
Christian Holidays: Passover to Pentecost

by: Ronald L. Dart

I have asked this before but let me ask it again. Why was a Gentile church, 30 years after the ascension of Christ, observing the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread? What is generally assumed to be a Jewish holiday. Why is it that Easter is never mentioned in the Bible as a Christian observance?

Now if you are a King James version reader, you may recall Acts 12 and verse 4, where Herod had arrested Peter, put him in jail, quote "Intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people." The problem is, that the Greek word translated 'Easter', is the Greek word 'Pascha' which means Passover. What the passage says is that "Herod intended after Passover to bring Peter forth to the people."

So why, 1600 years later, did the King James translators use Easter instead of Passover here? Well the reason is, by the third century, the entire church had begun to confuse Easter and Passover.

Why Did The Early Church Stop Observing the Passover?

How did it happen that the early church stopped observing the Passover, and began observing Easter? First realize that at the beginning it was not a controversy or a question of Passover versus Easter. It was a calendar controversy. It was a question of when the church would observe Pascha? You read this all through the early literature, when are we going to observe Pascha. The word Pascha means Passover.

The issue is confusing because even modern English works, that will be discussing this controversy, will translate Pascha as Easter. They will be rumbling along through something from Eusebius, which was written in Greek or one of the other early church fathers, who refers to Pascha, and they will translate it as Easter, all the way down to our day, today.

But you see what was at issue in the second century, was whether they would observe Passover on any day of the week or only on a Sunday? Later, the issue became, which Sunday are we going to observe it on? The reason for this is not too difficult to understand. The original Passover took place on the 14th day of the first month of the Jewish calendar. It could occur on

any day of the week, but many of the people wanted to observe it only on Sunday for various reasons.

Now the issue is further confused by a misunderstanding of the significance of the Sunday following the crucifixion of Jesus. Of course, all Christians will say that they know what that signifies, "That signifies the resurrection. That is the day of the resurrection, that's Easter."

Well, hold on. This was also an important day in the Jewish calendar. It was the day of offering the first fruits of the barley harvest. It was also the first day of the countdown to Pentecost, 50 days later. You may know, that the word 'Pentecost' actually means 50th. It is the 50th day after this particular day.

Wave Sheath Offering

The law forbade the eating of any grain from that year's harvest until a sheaf of the grain had been cut, prepared and presented to the priest. It was cut on Saturday evening, just after sundown when the Sabbath was over, and work could be done, that little sheaf of grain was prepared overnight and presented to God the next morning (Leviticus 23:9-14, John 20:17). It was the firstfruits. This first sheaf of grain was also called the wave sheaf, in the King James version, and was the very first of the firstfruits of that year's harvest.

Firstfruits

Now in Christian theology, and you can trace this with a concordance yourself, if you have one. Just sit down and look up the word 'firstfruits'. Christ is called the first of the first fruits (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23), so this particular Sunday was important to both Jews and Christians in the latter part of the first century and well into the second.

To the Jews, it was a day of the offering of firstfruits, the first day of the seven weeks leading up to Pentecost, which is also called the 'feast of the firstfruits' or the 'feast of weeks' (Leviticus 23:15-22, Exodus 34:22, Deuteronomy 16:10, 16, 2 Chronicles 8:13).

To Christians, it was the morning of Jesus' presentation to the Father (Leviticus 23:9-14, John 20:17) and of His first appearance to His disciples (John 20:19-21), and for them, just like the Jews, it was the first day of the seven weeks to Pentecost (Leviticus 23:15-22, Acts 2).

The symbolism of the Jewish observance was seen to point directly to Christ. The connection was clear and strong, right from the start, and it was clearly seen to be so by the New Testament writers. The early church had not adopted a calendar different from that of the Jews in the first century.

The First of the Sabbaths

Now consider this carefully, this Sunday was celebrated early on, as the day of Christ first appearances after His resurrection. It was an anniversary that appeared on the Jewish calendar on the first Sunday after Passover every year.

Now consider this very familiar verse from the Bible, Matthew 28 verse one, "Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the sepulchre." Now what you should know about this is, that the translation is incorrect, and it is out of this and the other references to the 'first day of the week' in the New Testament, that a great misunderstanding has arisen. Literally, the expression should be, 'the first of the sabbaths' and it is plural. That's what the Greek says.

They didn't really use the word 'week' as we use the word 'week.' A Jew, in referring to a Sunday morning would never refer to it as the first day of the week. For him, it would be the 'Morrow after the Sabbath', or the 'day after the Sabbath.' They generally looked at everything, in relationship to the Sabbath, and so consequently in this expression, literally in the Greek it says, "The first of the Sabbaths," in the plural. There is no other word for 'week' other than the 'Sabbath' and the understanding of week that goes with the Sabbath is understood by all.

Count 50 Days to Pentecost

It's a reference to a passage in Leviticus that marks the beginning of the count to Pentecost. What it says in Leviticus 23 verse 15 is this, "You shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, there shall be seven complete Sabbaths. {16} You shall count 50 days to the day after the seventh Sabbath, then you shall present a new grain offering to the LORD." That 50th day is the day we know as Pentecost. This was well understood by all Christians in the first century and Jewish Christians in particular were familiar with it and it was a part of their lives, that this day of the offering of the wave sheaf, the first sheaf of the wave offering, was the first day of seven Sabbaths or seven weeks leading up to Pentecost.

So what He is really saying here is, "On the first day of the weeks, leading up to Pentecost, it is not a weekly occurrence, not the first day of a given week, it is an annual day, it's an anniversary, that this particular day is, that is being referred to in Matthew 28 verse 1, and everywhere else in the New Testament where it talks about 'the first day of the week'.

Wave Sheaf Sunday

Every place in the New Testament where you see the expression 'the first day of the week' is not merely referring to a Sunday, but to a singular day of the year. The first day of the seven Sabbaths or weeks leading up to Pentecost. It is an annual, not a weekly, observance. It was Wave Sheaf Sunday.

How Wave Sheaf Sunday got confused with Easter is an interesting story all by its self.

Passover Observed on the 14th Day of the First Month

It is well-established, both in the Bible and in history, that late in the first century, the entire Christian Church still observed Passover and they observed it on the 14th day of the first month of the Jewish calendar. This meant that Passover could fall on any day of the week. Meanwhile,

much of the visible Christian church observed resurrection Sunday, on the Sunday following the Passover.

People Assumed The Resurrection was on Sunday

No one saw Jesus being resurrected. So, they didn't know that the resurrection was on Sunday morning. They assumed it. The truth is, there was no witnesses to the moment of Jesus' resurrection and we discussed this before in our article on "Three Days and Three Nights" on how it was possible and can be demonstrated in the Bible that Jesus could have been crucified on Wednesday afternoon, buried late Wednesday, then He rose from the dead on Saturday evening instead of Sunday morning. Remember, no one saw Him Sunday morning being resurrected. (You can request our free article "Three Days and Three Nights".)

Meanwhile, as I said, much of the Christian church observed resurrection Sunday on the Sunday following the Passover and because it was the Passover season, they still called this Sunday observance, Pascha or Passover.

Quarto Deciman Controversy

Now a controversy arose between the Western Christians, who observed Passover on Wave Sheaf Sunday, and the Eastern Christians who observed it on the 14th day of the new moon right along with the Jews. The controversy is called the Quarto Deciman Controversy and it is discussed at length in the Catholic Encyclopedia.

The controversy became important along about 190 A.D., but Easter is still not in the picture. These people were writing in Greek and Latin and the word in both languages used everywhere discussing it, is Pascha, which means Passover. So most of the bishops in the churches in Asia minor, and in Asia were actually observing Passover on the 14th day of the first month of the Jewish calendar.

Sunday Observance of Passover Won Out

The Roman Church, and those churches in the West, affiliated with it, were observing Passover on Sunday, constantly the same day of the week, every year. Now the Sunday observance of Passover won out in most of the known churches, but early in the fourth century, a second controversy arose. They were all settled on Sunday now, or at least most of them were, but now the question was, which Sunday?

Churches Distanced Themselves From The Jews

Through the intervening years, the churches had increasingly distanced themselves from the Jews, dropping as many links as they could drop. I suppose there was some anti-Semitism involved in this, but there was another reason as well. During some of the years over the turn of the first century and into the second century, there was a lot of persecution of Jews, in Rome in

particular, and during that time, it was really hard on Christians to be associated with, or any assumption of association with the Jews. So, to be observing the same Sabbath Day as the Jews or to be observing the Passover like the Jews did, could make people assume that they were Jews.

The result was that if the Jews were being forced to leave Rome then the Christians would have to go as well. So, in the process of time, they were getting themselves as far away from the Jews as they could possibly get. One of the ways they were moving was on the question of when they observed Passover.

Council of Nicaea

The Council of Nicaea in the year of 325 ruled these items. "One, Easter must be celebrated all throughout the world on the same Sunday. Second, this Sunday must follow the 14th day of the Paschal moon." Do you know what that means? That means it has to follow the 14th day of the first month of the Jewish calendar when the Passover is to be observed. "That moon," this is the third point, "was to be accounted the Paschal moon whose 14th day followed the spring equinox."

Now there is a curious little thing about the Jewish calendar that most people probably don't know. It is a strictly lunar calendar. It goes strictly by the moon. When you get a new moon, you get a new month.

Now if you know much about the calendar at all, you will realize that the length of time from one new moon to another is not quite right for 12 months to make a year. It comes up a few days short. So, in the Jewish calendar ever so often, in order to keep the holy days, the Jewish holidays, in conjunction with the seasons that were important to them because they were agricultural in nature, they would add a 13th month to the calendar which shoved the following year later. This was so that they would not slowly move out of the seasons they were supposed to be in. Simple, right?

The Jews had a system for doing that. What actually happened at the Council of Nicaea was the rejection of the Jewish system and they went to their own. They decided that the Paschal, the Passover, should be the 14th day of the moon following the spring equinox and that Easter Sunday or Paschal Sunday, as it should be called, was observed the following Sunday. So, in a sense, what they were doing was still following the Jewish calendar, but they had changed the way in which the leap years of the Jewish calendar are concerned. They added the 13th month to kick the Passover after the vernal equinox. Where did they get the authority to do that? They took it upon themselves, it is as simple as that.

The fourth item in their list was that some provision should be made, probably by the church in Alexandria, as being the best skilled in astronomical calculations, for determining the proper date of Easter and communicating it to the rest of the world.

These were the decisions that were handed down at that time by the Church. Now realize, what they had done was to move their Passover to the Sunday following the Jewish Passover. Now

they moved Passover Sunday to the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox, but it was still to them the Passover.

Easter

What we have had up until this time is purely a matter of calendar, but they had, by coincidence or design, moved the Passover to coincide with an ancient pagan fertility festival that involved all kinds of symbols of fertility, like rabbits and eggs. The Festival that would be known in the Anglo-Saxon world as Easter named after a pagan goddess. The name Easter comes from the ancient Anglo-Saxon 'Goddess of the Dawn.'

In pagan cultures, it was an annual Spring Festival, and it was held in her honor. She was also a fertility goddess, hence the fertility symbols of eggs and rabbits. The celebration of Easter, with a sunrise service for the Goddess of the Dawn, all the Easter egg hunts and bunnies and stuff is an entirely different holiday from what the church envisioned even in the third century, but because the Church moved the Passover from its original date to the date of Easter, the two holidays became confused and they are still confused right down to this day.

Christians will go out early in the morning, early to a morning sunrise service, actually celebrating the resurrection of Jesus at precisely the same time and in the same way the pagans went out to welcome the 'Goddess of the Dawn.'

This confusion is illustrated from a piece from the online 'Funk and Wagnalls Knowledge Center,' I got it from off of the Internet, and it says this, "The name Easter comes from Ishtar, an ancient Anglo-Saxon goddess originally of the Dawn. In pagan times, an annual Spring Festival was held in her honor. Some Easter customs have come from this and other pre-Christian spring festivals. Others come from the Passover feast of the Jews observed in memory of their deliverance from Egypt. The word Pascal comes from the Latin word that means belonging to the Passover or to Easter."

No, no, no, they can't say that!! It doesn't belong to Easter, it has nothing to do with Easter. Easter is something different. Paschal comes from the Latin word that means belonging to the Passover, but again, this confusion is very common. They continue to say, "formerly Easter and Passover were closely associated." As a matter fact, they actually fell on the same day, once the Roman Church had moved their Passover to Sunday after the vernal equinox.

Continuing to quote, "The resurrection of Jesus took place during the Passover. Christians of the Eastern church initially celebrated both holidays together. That means the resurrection and the Passover, but the Passover can fall any day of the week and Christians of the Western church preferred to celebrate Easter on Sunday, the day of the resurrection."

But you know, Easter as such, has absolutely nothing to do with Christianity. Wave Sheaf Sunday has everything to do with Christianity because it is the day Jesus first appeared to His disciples after His crucifixion and resurrection, and it is the day when Jesus was presented to the father as the firstfruits of the resurrection.

Wave Sheaf Sunday is a date on the Jewish calendar. It's on the day after the Sabbath following Passover, regardless of when the equinox takes place, because you see, the equinox plays no role in the Jewish calendar. The reason is a very simple one. It's an agricultural calendar. It's a lunar calendar adjusted for the time of the year for agriculture.

The problem was that the first ripe barley had to be ready to be cut, somewhere near the middle of the first month of the year. The determination of when that month would be, had to do, originally, not with the equinox but with the condition of the crops in the ground. So how does Christianity, how does Christ, His ministry, His message, how does that relate to the Jewish holiday that symbolizes the firstfruits?

Was The Early Church Unified?

We would like to think that everything was all sweetness and light in the early Church, that they were all unified, and went forward believing and teaching the same thing. Not so! The only reason, I think, is that we have more idiots in the modern world chasing rabbits around religiously, is because we've had more time to develop them, but they had a few strange ideas circulating in the early Christian Church as well.

Resurrection From The Dead

One for example, had to do with the 'resurrection from the dead' and Paul addresses this in first Corinthians chapter 15 verse 12, and it has a lot to do with what we have been talking about. Paul said, "Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?" Now somebody in Corinth was making the case, a theological case saying, "There is no such thing as a resurrection of the dead? And of course, there were Jews (Sadducees) who believed that there was no resurrection of the dead" (Acts 23:8). {13} "But," Paul says, "if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen." Right? {14} "And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is vain, and your faith is also vain."

The whole thing is worthless if Christ is not risen from the dead, {15} "And we are found to be false witnesses of God." Paul is not going to mince words about this. Paul says, "I'm a liar, if that's true, because I have testified of God, that He raised up Christ, whom he didn't raise, if there's no resurrection of the dead. {16} If the dead rise not, Christ is not raised" folks, get it straight. {17} "And if Christ is not raised, your faith is vain, and you are still in your sins."

Oh yes, the death of Christ paid the penalty for your sins. But apparently His resurrection was essential as well. Paul says, {18} "Then they who were fallen asleep in Christ are perished." They are gone, and you will never see them again. {19} "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable." Paul considered Christianity, if it has nothing to do with anything, except in this life, to be an exercise in futility, but, he says, {20} "Now is Christ risen from the dead and become the firstfruits of them that slept."

Now I suspect most people in reading through the Bible, sail right across that without stopping to realize what that means, but the analogy harkens right back to the day when the wave sheaf was cut, just at the end of the Sabbath, prepared all night, and then offered on Sunday morning before

God as the firstfruits of the harvest offered at the same time Christ was ascending to the Father to present himself there. He was the firstfruits of those who had died, which in a sense then connects the resurrection to the harvest, the harvest of firstfruits.

Christ Is First of the Firstfruits

Continuing in 1 Corinthians 15 verse 21, "For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead, {22} for just like Adam all die, even so like Christ shall all be made alive, {23} "But," this is really fascinating, every man, like Christ, can be made alive, "But every man in his own order. Christ the firstfruits, afterward they that are Christ's at his coming." Now it's a real sharp distinction that is drawn there.

Christ the firstfruits, we understand that now, that's the first sheaf of grain that is harvested on Saturday evening and presented on Sunday morning to God, symbolizes Christ being born from the dead. Afterward, at the coming of Christ, the rest of them are resurrected.

Now I expect that all of this is a little confusing to people who are divorced from the land, but Israel was an agricultural society and many of the images, the Bible draws from, to explain the plan of God are agricultural in nature.

There were two major harvests in Palestine, the grain harvest in the spring and the fruit harvest in the autumn. The spring harvest started with barley and ended with wheat. It took place between Passover and Pentecost. Pentecost is also called the feast of firstfruits, because it begins and ends with the offering of the firstfruits harvest, the first day. The first is barley and the second is wheat, so it's only natural that Jesus would refer to the harvest as an analogy for saving people.

There was a day, for example, this is in Luke 10 verse one, where "Jesus appointed 70 to go out, two and two before his face in every city and place where He Himself was planning to go and {2} He said to them, "The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few, pray the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth laborers into his harvest." Jesus saw His disciples going out there preparing a harvest for Him when He comes.

The 'harvest' metaphor is very strong in all of Jesus' teachings. You find it again and again, but it's also strong in all of the holidays of the Bible. The firstfruits of Wave Sheaf Sunday and Pentecost are especially meaningful to Christians.

We, the Church, Are Firstfruits

It was James who said this in James 1 verse 16, "Do not err, my beloved brethren, {17} Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. {18} Of his own will He begat us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."

Jesus is the first, but we also are firstfruits and the connection between the day of the wave sheaf offering when Jesus was presented to the Father as the firstborn from the dead and Pentecost

coming 50 days later, is the whole period of time of harvest in which we live now, in which people are being harvested for God.

There is this sometimes used and sometimes abused Scripture from Revelation chapter 14 verse one, "I looked and behold a Lamb stood on Mount Zion and with him 144,000, having his Father's name written in their foreheads, {2} and I heard a voice from heaven, as a voice of many waters, and a voice of a great thunder and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps. {3} And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, before the four beasts and the elders, and no man could learn that song but the 144,000 which were redeemed from the earth. {4} These were redeemed from among men," the latter part of verse four, "being the firstfruits unto God, and to the Lamb, {5} And in their mouth was found no guile for they are without fault before the throne of God."

The pattern is clear! Christ is the first of the firstfruits and the Saints of God are all the rest of the firstfruits. It's a crying shame that Christian Churches have lost touch with the Christian holidays of the Bible. They are not just Jewish holidays, they are the appointed times of God, times that actually represent His work, His plan and all the things that He is doing through Christ. In the annual celebration of these days, there's so much to be learned about God and his plan for man.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Did you know that the word 'Easter' used in the King James Version in Acts 12:4, was actually the Greek word 'Pascha' meaning Passover?
2. Do you think that the KJV translators used the wrong word intentionally, or do you think that it was just because they confused the holiday, Easter, with God's Holy Day, Passover?
3. Did you know that historians mistakenly mistranslated the Greek word 'Pascha' as Easter when even translating works from the early church?
4. Is it any surprise that God's Holy Days point to Christ?
5. Did you already know that the Jews didn't use the word week, but instead referenced everything based on the Sabbath?
6. Have you ever heard of the Quarto Deciman Controversy? What are your thoughts about it?

7. How much did the fact that the churches started to distance themselves from the Jews affect Christianity?
8. What are your thoughts about how mainstream Christian churches today have confused Easter with Passover and have forgotten all about the Wave Sheaf Offering?
9. Is it a surprise that there were rifts in the early Christian churches of Paul's day?
10. Do you believe that the observance of God's Holy Days that are listed in the Bible are still applicable to Christians today? Why or why not?