

The Passover Controversy in the East and West

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2004
(unpublished)

Second century Gentile churches followed two calendar traditions concerning Passover. Almost all of the churches in Asia (where Paul devoted much of his ministry [1 Cor 16:8, 19; Acts 19:10, 26]), as well as churches in Asia Minor, Cilicia, Syria, Judea (until c. 135) and Mesopotamia, observed Passover in accordance with the Jewish calendar, on the fourteenth day of the first month, the month of Nissan (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.23.1; 5:24:1; Athanasius, *Syn.* 2; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 70.9.8-9; 10.3-5; Theodoret, *Haer. Fab. Comp.* 3.4; see Cantalamessa 1993:128b).¹ Far from being a minor schismatic group, Gentile Christians who celebrated Passover on Nissan 14 stretched across a vast geographic region that represented the heartland of apostolic Christianity.

By contrast, the churches in the West—in Italy, Greece (including Corinth), Spain, Britain, Gaul (which included the present-day area of France, Belgium, the south Netherlands, south-west Germany)—observed Passover on the Sunday following Nissan 14 (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.23.1; *Vit. Const.* 3.18). These churches retained the name *πάσχα* (Passover)² but they moved away from celebrating Passover on the same day as Jews, with Jews and in the manner of Jews. Little by little, they de-Judaized Passover.

When did the split between East and West over the dating of Passover occur? According to Epiphanius (*Pan.* 70.9.2), who sought to answer this question, most of the churches in the East and West until c. 135 followed a common tradition of observing Passover when the Jerusalem church did, on Nissan 14.³ The Jewish overseers (*ἐπισκόπων*) of the

¹ ‘The Quartodeciman [Passover on Nissan 14] controversy, which continued for over two centuries in Asia Minor (Canon no. 7 of the Synod of Laodicea, ca. 350), testifies with clarion voice to the perennial desire of many Anatolian Christians to maintain the Jewish heritage of the Christian observance of Easter/Passover’ (Oster 1992). Athanasius (*Syn.* 2) writes in the fourth century that ‘the Syrians, Cilicians, and those who dwell in Mesopotamia dissented from us and kept the Pascha at the same time as the Jews’ (trans. Cantalamessa 1993:162).

² The term ‘Easter,’ with reference to the Christian festival, is first attested in the writings of Bede (eighth century). Many scholars today anachronistically use the term when rendering *πάσχα* (or its equivalent) in English translations of patristic texts (even Acts 12:4 in the King James Version mentions ‘Easter’). This has unfortunately contributed to the mistaken notion that the early church abandoned the name ‘Passover’ for ‘Easter’ or instituted a completely new Christian festival.

³ Epiphanius quotes the Regulation of the Apostles, which he considers to be a reliable source, ‘You shall not calculate, but celebrate the feast whenever your brethren from the Circumcision do. Keep it together with them...Even if they err, do not be concerned’ (Epiphanius, *Pan.* 70.10.2, 6; trans. Cantalamessa 1993:73-74; critical edition: *GCS* [Holl/Dummer] 3.243; cf. Boyarin 1999:13; L’Huillier 1996:21). Epiphanius rejects the Audian interpretation of the Regulation that ‘Keep it together with them’ refers to Christians celebrating Passover with non-Christian Jews. However, he acknowledges that ‘the Circumcision’ (Jewish Christian overseers in Jerusalem until c. 135) observed Passover on Nissan 14 and led the whole church in following this practice.

Jerusalem church were instrumental in determining the proper date of Passover for the Gentile wing of the church:

For this was their chief and entire concern: the one unity, so that there would be no schisms or divisions...Now altogether there were fifteen bishops from the circumcision, and it was necessary at that time, when the bishops from the circumcision were being ordained in Jerusalem, for the whole world to follow them and celebrate the feast with them, that there might be one accord and one confession, one feast celebrated; this was the reason for their solicitude which gathered the minds of people into the unity of the church. <But since the feast?> could not be celebrated <in this fashion?> for such a long time, by God's good pleasure in Constantine's reign the matter was <set right> for the sake of harmony (Epiphanius, *Pan.* 70.10.3-5; trans. Amidon 1990:274; critical edition: *GCS* [Holl/Dummer] 3.243; cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.5-6).

Epiphanius comments that the unifying influence of the circumcised overseers ceased during the reign of Hadrian when all Jews, including Christian Jews, were expelled from Jerusalem (c. 135).⁴ The subsequent two centuries, from the Hadrianic exile until the Council of Nicaea (c. 325), was marked by controversy in the church over the dating of Passover:

In a word, there was great confusion and fatigue, as many of the scholars know, during the times when a tumult arose in the preaching of the church concerning the debate about this feast, and in the time of Polycarp and Victor, when the East and the West in their dissension did not accept letters of commendation from each other, but at certain other times as well, and in the time of Alexander bishop of Alexandria, and Crescentius, each of whom is known to have written to the other and quarreled, and down to our own times. <The church> had continued in this troubled state since the time following the circumcised bishops. Therefore the <bishops> from every place gathered at that time and having investigated the issue carefully, ruled that the feast should be celebrated with unanimity, according to what was fitting to the date and the rite (Epiphanius, *Pan.* 70.9.8-9; trans. Amidon 1990:273-74; critical edition: *GCS* [Holl/Dummer] 3.242).

Epiphanius mentions Polycarp (bishop of Smyrna) and Victor (bishop of Rome), two second-century church leaders who agreed on the importance of celebrating Passover but differed strongly over *when* the church should celebrate the festival. Victor was furious that the churches of the East continued to observe Passover on Nissan 14 and he threatened to

Epiphanius' account would explain how such a large geographic segment of the second century church, in all of Asia and much of Asia Minor, came to accept and maintain the practice of celebrating Passover on Nissan 14. The account is also consistent with the Torah-observant ethos of the early Jerusalem congregation (Acts 21:17-26) and what we know of the later Jewish Christian 'Nazarene sect' (cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.5; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 29.7.1-8). Moreover, John, one of the pillars of the Jerusalem church, is reputed to have observed Passover on Nissan 14 (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.16). It makes the most sense, in our view, to assume that the decline of Jerusalem (Jewish) leadership in the church (from c. 135) cut lose an already existing tendency to de-Judaize Passover in the churches of the West, around the time of Xystus' bishopric in Rome (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.4-5; 5.24.14). Cf. Holl 1927:218ff.; Richard 1965:260-82; 1961:179-212; Huber 1969:56ff.

⁴ See Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.5-6.

excommunicate the Asian dioceses unless they conformed to the Passover tradition in Rome.⁵ In response, the bishops in the East gathered together and appointed Polycrates, the bishop of Ephesus, to reply to Victor.

Polycrates' Letter to Victor

Polycrates wrote to Victor in *c.* 191 from Ephesus, the city from which Paul wrote First Corinthians (1 Cor 16:8). The letter is preserved for us in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* (*c.* 311),⁶ and we may assume that Eusebius came across it when he catalogued the library at Caesaria. Eusebius introduces the letter with editorial comments:

At that time, no small controversy arose because all the dioceses of Asia thought it right, as though by more ancient tradition, to observe (παραφυλάττειν) for the feast of the Saviour's Passover (πάσχα) the fourteenth day of the moon, on which the Jews had been commanded to kill the lamb. Thus it was necessary to finish the fast on that day, whatever day of the week it might be. Yet it was not the custom to celebrate in this manner in the churches throughout the rest of the world, for from apostolic tradition they kept the custom which still exists that it is not right to finish the fast on any day save that of the resurrection of our Saviour. Many meetings and conferences with bishops were held on this point, and all unanimously formulated in their letters the doctrine of the church for those in every country that the mystery of the Lord's resurrection from the dead could be celebrated on no day save Sunday, and that on that day alone we should celebrate the end of the paschal (πάσχα) fast...but the bishops in Asia were led by Polycrates in persisting that it was necessary (χρῆναι) to keep the custom which had been handed down to them of old. Polycrates himself in a document which he addressed to Victor and to the church of Rome, expounds the tradition which had come to him as follows:

Therefore we keep the day undeviatingly, neither adding nor taking away, for in Asia great luminaries (στοιχεῖα) sleep, and they will rise on the day of the coming of the Lord, when he shall come with glory from heaven and seek out all the saints. Such were Philip of the twelve apostles, and two of his daughters who grew old as virgins, who sleep in Hierapolis, and another daughter of his, who lived in the Holy Spirit, rests at Ephesus. Moreover, there is also John, who lay on the Lord's breast, who was a priest wearing the breastplate, and a martyr, and teacher. He sleeps at Ephesus. And there is also Polycarp at Smyrna, both bishop and martyr, and Thraseas, both bishop, from Eumeneia, who sleeps in Smyrna. And why should I speak of Sagaris, bishop and martyr, who sleeps at Laodicea, and Papirius, too, the blessed, and Melito the eunuch, who lived entirely in the Holy Spirit, who lies in Sardis, waiting for the visitation from

⁵ Dissension existed in the church of Rome over the dating of Passover. Prior to Victor, during Eleutherius' bishopric (*c.* 174-189), a presbyter by the name of Blastus, and 'many of the Church' who followed him, called into question the Western dating of Passover, '...there is Blastus, who would latently introduce Judaism. For he says the Passover is not to be kept otherwise than according to the law of Moses, on the fourteenth day of the month' (Pseudo-Tertullian, *Haer.* 8; cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.15; 5.20.1).

⁶ The source documents quoted in *Hist. eccl.* 5.23-25 are generally held to be reliable. Petersen 1992:317-21 raises the problem of inconsistencies in Eusebius' editorial comments but concludes that the revisions are superficial.

heaven when he will rise from the dead? All these kept the fourteenth day of the Passover according to the gospel, never swerving, but following according to the rule of the faith. And I also, Polycrates, the least of you all, live according to the tradition of my kinsmen, and some of them have I followed. For seven of my family were bishops and I am the eighth, and my kinsmen ever kept the day when the people put away the leaven. Therefore, brethren, I who have lived sixty-five years in the Lord and conversed with brethren from every country, and have studied all holy Scripture, am not afraid of threats, for they have said who were greater than I, 'It is better to obey God rather than men.'

He continues about the bishops who when he wrote were with him and shared his opinion, and says thus:

And I could mention the bishops who are present whom you required me to summon, and I did so. If I should write their names they would be many multitudes; and they knowing my feeble humanity, agreed with the letter, knowing that not in vain is my head grey, but that I have ever lived in Christ Jesus.

Upon this Victor, who presided at Rome, immediately cut off from the common unity the dioceses of all Asia, together with the adjacent churches, on the ground of heterodoxy, and he indited letters announcing that all the Christians there were absolutely excommunicated. But by no means all were pleased by this, so they issued counter-requests to him to consider the cause of peace and unity and love towards his neighbours. Their words are extant, sharply rebuking Victor. Among them too Irenaeus, writing in the name of the Christians whose leader he was in Gaul (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.23.1–5.24.11 [Lake, LCL]).

It is notable how many apostles, bishops and heroes of the faith Polycrates mentions who observed Passover on Nissan 14. Moreover, it is significant that he refers to them positively as *στοιχεῖα* (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.2), the term Paul uses in Galatians 4:9 (cf. Gal 4:3; Col 2:8, 20) to refer to some kind of calendar-related enslavement. We may conclude that Polycrates, who 'studied all holy Scripture,' did not interpret Paul's comments in Galatians 4:9-10 as precluding the Christian observance of Passover.

Striking also is the language of 'oughtness' used in reference to celebrating Passover. Neither Polycrates nor Victor considers the dating of Passover to be a matter of indifference or adiaphora. Neither is flexible on this issue. On the contrary, both bishops consider the celebration of Passover to be a matter of obeying God and deviation from their received traditions to be heterodoxy:

1. According to Eusebius, Polycrates believed that it was 'necessary (*χρῆναι*) to keep (*διαφυλάττειν*) the custom' (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.1).
2. Polycrates quotes Acts 5:29 concerning the celebration of Passover on Nissan 14, '...for they have said who were greater than I, "It is better to obey (*πειθαρχεῖν*) God rather than men"' (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.7). For Polycrates and the bishops of Asia,

observing Passover on Nissan 14 was not only a good tradition, an ancient tradition and an apostolic tradition. It was a matter of obeying God.

3. Polycrates writes that the tradition of observing Passover on Nissan 14 is ‘according to the gospel...according to the rule of the faith’ (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.6).
4. Victor excommunicated all the churches of the East because he believed that observing Passover on the proper date was essential. Similarly, Polycrates and all the bishops of Asia were willing to be excommunicated by Victor rather than violate what they believed to be God’s will (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.23.2-4).

Why did Polycrates and the bishops of Asia consider the celebration of Passover on Nissan 14 to be mandated by God? Support for their position came from the laws of Passover in Exodus 12 (read at Melito’s Passover seder [Melito, *Peri Pascha* 1]) and the example of Jesus in the gospels (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.6; Hippolytus of Rome, *Against All the Heresies*). In addition to these authoritative texts, a living chain of apostolic tradition existed in the person of Polycarp (bishop of Smyrna), who lived from c. 69-155.⁷ Polycarp served as a bridge between the apostolic and post-apostolic period. He knew John and the other apostles and testified that they observed Passover on Nissan 14 (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.16). Polycarp passed on this tradition, which he learned from the apostles, to Polycrates’ generation of bishops in Asia. This chain of apostolic tradition (John → Polycarp → Polycrates and the bishops of Asia) is historically plausible and not disputed by Victor, bishop of Rome. The traditional place of John’s burial in Ephesus would have also been a perpetual reminder of the apostolic origin of the tradition.

Irenaeus’ Testimony About Polycarp

Irenaeus (bishop of Lyons in Gaul), who followed the Roman dating of Passover, explains that the Asian tradition of observing Passover on Nissan 14 originated, at least in part, with the apostle John. Irenaeus knew this because he personally knew Polycarp (John’s disciple) when he was a boy:

For while I was still a boy I knew you in lower Asia in Polycarp’s house when you were a man of rank in the royal hall and endeavoring to stand well with him. I remember the events of those days more clearly than those which happened recently, for what we learn as children grows up with the soul and is united to it, so that I can speak even of the place in which the blessed Polycarp sat and disputed, how he came in and went out, the character of his life, the appearance of his body, the discourses which he made to the people, how he reported his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord, how he remembered their words, and what were the things concerning the Lord which he had heard from them, and about their miracles, and about their teaching, and how Polycarp had received them from the

⁷ Polycrates was about thirty years old when Polycarp died.

eyewitnesses of the word of life, and reported all things in agreement with the Scriptures (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.20.5-6 [Lake, LCL]; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.3.4).

According to Irenaeus, Polycarp always celebrated Passover with John and the other apostles on Nissan 14. After becoming the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp sought to convince Anicetus (the bishop of Rome) to observe Passover on Nissan 14 as the apostles did:

...and when the blessed Polycarp was staying in Rome in the time of Anicetus, though they disagreed a little about some other things as well, they immediately made peace, having no wish for strife between them on this matter. For neither was Anicetus able to persuade Polycarp not to observe it [Passover on Nissan 14], inasmuch as he had always done so in company with John the disciple of our Lord and the other apostles with whom he had associated; nor did Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it [Passover on Nissan 14], for he said that he ought to keep the custom of those who were presbyters before him (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.16 [Lake, LCL]; cf. 4.14.1; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.3.4; Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 17).

Anicetus did not claim to follow apostolic tradition as the basis for Rome's Passover dating, the Sunday after Nissan 14. Rather, he claimed to follow the tradition of the 'presbyters before him' who, according to Irenaeus, went back only as far as 'Pius and Telesphorus and Xystus.' These were the bishops in Rome just before, during and after the Jerusalem church went into exile (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.4-6; 5.24.14). Eusebius (in the fourth century), on the other hand, held that the Roman dating of Passover originated with the apostles, but he provides no line of transmission to substantiate his claim (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.23.1; 5.24.14, 16). Not unexpectedly, later sources attribute the tradition to Peter and Paul.⁸

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⁸ Later sources claim that the Sunday Passover tradition originated with Peter and Paul, 'Moreover the Quartodecimans affirm that the observance of the fourteenth day was delivered to them by the Apostle John: while the Romans and those in the western parts assure us that their usage originated with the Apostles Peter and Paul. Neither of these parties however can produce any written testimony in confirmation of what they assert' (Sozomon, *Hist. eccl.* 2.2.131; cf. *The Paschal Canon of Anatolius of Alexandria*).

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