



Easter or Passover?

by Ronald L. Dart

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.

Part of the confusion arises from a curious use of terms. The Hebrew word for Passover is *Pesach* [פֶּסַח, Strong's H6453]. It's translated into Greek and Latin as *Pascha* [πάσχα, Strong's G3957]. *Everywhere* in the Bible (now, underline that in your mind) everywhere in the Bible where the Passover is mentioned, in 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 discussions of *Pascha* are translated into English, they become “Easter”—always.

Why on earth, and how on earth, did this happen? And on a related 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.

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* does a good job of outlining the history of the 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 was mainly concerned with the lawfulness of celebrating Easter on a weekday. We read in Eusebius (Hist. Eccl., V, xxiii): A question of no small importance arose at that time [i.e. the time of Pope Victor, about A.D. 190]. The dioceses of all Asia, as from an older tradition, held that the fourteenth day of the moon, on which day the Jews were commanded to sacrifice the lamb, should always be observed as the feast of the life-giving pasch[.]

Catholic Encyclopedia - Easter Controversy

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 was 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.

Now, when you consider that the *Christian* observance of Passover was about the sacrifice of Christ as a 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 there in chapter 5, verse 7:

1 Corinthians 5

AKJV

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 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.

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 than on that of the Resurrection of Our Savior.

Catholic Encyclopedia - Easter Controversy

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. We do, however, know that they kept the Passover—the Feast of the Passover—and we know when they did it. Now, bear in mind that when Eusebius spoke 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 churches closest and earliest in the origins of the faith. When he speaks of “the rest of the world”, he's 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 the Sunday and that we should observe the close of the paschal fast on that day only.

Catholic Encyclopedia - Easter Controversy

Now, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* at this point says:

These words of the Father of Church History, followed by some extracts which he makes from the controversial letters of the time, tell us almost all we know concerning the paschal controversy in its first stage.

Catholic Encyclopedia - Easter Controversy

When they say “almost all we know”, they have really covered the waterfront, because there's precious little anywhere else. It's helpful, at this point, to notice that they're still calling it the “paschal

controversy”. But when they translate it into English, they should remember it: “Passover”—this they carefully avoid. They go on to say:

A letter of St. Irenæus is among the extracts just referred to and this shows that the diversity of practice regarding Easter had existed at least from the time of Pope Sixtus (c. 120). Further, Irenæus states that St. Polycarp, who, like the other Asiatics, kept Easter on the fourteenth day of the moon, whatever day of the week it might be, following therein the tradition which he claimed to have derived from St. John the Apostle.

Catholic Encyclopedia - Easter Controversy

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 c. 150 about this very question. He could not be persuaded by Pope Anicetus to relinquish his Quartodeciman observance. Nevertheless he was not debarred from communion with the Roman Church and Irenæus, while condemning the Quartodeciman practice (that’s the practice of keeping the Passover on the 14th), nevertheless reproaches Pope Victor (c.189-199) with having excommunicated the Asiatics too precipitously and with not having followed the moderation of his predecessor.

Catholic Encyclopedia - Easter Controversy

Now, the article does not discuss the origins of the diversity which they mentioned goes back at least to AD 120. It doesn’t tell you how the church got divided 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. The article continues:

The question thus debated was therefore primarily whether Easter was to be kept on Sunday, or whether Christians should observe the Holy Day of the Jews, the fourteenth of Nisan, which might occur on any day of the week.

Catholic Encyclopedia - Easter Controversy

Now, I don’t know if you noticed that as I read along, but the article, 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.

Catholic Encyclopedia - Easter Controversy

Well, they’ve already told us that it really extended into 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 wrong-headed nonconformists.

Catholic Encyclopedia - Easter Controversy

Of course, that's what we usually consider people who differ from us. 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 were called Quartodecimans." It's not possible. The Jews don't keep Easter; they observe Passover. Now, if you think they had solved all their problems by what they have done here, you'd be mistaken. This very fact that this day was called *Pascha* in their language...they've 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. Again from the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:

The second stage in the Easter controversy centres round the Council of Nicæa (A.D. 325). Granted that the great Easter festival was always to be held on a Sunday, and was not to be coincident 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.

Catholic Encyclopedia - Easter Controversy

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 have 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 down the stream 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 [in *From Sabbath to Sunday*] 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 Nicæan decision has not been preserved, but 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, writing to the Churches after the Council of Nicæa, exhorts them to adopt its conclusions and says among other things "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.*]...And first of all it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin[.]”

Catholic Encyclopedia - Easter Controversy / Eusebius - Life of Constantine

Ah, now we go to a “first of all”, and we find Constantine’s primary motive for wanting 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:

[F]or 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 Wisdoms will gladly admit that practice which is observed at once in the city of Rome and Africa, throughout Italy and Egypt....with entire unity of judgment.

Catholic Encyclopedia - Easter Controversy / Eusebius - Life of Constantine

Hmm. 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 worthies 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.” Ha! “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. And the Eastern churches? Well, they are demanded 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 upon the Jewish calendar for its Easter. The Syrian Christians always held their Easter Festival on the Sunday after the Jews kept their Pasch.

Catholic Encyclopedia - Easter Controversy

Now, you should know this: that the church of Antioch, and all the Mesopotamian and Assyrian churches, all observed *Pasch* as well. They never heard of “Easter” in all their lives, but they just separated themselves from the Jews.

On the other hand at 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.

Catholic Encyclopedia - Easter Controversy

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. The

article continues:

As already stated, we have not its exact words, but we may safely infer from scattered notices that the council ruled: (1) that Easter must be celebrated by all throughout the world on the same Sunday; (2) that this Sunday must follow the fourteenth day of the paschal moon; (3) that that moon was to be accounted the paschal moon whose fourteenth day followed the spring equinox; (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.

Catholic Encyclopedia - Easter Controversy

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's 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 (lunisolar) calendar. It was a lunar calendar adjusted for the time of the first ripe grain in Palestine.

But at least they have settled *their problem*. No? 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've 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". Now we have our question: How did this usage come to be?

Our 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. 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.

Funk and Wagnalls Knowledge Center - Easter

Formerly when? They certainly were *not* associated in the days of the apostles. That came to be much later. The articles continues:

The resurrection of Jesus took place during the Passover. Christians of the Eastern church initially celebrated both holidays together. But the 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.

Funk and Wagnalls Knowledge Center - Easter

So here's where we are. The name Easter comes from Eostre, an ancient Anglo-Saxon goddess of the dawn. Now, talking about this, the Venerable Bede (an ancient historian) said:

Eosturmonath has a name which is now translated “Paschal month”, and which was once called after a goddess of theirs named Eostre, in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that month. Now they designate that Paschal season by her name, calling the joys of the new rite by the time-honoured name of the old observance.

Bede - De temporum ratione (The Reckoning of Time)

Oh yeah. Okay, we’ll pull this thing together with Easter and we’ll 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 the Eostre-monath.

AllAbout.com has this to say:

But a more convincing argument is that Eostre is a spring/summer goddess, venerated during April, Eostremonath, and representing the re-birth of life and nature after the harsh weather of the winter months. The egg symbol of Eostre is believed to represent that very re-birth. Another symbol sacred to Eostre is the Hare, which eventually became the Easter bunny of today. In the cult of Eostre, the hare was a symbol of fertility, a common tradition amongst Anglo-Saxon speakers.

By now, it just may have occurred to you what’s happened...the early church fathers, what they accomplished 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 the resurrection of Jesus fade into the background.

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’ve already read what Paul wrote to the Corinthians, but I’ll repeat it here. He said:

1 Corinthians 5

AKJV

⁷ Purge out therefore the old leaven [*And this is a reference to getting a man out of the church who was corrupting the church.*], that you may be a new lump, as you are unleavened. [...]

In other words, they had all gotten the leavening out of their houses; their problem is they haven’t gotten it out of the church, and leaven is a type [symbol] of corruption. He then says:

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.

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 you would cut loose from the *time* of that feast is hard to figure. Later in the same letter he wrote further on this issue. He said in 1 Corinthians, chapter 11, verse 23:

1 Corinthians 11

AKJV

²³ For I have received of the Lord that which also 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?

1 Corinthians 11

AKJV

²³ [...] 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 oft as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

Now, it seems important here that Paul emphasized the *time* of the observance—the night in which Jesus was betrayed, which 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 spear into his side. Not only this, but the apostle Paul *also* made this statement: “This is what I received of the Lord...”—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 their 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 a home Passover service [*Passover at Home*]. We also have a Passover service recorded if that would be of any help. But remember what the apostle Paul said:

1 Corinthians 5

AKJV

⁷ [...] Christ our passover is sacrificed for us:

⁸ Therefore let us keep the feast[...]

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