observed in Rome by some churches prior to Pope Victor's time. Apparently it was under bishop Sotus, the successor to Anicetus, that relations became "more tense" between the advocates of Easter-Sunday versus the Jewish Quartodeciman Passover.

Says Bacchiocchi of this issue: "The conflict and tension between Judaism and the Empire, which became particularly acute under Hadrian, may well have induced Bishop Sixtus to take steps to SUBSTITUTE those distinctive JEWISH FESTIVITIES AS THE PASSOVER AND THE SABBATH with new dates and theological motivations IN ORDER TO AVOID ANY SEMBLANCE OF JUDAISM" (p.203).

Rome and Alexandria, after having "eliminated the Judaizing Quartodeciman tradition, REPUDIATED EVEN THE JEWISH COMPUTATIONS, MAKING THEIR OWN TIME CALCULATIONS, since such a dependence on the Jews must have appeared humiliating" (M. Righetti, quoted by Bacchiocchi in *From Sabbath to Sunday*, p.206).

By the time of the Nicaean Council, in 325 A.D., during the reign of Emperor Constantine, the hatred of everything "Jewish" had reached a peak in the Roman Empire. Constantine, desiring that Christianity be completely free from any and all Jewish influence, wrote:

"It appears an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are, therefore, deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul . . . *Let us then have NOTHING IN COMMON with the detestable Jewish crowd.* . . . All should UNITE in desiring that which sound reason appears to demand, and in AVOIDING ALL PARTICIPATION IN THE PERJURED CONDUCT OF THE JEWS" (Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3,18-19; *NPNF* 2nd, 1, pp.524-525, quoted in Bacchiocchi, p.206).

This same anti-Jewish resentment and hostility is revealed in an even earlier document, dated to circa A.D. 243, where a certain Pseudo-Cyprian in *De Pascha computus* says: "we desire to show . . . that Christians need at no time . . . to walk in blindness and stupidity behind the Jews as though they did not know what was **the** day of Passover . . ." (quoted by Bacchiocchi, p.206).

Gradually, the influence and pressure of the Roman emperors, and the apostate Church in Rome, prevailed in the Empire and the observance of the Jewish Passover by Christians ceased within the bounds of the Empire. Gentile Christians *turned their backs on the true faith* delivered to the saints.

Emperor Constantine, a pagan worshipper of the sun, but who was "baptized" on his death

bed, wrote the following to those who persisted in observing the true Passover in his day:

“Forasmuch, then, as it is no longer possible to bear with your pernicious errors, we give warning by this present statute that none of you henceforth presume to assemble yourselves together. We have directed, accordingly, that you be deprived of all the houses in which you are accustomed to hold your assemblies; and forbid the holding of your superstitious and senseless meetings. . . .” (Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, bk. 3).

The Nicean Council

At the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325, during the reign of Emperor Constantine, the bishops of the Catholic Church decreed concerning the Passover that: “All the brethren in the East who formerly celebrated Easter [Passover] WITH THE JEWS [the Jews never celebrated what we call “Easter”], will henceforth keep it at the SAME TIME AS THE ROMANS, with us and with all those who from ancient times have celebrated the feast at the same time with us.”

Emperor Constantine, having been totally disgusted with the disagreements and controversies within the Christian community regarding the date of “Easter,” then exhorted all the bishops of the universal Church to embrace “the practice which is observed at once in the city of Rome, and in Africa; throughout Italy, and in Egypt” (*NPNF*, 2nd, I, p.525). Henceforth the power of the Roman Empire was used to *enforce Easter observance upon “Christians,”* and to prohibit and forbid true Passover observance!

Thus by 325 A.D. the true celebration of the ancient Passover, which had been the practice of the Jews, the family of Jesus, Jesus Himself, the apostles, and the early Church in Jerusalem, and throughout the region of Asia, as well as various other portions of the Empire, including some churches in Rome itself, was systematically rejected, repudiated and abolished, because of its connection with the hated and maligned Jews. Instead, the pagan worship of Easter Sunday observance was now transferred to the Church, supposedly in honor of Christ’s resurrection. Though its very name, “Easter,” is the name of a pagan goddess of spring and fertility, its very name emblematic of its true origin, it was cleverly slipped into the Church in the place of Passover observance.

The long struggle between Passover and Easter was finally decided – by the power of Rome – in favor of Easter! True Passover observance, by Christians, was halted, ended, by the force and power of Imperial edict and decree of the apostate Church in the Roman Empire.

By 364 A.D., at the Council of Laodicea, both the Passover and the Sabbath were completely abolished by the Roman state. The new state religion, a bizarre blending and amalgamation of paganism and Christianity, devoid of any remaining “Jewish” influences, became the dominant religious power in Europe for over one thousand years. Paganism, cloaked in outer “Christian” appearing clothing, triumphed over the truth. Satan’s great deception was complete. The “Great Whore” had triumphed.

But only temporarily. God is working and restoring His TRUE PASSOVER for all who desire to obey Him and keep His commandments!