

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EASTER

NOTES

1. "Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth *his* hands to vex certain of the church.
²And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. ³And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.)
⁴And 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." 1

2. **EASTER-** אֶסְתֵּר, mistranslated "Easter" in Acts 12:4, A.V., denotes the Passover (R.V.). The phrase "after the Passover" signifies after the whole festival was at an end. The term Easter is not of Christian origin. It is another form of אֶסְתֵּר one of the titles of the Chaldean goddess, the queen of heaven. The festival of Pasch held by Christians in post-apostolic times was a continuation of the Jewish feast, but was not instituted by Christ, nor was it connected with Lent. From this Pasch the Pagan festival of Easter was quite distinct and was introduced into the apostate Western religion, as part of the attempt to adapt Pagan festivals to Christianity. 2

3. **Astarte - QUEEN OF HEAVEN** (4427, 8064) The queen of heaven was Astarte, the goddess of the planet Venus, called Ishtar by the Assyrians and Babylonians and Ashtoreth by the Phoenicians and other Canaanites. She was regarded as the sister or consort of Baal, the storm god. Together they were looked upon as symbolizing the generative powers of nature, and their worship is denounced in the Old Testament as abominable in the sight of Jehovah. Cakes were offered to the queen of heaven, drink offerings were poured out to her, and incense was burned in her honor (Jeremiah 7:18; 44:17-25). This idolatry became practiced in Judah and Israel, and in spite of the remonstrances and warnings of Jeremiah, his hearers strongly refused to listen to him and abandon their worship. They attributed their lack of plenty to the discontinuance of honor they paid to the goddess. Accordingly divine retribution upon them made Babylon, which had been a principal instrument of their idolatrous iniquity, the instrument of their punishment.3

4. **EASTER**, a word used in the Germanic languages to denote the festival of the vernal equinox, and subsequently, with the coming of Christianity, to denote the anniversary of the resurrection of Christ (which in Gk. and Romance tongues is denoted by *pascha*, 'Passover', and its derivatives). Tyndale, Coverdale and others give 'Easter' as a rendering of *pascha*, and one example survives in AV, at Acts 12:4 ('after Easter', where RV and RSV have 'after the Passover'; similarly NEB). In the 2nd century AD and later there was considerable diversity and debate over the dating of the Christian Easter; the churches of Asia Minor for long followed the 'quartodeciman' reckoning, by which it was observed regularly on the 14th

1The King James Version, (Cambridge: Cambridge) 1769.

2Vine, W. E., *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell) 1981.

3Vine, W. E., *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell) 1981.

of Nisan, while those of Rome and elsewhere followed a calendar which commemorated the passion year by year on a Friday and the resurrection on a Sunday. The latter mode prevailed.

F.F.B.4

5. He would do this *after Easter*, $\text{Om} \blacklozenge \text{e} \blacklozenge \square \square \text{e} \cdot \text{M} \text{z} \text{z} \text{e}$ —*after the passover*, certainly so it ought to be read, for it is the same word that is always so rendered; and to insinuate the introducing of a gospel-feast, instead of the passover, when we have nothing in the New Testament of such a thing, is to mingle Judaism with our Christianity. Herod would not condemn him till the passover was over, some think, for fear lest he should have such an interest among the people that they should demand the release of him, according to the custom of the feast: or, after the hurry of the feast was over, and the town was empty, he would entertain them with Peter's public trial and execution. Thus was the plot laid, and both Herod and the people long to have the feast over, that they may gratify themselves with this barbarous entertainment.⁵

6. **Easter**, the Christian festival that celebrates Jesus' resurrection. The name 'Easter' derives from the Anglo-Saxon goddess of Spring (Eostre or Ostara), but the Christian festival developed from the Jewish Passover (Heb. $\square \text{M} \cdot \text{M} \text{M} \text{z} \text{z} \text{e}$ Gk. *pascha*), because according to the Gospels the events of Jesus' last days took place at the time of Passover. Easter was originally observed on the day following the end of the Passover fast (14 Nisan), regardless of the day of the week on which it fell. In the mid-second century, however, some Gentile Christians began to celebrate it on the Sunday after 14 Nisan, with the preceding Friday observed as the day of Christ's crucifixion, regardless of the date on which it fell. The resulting controversy over the correct time for observing the Easter festival reached a head in A.D. 197, when Victor of Rome excommunicated those Christians who insisted on celebrating Easter on 14 Nisan. The dispute continued until the early fourth century, when the Quarto-decimans (from Latin for '14') were required by Emperor Constantine to conform to the empire-wide practice of observing Easter on the Sunday following 14 Nisan, rather than on that date itself. 6

7. **The Jewish Calendar** Exodus 12:2. The Jewish calendar is a lunar calendar of twenty-eight days, resulting in a shorter year than that in the West. When the calendar became a month out of gear, an additional month called *Adar* was inserted. Months always began with the new moon. Easter always follows Passover, which is at full moon in Abib. The Easter festival varies with the moon, and a change is made from late April to late March when the additional Jewish month is inserted.⁷

4*The New Bible Dictionary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1962.

5Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Bible*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers) 1991.

6Achemier, Paul J., Th.D., *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc.) 1985.

7Gowers, Ralph, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*, (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago) 1987.

8. Early Christians continued to observe the Jewish Passover. But they did not celebrate the Passover in memory of deliverance from Egypt. Instead, they fasted to commemorate the sufferings of Jesus, the true Passover Lamb. Christians fiercely disagreed over when to celebrate Easter. Believers in Asia (modern Turkey) celebrated Easter, the “Christian Passover,” on *Passover* (the 14th day of the Jewish month of Nisan). Victor, the bishop of Rome from 189 to 198, insisted all churches had to celebrate Easter on a *Sunday* (the first Sunday following the 14th of Nisan). Victor threatened to excommunicate those Christians who observed Easter differently, but the Asian custom continued. The Council of Nicaea in 325 finally decreed that Easter should be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon in spring, the practice today.⁸
9. American Puritans did not celebrate religious holidays such as Easter or Christmas. The weekly “Lord’s Day” was celebration enough.⁹

10. **Melito of Sardis** (died c. 190)

Keeper of the Christian calendar

In the late second century, Bishop Polycrates of Ephesus wrote about “Melito the Eunuch” who “lived entirely in the Holy Spirit” and is among “the greatest luminaries who lie at rest in Asia and will rise again on the day of the Lord’s coming.” Melito traveled to Palestine to visit the Holy Places. Virtually nothing else is known of his life.

Melito’s importance lies in the topic of his most popular work, *Homily on the Pasch*, and in his role in the controversy over the proper date on which to celebrate Easter.

In Melito’s day, some Eastern churches (especially in Asia Minor) followed Jewish custom and celebrated Easter at the same time as Jewish Passover. This “Christian Passover” marked not only the Lord’s resurrection but also his sufferings as the Passover Lamb.

Other churches (e.g., the Roman Christians under Victor) celebrated Easter on the *Sunday* after Passover, marking the vital importance of the resurrection, which occurred on the first day of the week.

As bishop of Sardis, Melito defended the former position, termed *quartodeciman* (meaning “fourteenth”). He believed it dated from the apostle John’s stay in Ephesus. Ultimately, however, the Easter Sunday position triumphed. The Council of Nicaea (in 325) rejected quartodeciman practice.

This decision, along with decisions to commemorate Christmas, Epiphany, and Pentecost, as well as days for martyrs, shows the increasing importance of the Christian calendar, a means for Christians to mark sacred time. Melito’s *Homily on the Pasch* not only shows some of these developments, it is one of the most beautiful meditations ever written on the work of Christ. The word *Pasch* evoked for early Christians a number of themes: the Jewish

⁸*Worship in the Early Church: Christian History, Issue 37*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, Inc.) 1997.

⁹*The American Puritans: Christian History, Issue 41*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, Inc.) 1997.

Passover, the Passover meal, the lamb sacrificed and eaten at Passover, Holy Week, and Easter—sometimes all at once. 10

11. **Calendar Heresy**

For the first seven centuries after the birth of the church, Christians differed about how to determine the date of Easter. Believers from Asia Minor believed it should be celebrated on a fixed date: the fourteenth day of the Jewish month of Nisan, to correspond with the Jewish feast of Passover. In particular, these Christians thought Easter could be celebrated on any day of the week. They were called Quartodecimans, from the Latin for “fourteenth.”

The majority of Christians, however, insisted on celebrating Christ’s resurrection on a Sunday, the day he rose from the dead. They calculated Easter in the same way but put it on the Sunday following the fourteenth day of Nisan.

Other groups chose other dates still, and the result was a mess. Bishop Ambrose of Milan (c.339–397) commented in a letter that in A.D. 387, Easter was celebrated on March 21 in Gaul (modern France), April 18 in Italy, and April 25 in Egypt! The differences so troubled the bishops at the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) that Quartodecimans were called “heretics.” Unity in the Mediterranean world came in the fifth century when the churches all began using the Egyptian method of calculation: Easter was the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox.

The controversy arose again in the early medieval era in Celtic churches and in Gaul. Not until the early 800s was there complete agreement in the West.¹¹

12. **In the NT:** In the NT, the Gospels report that Jesus observed Jewish feasts (John 5:1; 7:2, 10; Matt. 26:17-18), and a tradition recorded by Paul reports that Jesus transformed Passover for his followers into a ritual remembrance of his death (1 Cor. 11:24). Aside from that, however, the NT contains few regulations pertaining either to fasts (Matt. 6:16-18 does not prescribe fasts, it simply gives advice to those fasting; but see Mark 2:20) or to festivals. Those that are observed by Christians have grown out of the traditions of the life and practices of Jesus and the experiences of the church: for example, Christmas, to celebrate Jesus’ birth (Luke 2:1-20); Epiphany, the appearance of the Magi (Matt. 2:1-12); Lent, Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-12); Easter, Jesus’ resurrection (Mark 16:1-8); Ascension Day, his ascent into heaven (Acts 2:9-10); and Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-11). Because the cardinal event of the Christian faith, the resurrection of Jesus, occurred on a Sunday, Christians turned to that day, rather than the Sabbath (Saturday), for their regular worship.¹²

¹⁰*Worship in the Early Church: Christian History, Issue 37*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, Inc.) 1997.

¹¹*Heresy in the Early Church: Christian History, Issue 51*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, Inc.) 1997.

¹²Achtemier, Paul J., Th.D., *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc.) 1985.

13. Titus Destroys Jerusalem (A.D. 70)

When the Roman general sacked the temple, the Jews were forced into a new era—and so were the Christians.

Gessius Florus loved money and hated Jews. As Roman procurator, he ruled Judea, caring little for their religious sensibilities. When tax revenues were low, he seized silver from the temple. As the uproar against him grew, in A.D. 66, he sent troops into Jerusalem who massacred 3,600 citizens. Florus's action touched off an explosive rebellion—the First Jewish Revolt—that had been sizzling for some time.

Launching the Revolt

The Jewish Revolt began—and met its bitter end—at Masada, a hunk of rock overlooking the Dead Sea. The Romans had built a virtually impregnable fortress there. Yet the atrocities of Florus inspired some crazy Zealots to attack Masada. Amazingly, they won, slaughtering the Roman army there.

In Jerusalem, the temple captain signified solidarity with the revolt by stopping the daily sacrifices to Caesar. Soon all Jerusalem was in an uproar, expelling or killing the Roman troops. Then all Judea was in revolt; then Galilee.

Cestius Callus, the Roman governor of the region, marched from Syria with twenty thousand soldiers. He besieged Jerusalem for six months, yet failed. He left six thousand dead Roman soldiers, not to mention weaponry that the Jewish defenders picked up and used.

Emperor Nero then sent Vespasian, a decorated general, to quell the Judean rebellion. Vespasian put down the opposition in Galilee, then in Transjordan, then in Idumea. He circled in on Jerusalem. But before the *coup de grace*, Nero died. Vespasian became embroiled in a leadership struggle that concluded with the eastern armies calling for him to be emperor. One of his first imperial acts was to appoint his son Titus to conduct the Jewish War.

Crushing the Revolt

By now, Jerusalem was isolated from the rest of the nation, and factions within the city fought over strategies of defense. As the siege wore on, people began dying from starvation and plague. The high priest's wife, who once basked in luxury, scavenged for crumbs in the streets.

Meanwhile the Romans employed new war machines to hurl boulders against the city walls. Battering rams assaulted the fortifications. Jewish defenders fought all day and struggled to rebuild the walls at night. Eventually the Romans broke through the outer wall, then the second wall, and finally the third wall. Still the Jews fought, scurrying to the temple as their last line of defense.

That was the end for the valiant Jewish defenders and for the temple. Historian Josephus claimed that Titus wanted to preserve the temple, but his soldiers were so angry at their resilient opponents that they burned it. The remaining Jews were slaughtered or sold as slaves.

The Zealot band that took Masada held it for at least three more years. When the Romans finally built their siege ramp and invaded the mountain fortress, they found the defenders dead—they had committed suicide to avoid being captured by foreigners.

Results of the Revolt

The Jewish Revolt marked the end of the Jewish state until modern times. The destruction of the temple also signified a change in the Jews' worship (although that change had begun as Jews had been scattering throughout the world for at least six hundred years). The first destruction of the temple, by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., had forced the Jews to become people of the Book. The temple's sad end slammed the door on the Jew's sacrificial system. They adjusted, of course, creating new rituals for home and synagogue. But the Sanhedrin was dissolved, and the center of Jewish religion moved to the educational institutions of Jamnia.

Where were the Christians? Out of town, basically. Many had been driven out of Jerusalem by persecution decades earlier. Eusebius wrote that when the revolt began, in A.D. 66, some of the remaining Jewish Christians fled to Pella, a city across the Jordan River.

It could be said that these events threw the young church's balance of power toward the Gentiles. Missionaries like Paul had originally dealt with a strong (and conservative) Jewish church, based in Jerusalem. But the Christian Jews' non-involvement in the revolt drove an obvious wedge between them and their traditional counterparts. After A.D. 70, Christians were not permitted in the synagogues.

The fall of Jerusalem, then, made the Christians even more distinct from the Jews and impelled the church to develop among the Gentiles.¹³

¹³*The 100 Most Important Events in Church History: Christian History, Issue 28*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, Inc.) 1997.