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The Pass Over to Easter

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The [history behind the establishment of Easter](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion_and_spirituality/passover_and_easter/13499.aspx) (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion_and_spirituality/passover_and_easter/13499.aspx) as a principal festival within the church is an example of the inculturation of Judeo-Christian and pagan celebrations.

The Judeo-Christian Passover became fused with pagan fertility worship to create a new festival celebrating the [resurrection of Christ](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality/death-and-resurrection-of-jesus/87256.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality/death-and-resurrection-of-jesus/87256.aspx>). This was observed at a different time from the Passover. Known as the Quartodeciman controversy, the debate over when this celebration concerning Christ should be observed reverberated across the empire through the second, third and fourth centuries. Eventually it was established by the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 and reinforced at the Synod of Antioch in A.D. 341. The Synod called for the excommunication of any who resisted the new Easter observance. Those who resisted were forced to move beyond the reach of the empire.

A STATEMENT AGAINST JUDAISM

The name *Quartodeciman* (“fourteenth” in Latin) derives from the fact that elements within the church, especially in Asia Minor, wished to honor Christ’s death as the early church had done, according to Jewish reckoning on the 14th of Nisan—the same date as the Jewish Passover. Others, however, led by the church at Rome, wanted to celebrate Christ’s resurrection at Easter, a wholly artificial date which was the Sunday following the first new moon in the new year (under the Julian Calendar, the New Year began at the vernal equinox, or March 25).

Hence it was a debate about the 14th. The force of the argument is perhaps best seen in [Constantine \(http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-constantine/165.aspx\)](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-constantine/165.aspx)'s own words in heralding the changes established by the Council:

“It seemed to every one a most unworthy thing that we should follow the custom of the Jews in the celebration of this most holy solemnity, who polluted wretches! having stained their hands with a nefarious crime, are justly blinded in their minds. It is fit, therefore, that, rejecting the practice of this people, we should perpetuate to all future ages the celebration of this rite, in a more legitimate order, which we have kept from the first day of our Lord's passion even to the present times. Let us have nothing in common with the most hostile rabble of the Jews. We have received another method from the Saviour” (Isaac Boyle, *Historical View of the Council of Nice with a Translation of Documents*, J.B. Lippincott & Co., Philadelphia, 1879, p. 52).

Constantine appears to have been misinformed about the origins of Easter. The intensity of the debate that led to the Council of Nicea, and the fact that the Council was called by Constantine in the first instance, indicates that the simplicity of the emperor's pronouncement obfuscated the real issues.

Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, who recorded the events of the Council of Nicea for us in his *Ecclesiastical History*, establishes the first pretext for changing the keeping of the Passover. He records the testimony of Irenaeus, a bishop of Lyon in the late second century, who stated that the start of the controversy was in the days of Xystus (c. A.D. 115–125), from whose days the observance of the 14th was no longer followed in the West (*Ecclesiastical History*, 5.24).

FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCES

Yet Pius, a successor to the bishopric of Rome, claimed in A.D. 147 that his brother Hermes had received instruction from an angel who commanded that the event should be kept on “the Lord's Day” and not on the 14th (Joseph Bingham, *The Antiquities of the Christian Church*, R. Bingham, ed., Oxford University Press, 1855, p. 302).

That the church in the second century had to resort to such claims for authenticity of its teachings, and not to apostolic authority, is a clear indication that this was a departure from what had been received.

In fact, while Easter is always on a Sunday, the 14th of Nisan may be on a Monday, Wednesday, Friday or Saturday, but never on a Sunday.

Constantine's ruling also glossed over another important aspect. The 14th was the memorial of Christ's death, whereas those advocating what we know as Easter were focused on His resurrection. Hence a major theological divide existed between the two groups of adherents. The Quartodecimans, in holding to the memorial of death, were maintaining a very Hebraic pattern. It exists to this day in the remembrance of the death of an individual, and is celebrated with a *Yahrzeit*.

Following the fall of Jerusalem, those Christians in Asia Minor claimed to follow the apostolic teaching, especially relating to the Passover. Christians based in Rome, however, began to celebrate Easter.

Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John, traveled to Rome in A.D. 159 in an effort to seek harmony between the two schools of thought, but without success. His successor, Polycrates, claimed to be the eighth in a succession of bishops in Asia Minor, dating from the time of the apostles, who had kept the 14th as the time to recognize the death of Jesus Christ (*Ecclesiastical History*, 5.24). The defenders of the 14th constantly claimed apostolic instruction. The church in the West could claim none.

Melito of Sardis, a writer of the late second century, also contended for the Passover on the 14th as an event to celebrate the death of Jesus Christ. His sermon on the Passover goes further than the historical records we have of Polycarp and Polycrates. In his homily, he makes the connection between the death of Christ as the Passover Lamb and the need for Christians to put leaven (yeast) out of their lives—leaven being a symbol of sin. This echoes the writings of the apostle Paul to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 5:7–8). It also shows an understanding on the part of Melito of the sequence of the festivals established in Leviticus and observed by the Jews to this day. It highlights the relationship of the Passover to the other festivals—a relationship that was lost to the church by its newly developed focus on the resurrection.

At the start of the fifth century, Epiphanius, another church historian writing some 50 years after Eusebius, recorded that the Quartodecimans were observers of “the Johannean tradition [i.e., of the apostle John] which for a long time was prevalent in Asia Minor” (C.J. Hefele, *A History of the Christian Councils*, Clark, Edinburgh, 1896, vol. 1, p. 334).

So the festival changed from one that had deep roots in the Old Testament and Jewish practice dealing with death, to one associated with resurrection, to which the name Easter relates. No account exists in either the Old or the New Testament instructing such a change in observance. The concept of a crucifixion was, as the apostle Paul stated, difficult for the

pagans. For a son of God to be treated as a common criminal did not endear the religion to the masses. A resurrection, although it created ambiguities for ideas of the afterlife, was much easier to accept.