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# Easter or Passover

*by: Ronald L. Dart*

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There is a fascinating story that links Easter and Passover, and most of the world goes on blissfully unaware of it. Most people know that Easter and Passover are in the same general season of the year, but what most don't realize, is that the Christian observance of Easter actually arose directly from the Passover. No, I don't mean from the resurrection, I mean from the Passover itself.

## **Pascha**

Part of the confusion arises from a curious use of terms. The Hebrew word for Passover is *pecach* and it is translated into Greek and Latin as *Pascha* everywhere in the Bible. Now underline that in your mind. Everywhere in the Bible where the Passover is mentioned, in the Greek and Latin versions, it is the word *pascha*. Now follow me carefully through this.

Throughout the Latin and Greek churches, the day of the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus is called, in their own languages, *pascha*, Passover. And when the discussion of *pascha* is translated into English, it becomes Easter. Always.

Why on earth and how on earth did this happen? An unrelated question, how on earth did colored eggs and Easter rabbits become connected somehow to the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus? A more absurd connection is hard to imagine.

## **Easter Controversy**

The Catholic Encyclopedia does a good job of outlining the history of development of *pascha*, or as they call it in English, Easter.

If you want to follow up on this, the article that you will want to look for is on the 'Easter controversy', which they conclude went through three phases. The first of these phases was mainly concerned with the lawfulness of celebrating Easter on a week day. We read in Eusebius, they said, and give you the reference. A question of no small importance arose at that time, that is the time of Pope Victor at about A.D. 90. The diocese of all Asia from an older tradition held that the 14th day of the moon on which the Jews were commanded to sacrifice the lamb should always be observed as the feast of the life-giving *pascha*. Now since Eusebius is writing in Greek, he called it what it was, Passover. Naturally the 14th day of the first month can fall on any day of the week. Eusebius is pointing out that from ancient times, the church observed

Passover on the day the Jews sacrificed the lamb. In other words, the 14th day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar.

### **Christian Observance of Passover**

Now when you consider that the Christian observance of Passover was about the sacrifice of Christ as the Passover lamb, that makes a whole lot of sense. In fact, our earliest, I think, apostolic tradition as to this, comes from the apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthians. He said in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 7: "Purge out therefore the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, as you are unleavened. For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us: {8} Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

So, celebrating pascha on the day that the Jews killed the lambs made perfect sense. And that's what all the churches did throughout Asia minor, throughout Palestine, throughout Syria and throughout Mesopotamia in those early years. They all celebrated Passover on the day the Jews killed the lamb.

### **No Lenten Fast Commanded in Bible**

Eusebius says that the Eastern churches contended that the fast ought to end on that day, whatever day of the week it might happen to be, and I presume he's referring to the Lenten season fast.

Continuing to quote "However it was not the custom of the churches in the rest of the world to end it at this point, as they observed the practice, which from apostolic tradition has prevailed to the present time of terminating the fast on no other day, but that of the resurrection of our Savior."

Now, there is no record whatsoever, of a Lenten fast in any of the writings of the apostles. So, we know that the whole idea of a fast leading up to Passover was a post-apostolic development.

### **Bible Commands Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread**

We do however know that Jesus and the apostles kept the Passover and the feast of the Passover (the feast of Unleavened Bread - 1 Corinthians 5:7-8, Leviticus 23:1-8), and we know when they did it. Now bear in mind that when Eusebius speaks of the customs of the Eastern churches, he is talking about Asia minor, today what we call Turkey, Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia. In other words, those church's closest and earliest in the origins of the faith. When he speaks of the rest of the world, he is talking primarily about Rome and Alexandria.

Eusebius continues "Synods and assemblies of bishops were held on this account and all with one consent, through mutual correspondence, drew up an ecclesiastical decree that the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord should be celebrated on no other day, but Sunday and that we should observe the close of the Paschal fast on that day only."

## **Paschal Controversy**

Now the Catholic Encyclopedia at this point says, "The words of the father of church history followed by some extracts which he makes from the controversy letters of the time, tell us almost all we know concerning the Paschal controversy in its first stage." They say almost all we know, they have really covered the water front because there's precious little anywhere else.

It is helpful at this point to notice that they're still calling it the Paschal controversy. But when they translated it into English, they should remember it Passover, this they carefully avoid.

They go on to say "A letter of Saint Irenaeus is among the extracts referred to and this shows that the diversity of practice regarding Easter had existed, at least from the time of Pope Sixtus circa 120 A.D."

## **Polycarp**

Now further Irenaeus states that "Saint Polycarp, who like the other Asiatics kept Easter on the 14th day of the moon, whatever day of the week that might be, following there in the tradition which he claimed to have derived from Saint John the apostle." Now we have no way of verifying that Polycarp got it from John the apostle, but we can verify that the Corinthians got it from Paul, exactly that way. Polycarp came to Rome about 150 A.D. about this very question. He could not be persuaded by Pope Anticetus to relinquish his quartodeciman observance, nevertheless he was not debarred from communion with the Roman church and Irenaeus, while condemning the quartodeciman practice, that's the practice of keeping the Passover on the 14th, nevertheless reproaches Pope Victor with having excommunicated the Asiatics to precipitously and when not having followed the moderation of his predecessors."

Now, the article does not discuss the origins of the diversity that goes back at least to 120 A.D. It doesn't tell you how the church got divided between East and West as it was by that time, nor does it discuss who made the change, East or West, but it seems likely that the Eastern churches, which were unanimous in their observations and who supported Paul, if not John, have the older case. But somehow, a change got introduced.

## **Easter or Passover**

The article continues "The question thus debated was therefore primarily whether Easter was to be kept on Sunday or whether Christian should observe the holy day of the Jews, the 14th of Nisan, which might occur on any day of the week"

Now I don't know if you notice that, as I read along without comment, stopped calling the festival pascha and began calling it Easter. Those who kept Easter with the Jews were called quartodecimans. But even in the time of Pope Victor, this usage hardly extended beyond the churches of Asia minor, where they have already told us that it extended down to Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia.

"After the Pope's strong measures, the quartodecimans seem to have gradually dwindled away. Origen seems to regard them as a mere handful of wrongheaded nonconformists." Of course, that's what we usually consider people who differ from us.

### **Can't Keep Easter with the Jews**

I'm sorry, but you can't, as they say here, keep Easter with the Jews. The article says those who kept Easter with the Jews are called quartodecimans. It is not possible, the Jews don't keep Easter, they observe Passover. Now if you think that they had solved all their problems, by what they have done here, you'd be mistaken. The very fact that this day was called pascha in their language, they started translating it into English every time they mention it now, but in their own language of Latin or Greek it was still Pascha.

This was problematic because that word pointed at the Passover, always. The early church sprouted schisms like so many weeds and after this there was a new challenge that arose.

The study of early church history, in a lot of ways, feels like a study of schisms, divisions and all of the arguments that arose in the early church. And here's another one, a new challenge arises on the question of Easter and the Passover.

### **Council of Nicaea**

Again, from the Catholic Encyclopedia. "The second stage in the Easter controversy centers around the counsel of Nicaea A.D. 335. Granted, that the great Easter Festival was always to be held on a Sunday and was not to coincide with a particular phase of the moon, which might occur on any day of the week. A new dispute arose as to the determination of the Sunday itself."

Okay, now we've got it always on a Sunday. Now we have to ask the question, which Sunday?

Now up to this point the article has been referring to the 14th day of the Paschal Moon which of course is the Jewish Passover. They are delicately stepping a little further away from that usage, it is now called the great Easter Festival and the phase of the moon is dismissive. Passover, as you may know, always occurs at the full moon, the Hebrew calendar being lunar, so we are at the 14th/15th of the month.

There was Biblical authority behind the eastern Passover that took place at the full moon. Now that we've dropped that, the day has become unmoored from its history, just visualize it as casting off the moorings of your little boat and starting off downstream without any connection to anything.

The festival, still called pascha or Passover, was still a little too Jewish for the church at this stage. They had suffered before from looking like just another Jewish sect to the Romans and there is what Samuele Bacchiocchi calls an "anti-Judaism of separation", in other words, we don't want to look Jewish lest we be treated like the Jews, and boy there were times when you did not want to be treated like Jews.

The final text of the Nicaea decision has not been preserved. Eusebius includes the text of a letter from Emperor Constantine, who by this time was calling the shots.

Now, this citation is really quite interesting. The Emperor himself is writing to the churches after the Council of Nicaea. He exhorts them to adopt the Council's conclusion and he says this, among other things he says, I quote, "At this meeting the question concerning the most holy day of Easter" and written in Greek, yes it was pascha, "was discussed and it was resolved by the united judgment of all present that this feast ought to be kept by all and in every place on one and the same day. We must be unified. First of all, it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of the Jews who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin."

Now we go to, first of all, and we find Constantine's primary motive for wanting to get himself disconnected, to get the church disconnected from the 14th day of the Paschal moon. He still couldn't get rid of the word pascha, but he was doing his best.

He continued to say "For we have received from our Savior a different way. And I myself have undertaken that this decision should meet with the approval of your sagacities in the hope that your wisdom will gladly admit that the practice, which is observed at once in the city of Rome and Africa throughout Italy and Egypt with the entire unity of judgment."

### **Contempt for the Jews**

There are two important things to be seen here. One is the contempt for the Jews expressed by Constantine as a motive for sealing the change, not only that, but it is listed as the first motive. Second the words "I myself have undertaken." These would've taken their lives in their hands to stand in opposition to the Emperor.

He says, "I myself have undertaken that this decision should meet with your approval." I have decided that you will approve this decision. So, an unbaptized Roman Emperor made this decision for the church to end the dispute. He also takes note of the fact that it's purely the Western churches, Rome, Africa, Italy and Egypt that do this. Well, they are commanded to be under this authority.

Continuing in the Encyclopedia, "From this and other indications which cannot be specified here, we learn that the dispute now lay between the Christians of Syria and Mesopotamia and the rest of the world. The important Church of Antioch was still dependent on the Jewish calendar for its Easter. The Syrian Christians always held her Easter Festival on the Sunday after the Jews kept Pascha."

Now you should know this, the Church of Antioch and all the Mesopotamian Assyrian churches, all observed Pascha as well. They never heard of Easter in all their lives, but they just separated themselves from the Jews

On the other hand, Alexandria and seemingly throughout the rest of the Roman Empire the Christians calculated the time of Easter for themselves paying no attention to the Jews, and one

might add, paying no attention to Saint John, paying no attention to Paul the apostle and their instructions nor paying any attention to the Law of God. They just decided it for themselves.

### **Conclusion of the Council of Nicaea**

As already stated, the article continues, "We have not its exact words, but we may safely infer from scattered notices that the Council of Nicaea ruled thus. One, that Easter must be celebrated by all throughout the world on the same Sunday. Two, this Sunday must follow the 14th day of the Paschal Moon. Three, that Moon was to be accounted the Paschal Moon whose 14th day followed the spring equinox. Four, that some provision should be made, (probably by the Church of Alexandria), that somebody would determine the proper date of Easter and communicate it to the rest of the world."

Now what they have done is to follow the Jewish calendar, in other words, the Passover moon, but to adapt it to their own purposes. The only reason for considering the 14th day of the month in any way is what? Well, it's the Passover. It is the day of Christ's sacrifice and Jesus did appear to his disciples on the first Sunday after the Passover moon, but the Hebrew calendar took no notice of the spring equinox. It was not, as some seem to assume, a lunar solar calendar. It was a lunar calendar adjusted for the time of the first ripe grain in Palestine, but at least they settled their problem. Well, no not really

They still had calendar headaches which need not trouble us here, but if you think twice about it, you know they're going to have trouble because they have broken loose from their moorings. They divorced themselves from their history.

It was interesting to me that the Catholic Encyclopedia fairly quickly dropped back into the common usage translating Pascha as Easter.

### **Eostre**

Now we have our question. How did this usage come to be? The name Easter comes from Eostre an ancient Anglo-Saxon goddess originally the goddess of the dawn. In pagan times an annual Spring Festival was held in her honor. This information comes from the Funk and Wagnalls Knowledge Center: "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 Paschal comes from a Latin word that means belonging to Passover or to Easter. Formerly Easter and the Passover were closely associated." Formerly when? They certainly were not associated in the days of the apostles! That came to be much later.

The articles continue: "The day of the resurrection of Jesus took place during the Passover. Christians of the Eastern church initially celebrated both holy days together. But Passover can fall on any day of the week, and the Christians of the Western church preferred to celebrate Easter on Sunday, the day of the resurrection.

## **Easter Comes From Eostre**

So, here's where we are. The name Easter comes from Eostre, the ancient Anglo-Saxon goddess of the dawn.

Now I'm talking about Venerable Bede, an ancient historian said, "The Eostre month has a name which is now translated Paschal month, and which was once called after a goddess of theirs named Eostre in whose honor the feasts were celebrated in that month. Now, they designate that Paschal season by her name calling the joys of the new right by the time-honored name of the old observance."

Okay, let's pull this thing together with Easter and we will call it by that name.

The Wikipedia writing about this says: "What is secure in Bede's passage is that the lunar month around the month of April in the Julian calendar was called Eostre month. "

AllAbout.com has this to say: "A more convincing argument is that Eostre is a spring summer goddess venerated during April. Eostre month and representing the rebirth of life and nature after the harsh weather of the winter months. The egg symbol of Eostre is believed to represent that rebirth, another symbol sacred to the Eostre is the hair, which eventually became the Easter Bunny of today. In the cult of Eostre the hair was a symbol of fertility, a common tradition among Anglo-Saxons."

## **What Happened?**

By now it may have occurred to you what's happened. The early church fathers, what did they accomplish by inserting the spring equinox into the equation, let me repeat myself. What the early church fathers accomplished by inserting the spring equinox into the calculation of the date of pascha was to cut the Passover loose from its moorings in Scripture and move it to the date of pagan Easter. Whether accidentally or by intent, you be the judge.

So is it any wonder that all the symbols of Easter, of Eostre, tend to dominate from the Easter Bunny to colored eggs, to sunrise services (remember Eostre was the goddess of the dawn), to the egg roll on the White House lawn, and the death, the burial and resurrection of Jesus fade into the background.

## **Followers of the Christian Passover**

There are still a few Christians who follow the ancient festival of the Christian Passover, following the apostolic custom as recorded in the New Testament. There aren't very many of them, but they're still out there.

Now I have already read what Paul wrote to the Corinthians, but I will repeat it here. He said in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 7: "Purge out therefore the old leaven." This is a reference to getting a man out of the church who was corrupting the church.

"That you may be a new lump of dough, as you are unleavened." In other words, they had all gotten the leavening out of their houses, but the problem was that they had not gotten the leavening out of the church and leaven is a symbol of a type of corruption.

He then says: "For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us: {8} Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

Okay, so Paul calls it the Passover. He says let's keep the feast. He says it to a Gentile church some 30 years after the ascension of Jesus.

Christ is our Passover. Let's keep the feast. Why anyone would think he would cut loose from that feast is hard to figure.

Later in the same letter Paul wrote further on this issue. He said in first Corinthians chapter 11 verse 23 "I have received of the Lord that which I delivered to you." Now, you may want to underline that phrase in your mind. "I have received of the Lord that which I delivered to you." Well, what's that? "That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread, {24} and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, Take eat this is my body, which is broken for you; this do in remembrance of me, {25} After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do you, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Now it seems important here that Paul emphasized the time of the observance. It was the night in which Jesus was betrayed, that night was the 14th day of the Passover moon and it was the very next day that the Jews were sacrificing their Passover lambs in the Temple, and it was at that same time that Jesus was being sacrificed on the stake with a Roman soldier finally thrusting a sword into his side.

Not only this, but the apostle Paul also made this statement. This is what I received of the Lord (verse 23), including the time of observance.

So, what can you do about this? Well, not much, because you're highly unlikely to convince your church to change the time of observance and those who observe a Christian Passover are few and far between.

The anti-Semitism of the early church fathers is regrettable. Nevertheless, I do not recommend keeping the Passover with the Jews. Their Seder includes nothing about the blood and the body of Christ, but you can observe it alone at home if you must.

Write or call our office and request instructions for an "In-home Passover service." We also have a Passover service recorded if that would be of any help but remember what the apostle Paul said: "Christ, our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore, let us keep the feast."



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*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](http://RLDEA.com) where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.*

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why Easter instead of Passover?
2. Do you find it interesting that you can study the development of Easter by reading about it in the Catholic Encyclopedia?
3. Is it interesting that they translate the word Paschal as Easter in English instead of Passover?
4. Why do you think that there is such an appeal to not follow God's Biblical Feast days?
5. Why create man-made days to replace God's appointed times?
6. What are your thoughts about the Council of Nicaea?
7. Since the internet, it has become easier to research the origins of the holidays. So, why aren't more Christians deciding to observe Passover rather than Easter?
8. What do you think Paul would say if he were alive today?
9. Do you think God's Feasts are applicable today?
10. Why do you think the world constantly refers to them as Jewish Holidays when that wasn't what God called them?