

# The Easter Controversy: Day or Date?

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Ecclesiastical history preserves the memory of three distinct phases of the dispute regarding the proper time of observing Easter. It will add to clearness if we in the first place state what is certain regarding the date and the nature of these three categories.



## First phase

The first was mainly concerned with the lawfulness of celebrating Easter on a weekday. We read in Eusebius (*Church History* V.23): "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 [*epi tes tou soteriou Pascha heortes*], contending that the fast ought to end on that day, whatever day of the week it might happen to be. 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 Saviour. 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." 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 that we know concerning the paschal controversy in its first stage. 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 that might be, following therein the tradition which he claimed to have derived from St. John the Apostle, came to Rome c. 150 about this very question, but could not be persuaded by Pope Anicetus to relinquish his

Quartodeciman observance. Nevertheless he was not debarred from communion with the Roman Church, and St. Irenæus, while condemning the Quartodeciman practice, nevertheless reproaches Pope Victor (c. 189-99) with having excommunicated the Asiatics too precipitately and with not having followed the moderation of his predecessors. The question thus debated was therefore primarily whether Easter was to be kept on a 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. Those who kept Easter with the Jews were called Quartodecimans or *terountes* (observants); but even in the time of Pope Victor this usage hardly extended beyond the churches of Asia Minor. After the pope's strong measures the Quartodecimans seem to have gradually dwindled away. Origen in the "Philosophumena" (VIII, xviii) seems to regard them as a mere handful of wrong-headed nonconformists.



## Second phase

The second stage in the Easter controversy centers round the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325). Granted that the great Easter festival was always to be held on a Sunday, and was not to coincide 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. The text of the decree of the Council of Nicaea which settled, or at least indicated a final settlement of, the difficulty has not been preserved to us, but we have an important document inserted in Eusebius's "Life of Constantine" (III, xviii sq.). The emperor himself, writing to the Churches after the Council of Nicaea, exhorts them to adopt its conclusions and says among other things: "At this meeting the question concerning the most holy day of Easter 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. . . And first of all it appeared an unworthy thing that in the



celebration of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin. . . for we have received from our Saviour 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 in Africa, throughout Italy and in Egypt. . . with entire unity of judgment." From this and other indications which cannot be specified here (see, e.g. Eusebius, "De Paschate" in Schmid, "Osterfestfrage", pp. 58-59) 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. 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. In this way the date of Easter as kept at Alexandria and Antioch did not always agree; for the Jews, upon whom Antioch depended, adopted very arbitrary methods of intercalating embolismic months (see CALENDAR, Bol. II, p. 158) before they celebrated Nisan, the first spring month, on the fourteenth day of which the paschal lamb was killed. In particular we learn that they had become neglectful (or at least the Christians of Rome and Alexandria declared they were neglectful) of the law that the fourteenth of Nisan must never precede the equinox (see Schwartz, *Christliche und jüdische Ostertafeln*, pp. 138 sqq.). Thus Constantine in the letter quoted above protests with horror that the Jews sometimes kept two Paschs in one year, meaning that two Paschs sometimes fell between one equinox and the next.

The Alexandrians, on the other hand, accepted it as a first principle that the Sunday to be kept as Easter Day must necessarily occur after the vernal equinox, then identified with 21 March of the Julian year. This was the main difficulty which was decided by the Council of Nicaea. Even among the Christians who calculated Easter for themselves there had been considerable variations (partly due to a divergent reckoning of the date of the equinox), and as recently as 314, in the Council of Arles, it had been laid down that in future Easter should be kept *uno die et uno tempore per omnem orbem*, and that to secure this uniformity the pope should send out letters to all the Churches. The Council of Nicaea seems to have

extended further the principle here laid down. As already stated, we have not its exact words, but we may safely infer from scattered notices that the council ruled:

that Easter must be celebrated by all throughout the world on the same Sunday;

- that this Sunday must follow the fourteenth day of the paschal moon;

- that that moon was to be accounted the paschal moon whose fourteenth day followed the spring equinox;

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 (see St. Leo to the Emperor Marcian in Migne, P.L., LIV, 1055).

This ruling of the Council of Nicaea did not remove all difficulties nor at once win universal acceptance among the Syrians. But to judge from the strongly worded canon i of the Council of Antioch (A.D. 341; see Hefele-Leclereq, "Conciles", I, 714), as also from the language of the Apostolic Constitutions and Canons (see Schmid, *Osterfestfrage*, p. 63), the Syrian bishops loyally co-operated in carrying into effect the decision of the Council of Nicaea. In Rome and Alexandria the lunar cycles by which the occurrence of Easter was determined was not uniform. Rome, after the hundred-and-twelve year cycle of Hippolytus, adopted an eighty-four year cycle, but neither gave satisfactory results. Alexandria adhered to the more accurate nineteen-year cycle of Meton. But it seems to be clearly established by the most recent researches (see Schwartz, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29) that the lunar cycles were never understood to be more than aids towards ascertaining the correct date of Easter, also that where the calculations of Rome and Alexandria led to divergent results, compromises were made upon both sides and that the final decision always lay with accepted ecclesiastical authority.

## Third phase



It was to the divergent cycles which Rome had successively adopted and rejected in its attempt to determine Easter more accurately that the third stage in the paschal controversy was mainly due. The Roman missionaries coming to England in the time of St. Gregory the Great found the British Christians, the representatives of that Christianity which had been introduced into Britain during the period of the Roman

occupation, still adhering to an ancient system of Easter-computation which Rome itself had laid aside. The British and Irish Christians were not Quartodecimans, as some unwarrantably accused them of being, for they kept the Easter festival upon a Sunday. They are supposed (e.g. by Krusch) to have observed an eight-four year cycle and not the five-hundred and thirty two year cycle of Victorius which was adopted in Gaul, but the most recent investigator of the question (Schwartz, p. 103) declares it to be impossible to determine what system they followed and himself inclines to the opinion that they derived their rule for the determining of Easter direct from Asia Minor. (See, however, the very opposite conclusions of Joseph Schmid, ("Die Osterfestberechnung auf den britischen Inseln", 1904.) The story of this controversy, which together with the difference in the shape of tonsure, seems to have prevented all fraternization between the British Christians and the Roman missionaries, is told at length in the pages of Bede. The British appealed to the tradition of St. John, the Romans to that of St. Peter, both sides with little reason, and neither without the suspicion of forgery. It was not until the Synod of Whitby in 664 that the Christians of Northern Britain, who had derived their instruction in the Faith from the Scottish (i.e. Irish) missionaries, at last at the instance of Bishop Wilfrid and through the example of King Oswy accepted the Roman system and came into friendly relations with the bishops of the South. Even then in Ireland and in parts of the North some years passed before the adoption of the Roman Easter became general (Moran, Essays on the Origin, Doctrines and Discipline of the Early Irish Church, Dublin, 1864).

## Points of obscurity



These are the facts regarding the Easter controversy which are now generally admitted. Many other subsidiary details have an important bearing on the case but are more matters of conjecture. There is, for example, the perplexing doubt whether the Crucifixion of Christ took place on the fourteenth or fifteenth of Nisan.

The Synoptists seem to favour the latter, St. John the former date. Clearly we should expect to find that according to the answer given to this question, the position of the earliest possible Easter Sunday in the lunar month would also change. Again, there is the problem, much debated by modern scholars, whether the Pasch which the early Christians desired to commemorate was primarily the Passion or the Resurrection of Christ. Upon this point also our date do not admit of a very positive answer. It has been very strongly urged that the writers of the first two centuries who speak of the Pasch have always in view the *pascha staurosimum*, the Crucifixion Day, when Jesus Christ Himself was offered as the Victim, the antitype of the Jewish paschal lamb. Supporters of this opinion often contend that the Resurrection was held to be sufficiently commemorated by the weekly Sunday, on the vigil of which the night-watch was kept, the Liturgy being

celebrated in the morning. In any case it must be admitted that while in the New Testament we have definite mention of the observance of the Sunday, or "Lord's Day", there is no conclusive evidence in the first century or more of the keeping of the Pasch as a festival. Some are inclined to think that the Christian



Easter first appears as setting a term to the great paschal fast which, as we learn from Irenaeus, was very variously kept in the sub-Apostolic Age. Another class of obscure and rather intricate questions, about which it is difficult to speak positively, regards the limits of the paschal period as laid down by the computation of Rome before the tables of Dionysius Exiguus and the Metonic cycle were finally adopted there in 525. According to one system Easter Day might fall between the fourteenth and twentieth day inclusive of the paschal moon; and although this implies that when Easter fell on the fourteenth it coincided with the Jewish Pasch, the Roman Church, observing its eighty-four-year cycle, at one time permitted this (so at least Krusch contends; see "Der 84-jährige Ostercyclus und seine Quellen", pp. 20 and 65). Certain it is that the data of the *supputatio Romana* did not always agree with those of Alexandria, and in particular it seems that Rome, rejecting 22 March as the earliest possible date of Easter, only allowed the 23rd, while, on the other hand, the latest possible date according to the Roman system was 21 April. This sometimes brought about an impasse which was relieved only by accepting the Alexandrian solution. Other computations allowed Easter to fall between the fifteenth and twenty-first day of the paschal moon and others between the sixteenth and the twenty-second.

What is perhaps most important to remember, both in the solution adopted in 525 and in that officially put forward at the time of the reform of the Calendar by Gregory XIII, is this, that the Church throughout held that the determination of Easter was primarily a matter of ecclesiastical discipline and not of astronomical science. As Professor De Morgan long ago clearly recognized, the moon according to which Easter is calculated is not the moon in the heavens nor even the mean moon, i.e. a moon traveling with the average motion of the real moon, but simply the moon of the calendar. This calendar moon is admittedly a fiction, though it departs very little from the actual astronomical facts; but in following the simple rule given for the dependence of Easter upon the moon of the calendar, uniformity is secured for all countries of the world. According to this rule, Easter Sunday is the first Sunday which occurs after the first full moon (or more accurately after the first fourteenth day of the moon) following the 21st of March. As a result, the earliest possible date of Easter is 22 March, the latest 25 April.