

The Passover Controversy in the Early Church

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From the time of Christ until the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 Christianity was considered by the Roman authorities to be a sect of Judaism. Whatever persecution came to Christians was almost always instigated by Jews creating civil disturbances which the Romans sought to quell at all costs.¹ For the most part, Roman officials left Christians alone because they tended to be peaceful and law-abiding.

In the city of Rome, Christianity had become widely adopted by the lower classes of both Jews and Gentiles. However, when the great fire destroyed much of Rome in AD 64, the emperor Nero was blamed by the people for setting the city on fire for his own amusement or to make room for his proposed construction projects. To deflect the blame, Nero accused the Christians of setting the fire.² They were an easy scapegoat because their Messianic expectations had already been portrayed as a threat to Rome. In the persecution of Christians that followed, both Paul (AD 65) and Peter (AD 66) were killed by the Romans.

At the same time, a genuine military revolt against Rome was brewing among the Jews in Jerusalem. Unlike the Christians who were content to peacefully await the return of Jesus the Messiah from heaven, a large body of Jewish zealots in Judea sought to bring about their own Messianic expectations by forcefully removing their Roman overlords. The Romans reacted with the complete destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

In the aftermath of Jerusalem's destruction, Christians throughout the empire took extreme measures to distance themselves from the despised and humiliated Jews.³ This included prohibitions on observing the Sabbath,⁴ as well as abandonment of the Feasts of the Lord. This was facilitated on theological grounds by Christian writers appealing to the prophet Isaiah: *"Bring no more futile sacrifices; Incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies — I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; They are a trouble to*

¹ Acts 14:1-8; Acts 17:5-9; Acts 17:13; Acts 18:12-17; Acts 21:27-36; Acts 23:12-22; 1 Thess. 2:14-16

² Carrington, Phillip, *The Early Christian Church* (1957).

³ Many of the early Christian writers after AD 70 display significant anti-Semitism. The Epistle of Barnabas and other early documents contain disparaging remarks against the Jews. For example, in Barnabas 16, he calls them "wretched Jews."

⁴ Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians*, ch. ix

Me, I am weary of bearing them."⁵ Rather than interpreting these words in their proper context – God's frustration with the blatant hypocrisy being demonstrated at His Feasts – these early Christians took this statement as God's complete and permanent renouncement of His own appointed Feasts. In addition, they began to allegorizing the promises in the prophets concerning the restoration of Jerusalem and the Kingdom Temple prophesied by Isaiah and Ezekiel.⁶

The Passover Controversy According to Eusebius

A struggle ensued between the churches of Asia Minor (the cradle of early Christian missionary activity by Paul and John) and the church in Rome concerning the observance of Passover. The tradition passed down from the Apostle John, who leaned on Jesus' breast during His last Passover meal, involved observance of a Christian Passover meal on the same day that the Jews had observed it, beginning at sundown of the 14th of Nisan (as the Scripture commanded in Lev. 23). This was preceded by a day or two of fasting, after which the resurrection was celebrated on the following Sunday. The Christian Passover was obviously different from the original Jewish celebration which required the Temple and Priesthood, or the modified form which the Jews celebrated after the destruction of the Temple.

However, Victor, the bishop of Rome, insisted on a different tradition which omitted the Passover meal entirely, and instead required a three-day fast which ended with celebrations on the Sunday of the Resurrection. Thus, the Eucharist (Communion) was not kept on Passover (as when Jesus kept it with His disciples and appointed Communion), but instead became part of a single Resurrection observance. Victor sought to excommunicate all of the churches of Asia Minor who would not omit the Passover celebration handed down to them by the Apostle John. Eusebius, a fourth century Roman Catholic historian, described both sides in the controversy, as well as the council of the Roman Catholic Church which eventually abolished the Passover celebration entirely and firmly established the Resurrection Day (later called "Easter") as the official Christian festival. Below are Eusebius' words from his Church History.

"A question of no small importance arose at that time. For the parishes 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 be observed as the feast of the Savior's Passover. It was therefore necessary to end their fast on that day, whatever day of the week it should happen to be. But it was not the custom of the churches in the rest of the world to end it at this time, as they observed the practice

⁵ Isaiah 1:13-14

⁶ Epistle of Barnabas, ch. 16.

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. 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 but the Lord's day, and that we should observe the close of the paschal fast on this day only. There is still extant a writing of those who were then assembled in Palestine, over whom Theophilus, bishop of Caesarea, and Narcissus, bishop of Jerusalem, presided. And there is also another writing extant of those who were assembled at Rome to consider the same question, which bears the name of Bishop Victor; also of the bishops in Pontus over whom Palmas, as the oldest, presided; and of the parishes in Gaul of which Irenaeus was bishop, and of those in Osrhoene and the cities there; and a personal letter of Bacchylus, bishop of the church at Corinth, and of a great many others, who uttered the same opinion and judgment, and cast the same vote. And that which has been given above was their unanimous decision.

“BUT the bishops of Asia, led by Polycrates, decided to hold to the old custom handed down to them. He himself, in a letter which he addressed to Victor and the church of Rome, set forth in the following words the tradition which had come down to him:

‘We observe the exact day; neither adding, nor taking away. For in Asia also great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again on the day of the Lord's coming, when he shall come with glory from heaven, and shall seek out all the saints. Among these are Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who fell asleep in Hierapolis; and his two aged virgin daughters, and another daughter, who lived in the Holy Spirit and now rests at Ephesus; and, moreover, John, who was both a witness and a teacher, who reclined upon the bosom of the Lord, and, being a priest, wore the sacerdotal plate. He fell asleep at Ephesus. And Polycarp in Smyrna, who was a bishop and martyr; and Thraseas, bishop and martyr from Eumenia, who fell asleep in Smyrna. Why need I mention the bishop and martyr Sagaris who fell asleep in Laodicea, or the blessed Papius, or Melito, the Eunuch who lived altogether in the Holy Spirit, and who lies in Sardis, awaiting the episcopate from heaven, when he shall rise from the dead? **All these observed the fourteenth day of the Passover according to the Gospel**, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith. And I also, Polycrates, the least of you all, do according to the tradition of my relatives, some of whom I have closely followed. For seven of my relatives were bishops; and I am the eighth. And my relatives **always observed the day when the people put away the leaven**. I, therefore, brethren, who have lived sixty-five years in the Lord, and have met with the brethren throughout the world, and have gone through every Holy Scripture, am

not affrighted by terrifying words. For those greater than I have said 'We ought to obey God rather than man.'

"He then writes of all the bishops who were present with him and thought as he did. His words are as follows:

'I could mention the bishops who were present, whom I summoned at your desire; whose names, should I write them, would constitute a great multitude. And they, beholding my littleness, gave their consent to the letter, knowing that I did not bear my gray hairs in vain, but had always governed my life by the Lord Jesus.'

"Thereupon Victor, who presided over the church at Rome, immediately attempted to cut off from the common unity the parishes of all Asia, with the churches that agreed with them, as heterodox; and he wrote letters and declared all the brethren there wholly excommunicate. But this did not please all the bishops. And they besought him to consider the things of peace, and of neighborly unity and love. Words of theirs are extant, sharply rebuking Victor. Among them was Irenaeus, who, sending letters in the name of the brethren in Gaul over whom he presided, maintained that the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord should be observed only on the Lord's Day. He fittingly admonishes Victor that he should not cut off whole churches of God which observed the tradition of an ancient custom and after many other words he proceeds as follows:

'For the controversy is not only concerning the day, but also concerning the very manner of the fast. For some think that they should fast one day, others two, yet others more; some, moreover, count their day as consisting of forty hours day and night. And this variety in its observance has not originated in our time; but long before in that of our ancestors. It is likely that they did not hold to strict accuracy, and thus formed a custom for their posterity according to their own simplicity and peculiar mode. Yet all of these lived none the less in peace, and we also live in peace with one another; and the disagreement in regard to the fast confirms the agreement in the faith.'

"He adds to this the following account, which I may properly insert:

'Among these were the presbyters before Soter, who presided over the church which thou now rulest. We mean Anicetus, and Plus, and Hyginus, and Telesphorus, and Xystus. They neither observed it themselves, nor did they permit those after them to do so. And yet though not observing it, they were none the less at peace with those who came to them from the parishes in which it was observed; although this observance was more opposed to those who did not observe

it. But none were ever cast out on account of this form; but the presbyters before thee who did not observe it, sent the Eucharist to those of other parishes who observed it. And when the blessed Polycarp was at Rome in the time of Anicetus, and they disagreed a little about certain other things, they immediately made peace with one another, not caring to quarrel over this matter. For neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp not to observe what he had always observed with John the disciple of our Lord, and the other apostles with whom he had associated; neither could Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it as he said that he ought to follow the customs of the presbyters that had preceded him. But though matters were in this shape, they communed together, and Anicetus conceded the administration of the eucharist in the church to Polycarp, manifestly as a mark of respect. And they parted from each other in peace, both those who observed, and those who did not, maintaining the peace of the whole church.'

"Thus Irenaeus, who truly was well named, became a peacemaker in this matter, exhorting and negotiating in this way in behalf of the peace of the churches. And he conferred by letter about this mooted question, not only with Victor, but also with most of the other rulers of the churches.

"Those in Palestine whom we have recently mentioned, Narcissus and Theophilus, and with them Cassius, bishop of the church of Tyre, and Clarus of the church of Ptolemais, and those who met with them, having stated many things respecting the tradition concerning the Passover which had come to them in succession from the apostles, at the close of their writing add these words:

'Endeavor to send copies of our letter to every church, that we may not furnish occasion to those who easily deceive their souls. We show you indeed that also in Alexandria they keep it on the same day that we do. For letters are carried from us to them and from them to us, so that in the same manner and at the same time we keep the sacred day.'"

Although there had been a somewhat gradual separation of the Christian churches from all things Jewish beginning in AD 70, the official "divorce" took place when the emperor Constantine embraced a Platonic version of Christianity.⁸ The new Christianity replaced the Jewish - Christian hope (the resurrection of the body to reign in Christ's Kingdom in restored Jerusalem) with the Platonic hope of shedding the body to ascend to the heavens as pure spirit. This transformation of the Christian hope was sealed with

⁷ Eusebius, Church History, Vol. V, chs. 23-25.

⁸ See my book, The TIME of the END, pp. 147-177

the allegorizing of all of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the future Kingdom of Messiah. These were reinterpreted as already realized in the present Christian Kingdom centered in Rome. The bishop of Rome became the “vicar of Christ” ruling in Christ’s place along-side the emperor. The city of Rome became “the City of God” thanks to some creative interpretive gymnastics by Augustine. Since the marriage of Platonic Christianity with the Roman state, Mystery Babylon, the Mother of Harlots, has handed down to Christians pagan traditions cloaked in Christian garb, while suppressing the Christianized Feasts of the Lord, handed down by the Apostles, which speak of God’s past faithfulness as well as prefigure the genuine Kingdom of the Messiah that will soon appear.

Luke 22:15-16 NKJV

15 Then He said to them, "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; 16 for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."