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Religion and Spirituality

An Empty Shell

Robert C. Boraker

Most Christians celebrate Easter as one of the two holiest days of the year, yet neither the apostles nor the early Church observed it. In fact, it isn't even mentioned in the Bible, except as a mistranslation.

How can it be that the book the Christian world calls holy is silent on one of traditional Christianity's most important celebrations?

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The name *Easter* is actually derived from the name of an ancient goddess. In Europe she was known as Ostara, the goddess of spring. The Phoenicians called her Astarte, and her name also appears on Assyrian monuments found by 19th-century archaeologist Sir Henry Austen Layard in excavations at Nineveh. The Assyrians and the Babylonians called her Ishtar; in fact, the Assyrian pronunciation of her name sounds just like the English word *Easter*.

For more than a thousand years before Jesus' birth, a festival to this goddess was celebrated each spring to mark the budding of new life—the resurrection of nature after the dead of winter. It was a feast of regeneration. Throughout the inhabited world in ancient times, spring festivals and various related sex rituals honored the sun's welcome rays as they once again imparted life and warmth.

Christians in the second century and later saw Christ's resurrection to new life as a parallel to these pagan spring rituals. Gradually they incorporated the customs surrounding worship of the spring goddess into Christianity in the festival we know as Easter.

But the acceptance of Easter as a celebration within traditional Christianity did not come easily. Indeed, much controversy surrounded its integration into the Christian calendar.

Historical references show that the early Church did not observe Easter. In his book *The Primitive Church*, Maurice Goguel noted that “those Christians of Jewish origin continued to celebrate the Jewish feasts, particularly the Passover.”

The New Testament itself states that Jesus Christ and the apostles kept the Passover. Just before He was crucified, however, Jesus introduced the emblems of bread and wine into the Passover celebration (Matthew 26:26–29), thus changing the *manner* in which it should be observed. After Jesus' crucifixion, the apostles and the early Church continued to observe the Passover, with these new emblems, on the eve of Nisan 14 (on the Hebrew calendar) as an annual memorial of His death.

According to the record of fourth-century Roman Catholic cleric Epiphanius, there was no change in this practice as long as the leaders in Jerusalem were of Jewish background. Eusebius, a bishop and church historian around the same time, confirmed in his *History of the Church* that there were 15 successive bishops over Jerusalem up to the time of Hadrian and his destruction of the city in A.D. 135. “All

are said to have been Hebrews in origin, who had received the knowledge of Christ with all sincerity,” Eusebius wrote. “For at that time their whole church consisted of Hebrew believers who had continued from apostolic times down to the later siege in which the Jews, after revolting a second time from the Romans, were overwhelmed in a full-scale war.” As “Hebrew believers” who had “received the knowledge of Christ with all sincerity,” they would have followed His example and observed the Passover on Nisan 14 each year.

A FORK IN THE ROAD

During the second century, the paths of the congregations in the West, centered at Rome, began to diverge from those in Asia Minor.

The two groups generally agreed that Jesus Christ ate the Passover on the 14th day of Nisan. The Christians in Asia Minor, who made up what came to be referred to as the Eastern church, stuck to that date for partaking of the bread and wine that symbolized Christ’s suffering and death. However, as Fernand Mourret pointed out in his five-volume *History of the Catholic Church*, “the Christians of the West made a different calculation. In their opinion the purpose of the great Christian feast was the commemoration of Christ’s Resurrection.”

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So the church in the West established Sunday as a memorial to the resurrection, discontinuing the observance of the Passover on Nisan 14. But in Asia Minor, the Passover continued to be observed on that day.

Catholic historian Louis Duchesne, in his *Early History of the Christian Church*, remarked: “There were many Christians of Asia in Rome at that time; and the very early Popes, Xystus [Sixtus] and Telesphorus, saw them every year keep their Pasch [or Passover] the same day as did the Jews. They maintained that was correct. It was allowed to pass, and though the rest of Rome observed a different use, no one fell out with them.”

But the difference in practice between the Christians in the East and those in the West soon led to a serious controversy. Duchesne wrote, “Later on, this divergence seemed sufficiently important to demand some effort to remove it.” The bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp (who had been a student of the apostle John), and the churches in the East maintained the traditions of the early Church, following the example of Christ and the apostles. Even though he was over 80 years old, Polycarp journeyed to Rome to defend their Passover observance. “Polycarp,” wrote Duchesne, “during his stay in Rome, tried to convince Pope Anicetus that the quartodeciman [or “14th”] use was the only one permissible. He did not succeed. Neither could Anicetus succeed in persuading the old master to adopt the Roman method.”

When Irenaeus (a Greek theologian and pupil of Polycarp) wrote about that meeting, he said “they at once made peace, having no desire to quarrel on this point. Anicetus could not persuade Polycarp not to keep the day [Passover], since he had always kept it with John the disciple of our Lord and the other apostles with whom he had been familiar; nor did Polycarp persuade Anicetus to keep it: Anicetus said that he must stick to the practice of the presbyters before him. Though the position was such, they remained in communion with each other, and in church Anicetus made way for Polycarp to celebrate the Eucharist—out of respect, obviously. They parted company in peace, and the whole Church was at peace, both those who kept the

day and those who did not” (quoted by Eusebius in his *History of the Church*, G.A. Williamson translation).

Although Polycarp was unsuccessful in convincing Anicetus as to how and when the Passover should be properly observed, they agreed that on such a matter a difference of practice might be allowed.

JEWISH VS CHRISTIAN?

A shift occurred, however, when Soter became pope in 166. As noted by Goguel, “the conflict between the Romans and the Asiatics changed its character in Soter’s time. It became a conflict between two feasts, which had the same name, but differed in the time and manner of their celebration as well as in their significance.”

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MAURICE GOGUEL, *THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH*

Since the Western Christians believed the resurrection of Christ occurred on a Sunday, they concluded that a commemorative feast should be celebrated on the Sunday following Nisan 14. In the words of Mourret, “they blamed the Easterners—the ‘Quartodecimans,’ as they were called—for seeming to follow the Old Law, for giving their feast a Jewish color. At the bottom of this simple question of a date lay the old opposition between the Judaizing spirit and the Catholic spirit.”

Polycarp was eventually arrested and burned alive, and the leadership of the Asiatic churches passed to Polycrates. During his ministry, the Paschal controversy became even more acute.

In A.D. 197, “Pope Victor decided . . . to bring about unity in the observance of the Easter festival and to persuade the Quartodecimans to join in the general practice of the Church,” says the *Catholic Encyclopedia*. “He wrote, therefore, to Bishop Polycrates of Ephesus and induced the latter to call together the bishops of the province of Asia in order to discuss the matter with them.”

According to Eusebius, Polycrates responded with a letter to the pope and the church of Rome, in which he expounded the tradition that had come to him: “We for our part keep the day scrupulously, without addition or subtraction. For in Asia great luminaries sleep who shall rise again on the day of the Lord’s advent, when He is coming with glory from heaven and shall search out all His saints—such as Philip, one of the twelve apostles. . . . Again there is [the apostle] John, who leant back on the Lord’s breast. . . . Then in Smyrna there is Polycarp, bishop and martyr. . . . All of these kept the fourteenth day of the month as the beginning of the Paschal festival, in accordance with the Gospel, not deviating in the least but following the rule of the Faith. Last of all I too, Polycrates, the least of you all, act according to the tradition of my family, some members of which I have actually followed; for seven of them were bishops and I am the eighth, and my family have always kept the day when the people put away the leaven. So I, my friends, . . . am not scared of threats. Better people than I have said: ‘We must obey God rather than men [Acts 5:29].’”

Victor, in the meantime, polled the leading bishops in other regions, and they unanimously reported that they observed Easter on Sunday. Only the province of Asia differed in its practice. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* states: “Victor, who acted throughout the entire matter as the head of Catholic Christendom, now called upon the bishops of the province of Asia to abandon their custom and to accept the

universally prevailing practice of always celebrating Easter on Sunday. In case they would not do this he declared they would be excluded from the fellowship of the Church.”

Upon their continued refusal, Victor had to be restrained by other bishops from actually enforcing the decree of excommunication. Irenaeus, who was now the bishop of Lyons, in particular pleaded at length with Victor not to excommunicate whole congregations for following an ancient tradition traced back to John and the apostles. Mourret noted that Irenaeus “was pained to see the old churches of Asia, where he had passed his youth . . . on the point of being separated from the body of the universal Church.”

Though peace was maintained, the controversy continued to cause disunity in the church centered at Rome. Strong action would be needed to stamp out the observance of the Passover from the churches that developed after the time of the apostles.

ENTER CONSTANTINE

In time Constantine became the Roman emperor. In 313 he issued a proclamation at Milan that came to be called the Edict of Toleration, or the Edict of Milan. It accepted Christianity as an official religion in the empire, with legal equality to other religions.

Over the next several years, the church further removed itself from its Jewish roots and acculturated within Roman society. It became a politicized religion of the state. But the congregations in the East and even in other parts of the vast Roman Empire still differed significantly in doctrine and practice. Constantine therefore convoked the first great ecumenical council at Nicea, in Asia Minor, in 325.

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This was a major turning point. The emperor had already decreed that the day of the sun should be kept as a weekly day of rest. Now the Council of Nicea would determine the course of the church in other respects as well.

In his letter to all those throughout the empire who had not attended the Council of Nicea, Constantine wrote concerning the keeping of Easter: “It appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews. . . . Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd. . . . It is most fitting that all should unite . . . in avoiding all participation in the perjured conduct of the Jews.” From such comments it appears that the adoption of Easter Sunday worship was motivated more by hatred toward the Jews than by love for Jesus Christ—Himself a Jew.

Without regard to the decisions rendered by Constantine and the Council of Nicea, many continued to observe the Passover. Eventually, however, Constantine issued an edict against all those whom he regarded as heretics, as recorded by Eusebius in his *Life of Constantine*. In the edict the emperor declared: “We have directed, accordingly, that you be deprived of all the houses in which you are accustomed to hold your assemblies: and our care in this respect extends so far as to forbid the holding of your superstitious and senseless meetings, not in public merely, but in any private house or place whatsoever.”

Since evening meetings were also banned, observing the Passover on the eve of Nisan 14 became increasingly difficult. As the politically organized church at Rome grew to great size and power, it gradually succeeded in stamping out the biblical teaching regarding the Passover as the memorial of Christ's death. Easter Sunday thus became universally accepted within that church as the day when Christians should celebrate His resurrection.

We find, then, that in the early centuries of what is often called the Christian era, an unbridgeable gulf opened up between Christian churches and the practice of the early Church. Nowhere does the New Testament command or even suggest that Christ's resurrection should be commemorated on Easter Sunday or indeed on any day. That celebration, along with its attendant customs, has replaced what was taught and practiced by Jesus Christ, the apostles and the early Church—namely the annual commemoration of His death on Passover.

What are the implications for those who sincerely want to honor Jesus Christ?

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