

Born to Win

A Non-Christian Easter

by Ronald L. Dart

How much we take for granted. Every year the Easter season comes around, with Palm Sunday followed by Good Friday followed by Easter Sunday; and Easter has the sunrise service, new bonnets, Easter eggs, Easter bunnies. I'll never forget the Sunday morning we were sitting having brunch in a hotel somewhere, and in the front door bounds this 6-foot rabbit with a basket in his hand with lots of little, colored eggs in it; and he made the rounds of the restaurant giving the little eggs out to the children who were all abuzz. I hope we all realize the first Christians didn't do *anything* like that. The connection of the sunrise service to Easter isn't hard. After all, the women were at the tomb of Jesus at the crack of dawn only to find the stone rolled away and the body of Jesus gone. And boy, that's an important moment for all of us who are Christians.

It's been so long since I went to a sunrise service, I forget what happens. It probably varies depending on who's doing the service and what denomination it is. But, you know, you don't have to feel guilty about not going to a sunrise service. The First Christians didn't do it—never did a sunrise service as far as we can tell (after that first day, of course, with Mary and the others who were there). But nobody ever did it again, so don't feel guilty if you want to sleep in. But a stranger who came upon our customs would surely have some questions to ask.

What, for example, do the rabbits and the eggs have to do with the resurrection of Jesus, pray tell? And, for that matter, what does the name "Easter" have to do with it? You know, it's really interesting. If you take the point of view of an uninformed observer, and look at what the First Christians actually did, you run into some fascinating questions. Take Palm Sunday as a case in point. There are far too many variables to be *certain* that the events of that day took place on Sunday *at all*. The scripture that forms the basis of it is found in John, the 12th chapter. It starts out by saying:

John 12

AKJV

¹ Then Jesus six days before the passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, which had been dead, whom he raised from the dead.

² There they made him a supper; and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him.

So here's the picture: Six days before the Passover (and we're talking now about the Passover of Jesus' death), six days before that he comes to Bethany and a supper is made for him. It was at this supper that Mary took a pound of ointment (very *expensive* ointment) and anointed the feet of Jesus—wiped his feet with her hair. And Judas Iscariot said, "Well,"...

John 12

AKJV

⁵ Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?

And John notes:

John 12

AKJV

⁶ This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bore what was put therein.

⁷ Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of my burying has she kept this.

You know, it makes me wonder a little bit how much Mary understood that the rest of them hadn't quite got their mind around yet. He said:

John 12

AKJV

⁸ For the poor always you have with you; but me you have not always.

⁹ Much people of the Jews therefore knew that he was there: and they came not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also, whom he had raised from the dead.

You know, you can imagine what that was like.

John 12

AKJV

¹⁰ But the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death;

¹¹ Because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus.

It's incredible, isn't it? Well, all that took place six days before the Passover. The events celebrated on Palm Sunday took place the next day—*five* days before the Passover.

John 12

KJ2000

¹² On the next day many people that were come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem,

¹³ Took branches of palm trees, and went forth to meet him, and cried, Hosanna: Blessed is the King of Israel that comes in the name of the Lord.

¹⁴ And Jesus, when he had found a young donkey, sat thereon; as it is written,

¹⁵ Fear not, daughter of Zion: behold, your King comes, sitting on a donkey's colt.

Now, this is *really* an important part of the symbolism of this day. (It's a *whole* lot more important than whether it was on Sunday or not.) It is the symbolism of Jesus coming as king. He comes not on a horse; that would be threatening, because a horse was an instrument of war in those days. No, he comes *humbly* sitting on a donkey. And it comes from the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, which says:

Zechariah 9

AKJV

⁹ Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, your King comes to you: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding on an ass, and on a colt the foal of an ass.

Now, this is *really* the importance of this day; it is the symbolism of our king coming to us. He is not threatening. We do not need to be afraid. He is lowly of heart. The disciples, we're told [**verse 16**],

didn't understand these things at the time. Only when Jesus was glorified did it really come home to them all that it meant.

Now, all that happened five days before the Passover. Okay, here's our problem: What day of the week was Passover? Now, the Palm Sunday tradition assumes it was Friday—the day Jesus died. But Jewish tradition places it on the day *after* Jesus died. That would inconveniently take us to Palm *Monday*. And, of course, John makes it very clear that on the day of Jesus' crucifixion the Jews came to Pontius Pilate. They wanted the legs broken on these guys and wanted them down off the cross before the day was over, because that next day was going to be “a high day” [John 19:31]; and they wouldn't come all the way in because they didn't want to be defiled, because they were going to keep the Passover [John 18:28]. And in Jewish tradition, when you say “the Passover” you were talking about what begins at the 15th day—the *evening* of the 15th day—of the month, and goes forward for seven days through the Days of Unleavened Bread—the whole thing.

Now, sometimes when issues are in doubt a tradition grows up around a practice (and that isn't necessarily a bad thing). In this case, though, there's *yet another* complicating issue. Some scholars believe or hold that Jesus was not crucified on Friday, but on Wednesday. (I've discussed that at some length in my book *The Thread*.) They see you can't get three days and three nights—that's the time Jesus was to be in the tomb—between Friday sunset and Sunday sunrise. It just won't work. This point of view holds a Wednesday crucifixion with a burial at sunset, and places Jesus' resurrection on Saturday at sunset. No one saw his resurrection—the moment he came out of the tomb—they only knew it the next morning.

Now, this really throws a monkey wrench in the works, because that would give us, what? Palm *Friday*, I think. There's something to be said for recognizing that tradition and history may be two *very different* things. But there's still one *more* fly in the ointment: The Passover is on a day of the year, not a day of the week. Now, follow me on this because we should understand. The 4th of July—Independence Day—always falls on the 4th of July. So it's not always on a Wednesday, it's not always on a Thursday, it's not always on a Tuesday; it's on the 4th of July, and it can fall on any day of the week, right? That's the same thing with the Passover. Now, the Passover lamb, like Jesus, was killed on the 14th day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar. One year it might be on a Friday, another year on another day of the week. So it's easy enough to say that the really important thing about Palm Sunday is not the day of the week but the *fact* of the event. I agree entirely, but sometimes we have a thirst to know as best we can what happened and how it played out. And it's a good idea to know the difference between tradition and Scripture. And if we thought the crucifixion took place on *Wednesday*, we may wind up observing Palm Friday and Good Wednesday; it could happen. So Palm Sunday is like the song from *Fiddler on the Roof*: it is *tradition*. And the important thing is not the day, it is Jesus as king.

Now on the other hand, there are some other things that have intruded on the story of this week that the stranger may wonder about. For example, why “Easter”? Why not “Passover”? I don't remember when I first noticed it but, in all the early writings of the church—in Hebrew, in Greek, in Aramaic, even Latin—the word “Easter” in *any* form is absent (in relation at least to this day). It is the *English translations* of the early church fathers that wander off down that road. The German travels that way, as well, although I've never really looked it up in German. (Easter does seem to have been derived through the German.) The King James translators made a strange choice, and it kind of illustrates the problem we're dealing with. It's Acts 12, verse 4, which reads this way:

Acts 12

KJV

⁴ And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.

Now, you can be absolutely certain that the First Christians did not observe Easter, as such. They would have been horrified at the term and the practices connected with it. And it's interesting that in Latin and all the Romance languages, to this day, they do not know "Easter". For them in their languages, the word that comes out "Easter" in English is the same word as "Passover" in their language and in Greek and in Latin and in Hebrew and in Aramaic. Now, what makes this interesting is that the Greek word is *pascha* [πάσχα, Strong's G3957]. In the New Testament, it has rendered "Passover" 28 times in the King James Version and once as "Easter". Same word, no difference. (Of course, if you read NIV you will not have noticed that, because the NIV translates that "Passover" not "Easter".) Now, how did this happen? I can't trace the origins of the word, but something happened in the early churches that bear on this.

Now, the first thing to realize is that in the early church this was not a Passover versus Easter controversy; it was a *calendar* controversy. The idea of Easter didn't even enter the equation. It was a question of when the church would observe Pascha—the Greek word for "Passover". And a surprising amount of all this conversation between the ancient church fathers took place in Greek. It gets confusing when you read up on church history, because even modern *English* works, when they cite the early Greek and Latin documents, translate "Pascha" as "Easter"; and I cannot for the life of me figure why they do that. When discussing the *Jewish* observance, they render "Pascha" as "Passover". When they get to the church doing it, they call it "Easter"—same Greek word both cases.

Now, what was at stake late in the second century was whether they will observe Passover on any day of the week (like the Hebrew calendar allowed) or only on a Sunday. Later, the issue became *which* Sunday; but to start with we've got to move this thing to Sunday all the time. If you consider it *solely* as a calendar issue like I've already explained, you could end up with Palm *Friday*, you can end up with Good *Wednesday*. Remember now, the First Christians were almost to a man either Jewish or what are called "God-fearing" Gentiles—that is, they believed in the Torah, they went to synagogue, they heard the Scriptures read, and they had accepted the God of the Jews. So *all* of the First Christians were deep into the Jewish manner of the worship of God, and the calendar, and all that kind of stuff. So they hadn't even *considered* some of these issues yet. It was well down into the next generation or the third generation of Christians this started becoming a problem. So for them the symbolism of the Jewish observance—the Passover—was seen to point directly to Christ, to his passion, and of course ultimately to his resurrection. The connection was clear and strong from the start: The early church had not adopted a calendar different from that of the Jewish majority in the first century. So the comparison between liturgy and events was to them clear as crystal. Thus that first Sunday after the crucifixion of Jesus was important—not because of the day of the week it was, but as a day of the year. In the Hebrew calendar, it was not the first day of the *week*, it was the first day of the *weeks*—the seven weeks of harvest leading up to Pentecost. And it was an *annual* occurrence, not a weekly occurrence. This Sunday was celebrated early on as the day of Christ's first appearance after his resurrection. It was an *anniversary* that appeared on the Jewish calendar on the first Sunday after Passover every year. It was for them (for want of a better term) Wave Sheaf Sunday. How it got confused with Easter is a very interesting story.

It's well established, both in the Bible and in history, that late in the first century the entire Christian Church still observed Pascha (the Passover) on the 14th day of the first month of the Jewish calendar. This meant that Pascha, the Christian Passover, could fall on different days of the week. Meanwhile, much of the visible Christian Church observed Resurrection Sunday on the Sunday following the Passover; and because it was the Passover season they called the Sunday observance Pascha, naturally. The Jews used the term for the seven Days of Unleavened Bread (in other words, the whole seven-day festival). Now, a controversy arose late in the second century between the Western Christians who observed Pascha on Wave Sheaf Sunday and the Eastern Christians who observed it on the 14th day of the month.

Now, you see where the problem begins to arise here: one group is observing it on a calendar date, the others on a day of the week. This is called the Quartodeciman Controversy, and it's discussed at length

in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*. It became important somewhere around AD 190. (Easter? Still nowhere to be seen.) These people were writing in Greek and Latin. The word in both languages was “Pascha”; so the whole conversation was about the Passover, not about Easter. The Sunday observance of Pascha won out in most of the known churches, but early in the 4th century we got a brand-new controversy. They had mostly settled on Sunday, but now the question was: *Which* Sunday? Through the intervening years, the churches had increasingly distanced themselves from the Jews, dropping as many links to the Jews as they could. It’s kind of understandable, in the way; because, with the kind of persecution the Jews were getting in Rome, you didn’t even want to look like a Jew. And so they tried their best at times to really get away from that. The Council of Nicaea in the year 325 made the following four rulings (This comes from the *Catholic Encyclopedia*):

1. Easter must be celebrated by all throughout the world on the same Sunday;

“Easter” - The Catholic Encyclopedia

Now, this is the translators again, who are translating “Pascha”. The Council of Nicaea didn’t say “Easter”, they said “Pascha” or Passover.

2. that this Sunday must follow the fourteenth day of the paschal moon;

“Easter” - The Catholic Encyclopedia

If you ever wondered how the moon got into the picture, the Hebrew calendar was a lunar calendar. So the Roman Catholic fathers are *still* looking at the Hebrew calendar having something to do with it. The Sunday must follow the 14th day of the paschal moon.

3. that that moon was to be accounted the paschal moon whose fourteenth day followed the spring equinox;

“Easter” - The Catholic Encyclopedia

Now they have entered a whole new thing into the picture. Because the Hebrew version of this was not dependent on the equinox; it looked entirely at the agricultural considerations. The grain which was going to be offered as the first wave sheaf—the beginning of the spring’s grain harvest—had to be determined as when it was going to be ripe, regardless of when the equinox came. (The equinox, you know, is incidentally involved in it; because that’s just whenever we began to move towards summer.) So they have made this decision.

4. that some provision should be made, probably by the Church of Alexandria as best skilled in astronomical calculations, for determining the proper date of Easter and communicating it to the rest of the world.

“Easter” - The Catholic Encyclopedia

Okay. Now, note: The equinox is never mentioned in connection with the Hebrew calendar; it is the first ripe grain that controls. So the Nicean Council took its authority to itself and established the

tradition of the day of *Paschal* observance. What they had done at first was to move Pascha to the Sunday following the Jewish Passover. Now they moved Pascha to the first Sunday after the first full moon of the spring equinox. It was still the Pascha, not Easter; but they had (by accident or design in doing it the way they did it) moved the Passover to coincide with an ancient pagan festival called, you guessed it, Easter. The name “Easter” comes from the Anglo-Saxon goddess of the dawn. In pagan cultures, an annual spring festival was held in her honor. She was a *fertility* goddess, hence the fertility symbols of eggs and rabbits.

So the celebration of Easter with a sunrise service for the goddess of the dawn, and all the Easter egg hunts and bunnies and all that stuff, is an entirely different holiday from the holiday *Passover* observed by all the early church fathers (and certainly by the First Christians). But because the church moved the Passover from its original date to the date of Easter, the two holidays have become inextricably tangled to this day. And the profound symbolism of Passover has been all but lost to most Christian folk.

Easter as such has absolutely nothing to do with Christianity. The First Christians would have recoiled with *horror* from it. Mercifully, some of the ancient, ancient customs that were connected with this pagan fertility goddess...which included children being sold into slavery in various and sundry temples to act as temple prostitutes. (I’m sorry, that’s what actually happened back in those times.) And we have at least moved away to doing harmless things with children like hiding eggs in the grass, and telling them a rabbit put it there, and then go find them...all colored eggs, and so forth.

Now, Wave Sheaf Sunday though *has* something to do with Christianity, because that’s the day Jesus first appeared to his disciples in the morning *after* his resurrection. It wasn’t exactly the *morning* when he was raised, because every indication is he was raised at sunset the night before, but he *appeared* to the disciples that morning; and, of course, it naturally became very important to them. What is also interesting is Wave Sheaf Sunday: That’s the day when the priest in the temple took a sheaf—the firstfruits of the barley harvest; they weren’t allowed to eat any of that harvest until the first fruit was presented before God—and on that morning he went into the temple with an *omer*—a basket of that barley—waved it before God as an offering, and *after* that they were able to go forward with the harvest **Leviticus 23:10–14**]. And this is on the day after the Sabbath following Pascha. And that doesn’t have much to do with when the equinox takes place. It’s an important day.

Now, how did the First Christians see this? Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthian church at this very time of year, and he had to deal with a serious error. This is First Corinthians, chapter 5. He said:

1 Corinthians 5

AKJV

¹ It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife.

² And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that has done this deed might be taken away from among you.

Paul was really incensed about this, because the church...apparently they all knew about it and they were just letting it go on and had said nothing, done nothing. He said:

1 Corinthians 5

AKJV

³ For I truly, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that has so done this deed,

⁴ In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ [*which means by his authority*], when you are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ,

⁵ To deliver such an one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

I'm not entirely sure what it means to deliver someone unto Satan. I don't want it happen to me. Then he says something that is...it's almost as a byway of this, but still it's really heart and core of early Christian practice. He said:

1 Corinthians 5

AKJV

⁶ Your glorying is not good. Know you not that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?

Now, this was written about the time of the Days of Unleavened Bread, so it was on everybody's mind. The bread that they made they made with sourdough leavening. They took a little starter that they'd held over from the previous lump of dough, they kneaded it into the lump—the new lump that they are putting together, lay it aside until that little bit of leavening spreads its way through the whole thing and causes it to rise and makes a loaf of that wonderful sourdough bread. And he says, “You've got to remember folks, it doesn't take much leavening to leaven the whole lump of bread. If you allow this kind of sin to sit there and *ferment* in the church, it's going to ruin all of you.” And then he says:

1 Corinthians 5

AKJV

⁷ Purge out therefore the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, as you are unleavened. [...]

Now, you take that sentence straight out, it sounds like double-talk. *Purge out* the leaven so you'll *be* unleavened as you *are* unleavened. You know, it doesn't make sense. Except he is talking about, in his metaphor, that they were unleavened in their homes [**Exodus 12:19–20**]. They had put the leavening out of the house, now they had to get it out of the church. And then he says this:

1 Corinthians 5

AKJV

⁷ [...] 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.

This is really a fascinating statement, because it reveals plain as day that the Corinthian church—a largely Gentile church—was still at this late date observing the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread, apparently to the extent of abstaining from leaven during that time. They kept the seven-day feast with unleavened bread.

It seems a shame somehow that the connection with the Passover has been lost to most Christian observance. The Last Supper was a Passover service. The bread and the wine were introduced as symbols of Christ's body and blood. It would have been for the First Christians a once-a-year observance. But in time someone decided to call it Communion or the Lord's Supper, and moved it to weekly or monthly, and the Paschal connection was lost. And in time, instead of observing Passover, we find the church observing Easter. It's a crying shame.

Until next time, I'm Ronald Dart.

Christian Educational Ministries

P.O. Box 560 ❖ Whitehouse, Texas 75791
Phone: 1-888-BIBLE-44 ❖ Fax: (903) 839-9311
❖ www.borntowin.net ❖

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