

A Return to Orthodoxy A History of Passover vs. Easter

**“He said to them, ‘All too well you reject the commandment of God,
that you may keep your tradition.’”**

Mark 7:9

In the modern evangelical church, there are three days of special significance— Christmas, Easter, and the weekly Sunday “worship day”. Many Christians do not know how these days came to be of special significance – they simply assume that they have always been – and that celebrating Christmas, Easter, and Sunday “worship” are orthodox¹. Most Christians do not know that these days were not celebrated by the early church and there is no biblical basis for them – but instead they were established later in church history by the Catholic Church. Even the Roman Catholic Church does not claim these days as biblical – but rather that the Church had the authority to establish them.²

There is nothing wrong with keeping traditions in and of themselves. The danger comes when we declare our traditions as “God-given” – or even replace God-given commands with man-made traditions. So as not to be found following the “traditions of men” which oppose God’s Word, we need to reexamine what is indeed orthodox and biblical regarding what is commonly called “Easter”.

First, it should be noted that the word “Easter” is not found in the Bible³. The origins of the word “Easter” are quite clear. This Anglo-Saxon word is derived from the ancient eastern religion of Ishtar. In ancient Babel, Nimrod⁴ was married to Queen Semiramis. After Nimrod died, Semiramis declared Nimrod to be the Sun-god. Various cultures thereafter called him Baal, Bel, Molech etc. Semiramis named herself Ishtar (pronounced: ee-**star**) and claimed to be a goddess (other cultures adopted this and called her Astarte, Osaris, Wife of Baal, Ashtaroth or Ashtoreth, or Queen of Heaven⁵). Semiramis gave birth to a son she named Tammuz⁶, who she claimed was fatherless, and was in fact Nimrod reborn. When Tammuz was killed by a wild boar, Semiramis claimed that he was resurrected each spring in the trees and flowers on the first sun-day, after the first moon of the spring. Semiramis declared that those worshipping Tammuz should fast for 40 days prior to the celebration of the day of Tammuz’ resurrection – a day known as “Easter”. From this ancient mystery religion it is quite easy to see the pagan origins of Lent and Easter. Satan prepared a counterfeit to confuse men – but God’s calendar had Feasts called “Passover” and “Unleavened Bread” that would not be tied to the sun – and thereby remain distinct.

In the middle of the Second Century, there was a controversy raging among the followers of Jesus. It became known as the “Quartodeciman Controversy”. There were essentially two competing times to commemorate the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Early in the Second Century, there were a number of church leaders who began moving away from all things that appeared Jewish. In commemorating the death of Jesus, the church in Rome had begun to distance itself from relating this event to the Jewish Passover and instead began to time the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus to coincide with the pagan rites of Attis (Roman variation of Tammuz). The Asian churches still were holding to the practice of commemorating the death of Jesus (and therefore the timing of His Resurrection) on the 14th day of the month of Nisan. The word “quartodeciman” means “fourteenth”. The Asian churches were still keeping the Hebrew Feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread as a part of their celebrations surrounding the Resurrection.

¹ As in, the original practice and beliefs of First Century believers in accordance with Scripture

² *The Convert’s Catechism of Catholic Doctrine* by Peter Geiermann, 1957 ed. B. Herder Book Co., St. Louis; 1930 pp37-38: “Question: Which is the Sabbath day? Answer: Saturday is the Sabbath day. Question: Why do we observe Sunday instead of Saturday? Answer: We observe Sunday instead of Saturday because the Catholic Church, in the Council of Laodicea (A.D. 336) transferred the solemnity from Saturday to Sunday.”

³ In the King James Version, the English word “Easter” is found in Acts 12:4, but the translators chose this word even though the Greek word used here is *Pascha*, which is an adaptation of the Hebrew word *Pesach* [Passover].

⁴ Genesis 10:8-10

⁵ Jeremiah 7:18 – baking cakes for the “Queen of Heaven” began thousands of years ago, and continues to this day – on what is called “Good Friday”

⁶ Ezekiel 8:13-16

In an effort to resolve the differences between the churches in Asia Minor, and the churches in the West (led by Rome), Polycarp, a student of the Apostle John and a bishop in Smyrna traveled to Rome to confer with Anicetus the bishop in Rome. The churches of Asia were following the practices of the Apostle John and the other Apostles in celebrating the Resurrection in relationship to the 14th of Nisan. Anicetus, on the other hand was beginning a movement which sought to abandon all things that appeared “Jewish”. The meeting left the issue unresolved.

At the end of the Second Century, Victor, the bishop of Rome began to threaten other Church leaders in an attempt to get them to abandon Passover in favor of the Roman Easter celebration as a means to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus. Polycrates, the bishop of Ephesus, wrote to Victor his response to these threats.

“We for our part keep the day [14th of Nisan = Passover] 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... there is John, who lent back on the Lord's breast... there is Polycarp, bishop and martyr... All these kept the fourteenth day of the month as the beginning of the Paschal Festival [Passover], 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... and my family has always kept the day when the people put away the leaven [Feast of Unleavened Bread]. So I, my friends, after spending sixty-five years in the Lord's service and conversing with Christians from all parts of the world, and going carefully through all Holy Scripture, and not scared of threats. Better people than I have said: 'We must obey God rather than men'. ”⁷

The controversy worsened until the Council of Nicea in 325 CE. The Council of Nicea was ordered by Emperor Constantine to resolve various “disputes” that existed in the Church – including whether the Passover or Easter should be celebrated. Constantine was a pagan who claimed to be a “Christian” and yet introduced many pagan influences into the church. In his order from the Council of Nicea he said:

“Constantine, August, to the churches... When the question arose concerning the most holy day of Easter, it was decreed by common consent to be expedient, that this festival should be celebrated on the same day by all, in every place. ...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 then have nothing in common with the most hostile rabble of the Jews.”⁸

Hence, the “Christian” celebration of Easter, and the dating thereof was created out of whole cloth by order of the Roman Emperor Constantine through a ruling council of the Catholic Church. An Easter celebration of course was not new – it had been celebrated by pagans for thousands of years. Constantine claimed that this had always been the practice of the church, even though this ruling was meant to bring an end to the Quartodeciman practice of celebrating the Passover.

In the Council of Laodicea in 364 CE, the Church Council took even more strident steps. They considered all those who celebrated Passover⁹ as well as those who rested on the Sabbath¹⁰ to be heretics because they adhered to “Jewish” dates.

In the Church's official actions at the Council of Nicea and the later Council of Laodicea, it is of special interest that a prime motivation for establishing “Easter” as a replacement in practice and dating from Passover was a desire to abandon all things “Jewish”. Unfortunately, they failed to remember Jesus' words in John 4:22, “salvation is of the Jews” – and the fact that Jesus Himself was and is a **Jew**. In Church documents from early in

⁷ Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, p.231

⁸ *A Historical View of The Council of Nice; with by Rev. Isaac Boyle, D.D.*; T Mason and G Lane, New York, 1839; pp. 51-54

⁹ From Council of Laodicea, Canon 7

¹⁰ From Council of Laodicea, Canon 29: "... must not Judaize by resting on the Sabbath [seventh day], but must work on that day...)

the Second Century up until now, there has been a strong anti-Semitic bent. In their hatred of the Jews, they abandoned Scripture and established their own system.

If we are to examine and hold to orthodoxy, we need to be mindful of what Scripture says. Scripture is quite clear regarding the Resurrection, and the timing of it. It all started with a picture... the picture of deliverance from bondage, the exodus from Egypt. The Feast of Passover and the associated Feast of Unleavened Bread commemorate how God delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. God commanded that they keep these Feasts along with others in Leviticus 23. Passover was to be a calendar marker for God's people – found in the starting month of God's calendar. In fact, in the detailing of the seven Feasts in Leviticus, they are not called the "Feasts of Israel" – but rather the "Feasts of the LORD".

In God's calendar, Passover [*Pesach*] was celebrated first, then immediately thereafter the Feast of Unleavened Bread [*Hag HaMatzot*]. In the midst of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (seven days long), was found the Feast of First Fruits [*Bikurim*]. From that date counting fifty days (or plus 49 days) was to be Pentecost [*Shavuot*]. If one looks at the dating for these biblical Feasts, you can quickly see the events of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts. In fact, the Gospel of John uses the seven as its date references. The Gospels make it quite clear that the events at the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus were not just coincidentally related to the Feasts of Leviticus 23 – but that they were by God's design a picture of the events of the ministry of the Messiah Jesus. It all began that year with the month of Nisan (also known as *Aviv*). The Feasts were all based upon the new moon – beginning the cycle with the new moon of the "first month" (*Aviv*). Therefore, it is always exactly 185 days from Passover to the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*). The connections between the Feasts of the LORD in Leviticus 23 and the Gospel accounts are amazing:

1. On the 10th of Nisan the people were to choose a lamb that they would then use later in the week to be their Passover lamb (Exodus 12:). It must be a male lamb without blemish. It was to be examined for the next four days in order to be sure it was suitable and without blemish.

This most likely coincided with Jesus' journey from Bethany to Jerusalem (a short distance) described in John 12. By the First Century, it was common to interchange the words "Passover" and "Unleavened Bread" when describing these Feasts since they occurred at the same time. Thus what is referred to as Jesus' "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem was on the 10th of Nisan. Luke 19:7 records that Jesus spent the next 4 days teaching in the Temple – to satisfy the 4 days of examination of the Passover Lamb.

2. On the 14th of Nisan the people were to kill the chosen lamb "between the evenings" – in Hebrew reckoning of days, the day begins at sunset and ends at the next sunset. The day is then divided into sections. "Between the evenings" was a term to refer to the afternoon. Thus to be precise, the practice was to kill the Passover lamb between 3:00PM and 6:00PM. On that first Passover in Egypt, the blood of the lamb was then put upon the door post of each home – as a sign for the Angel of the LORD to "pass over" that home and not take the life of the first born. Then at sunset, the lamb was to be eaten by the family of each household.

John records that the day that Jesus was crucified was the "Preparation Day of the Passover". This coincides with the afternoon of the 14th of Nisan.

Matthew 27:46 says that Jesus died at the "ninth hour" which would coincide with the very hour that thousands of "Passover lambs" were being slain in the Temple – around 3:00PM on the 14th of Nisan.

3. After the sunset of 14th of Nisan it became the 15th of Nisan (remember, Hebrew dates begin and end at sunset). This was the first day of Unleavened Bread. According to Leviticus 23:6-7, the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (15th of Nisan) was to be a "Sabbath". This is in addition to the normal weekly Sabbath (This is why many read the Gospel accounts and automatically assume that Jesus was crucified on Friday, because it says the next day was a Sabbath).

Jesus was laid in a tomb before sunset on the 14th of Nisan. In Matthew 12:40 Jesus said that He would be "three days and three nights in the heart of the earth". People approaching the question of when Jesus was crucified from a traditional perspective argue that from Friday to Sunday is "parts of three days" – and yet cannot account for "three nights". The predisposition to simply accept a tradition has blinded many to the fact that these important dates are not "days of the week" but "days of the month". In fact, there is very little

mention of days of the week in Scripture except references to the weekly Sabbath. However, if one insists on developing a “days of the Passion week” timeline, Friday does not work in the Leviticus 23 calendar – it would have to be either Wednesday or Thursday instead.

4. Hidden within the week of the Feast of Unleavened Bread described in Leviticus 23, is the Feast of First Fruits. It was an extremely important day within the Feast week. It was the starting day for counting to when Pentecost would occur 50 days later. It was the day to give thanks for the beginning of the harvest. Leviticus 23:10-11 tells us that this Feast was to be on the day after the Sabbath of the week of Unleavened Bread. There is a question among scholars whether this meant the day after the normal weekly Sabbath (Sunday) or the day after the special “Sabbath” on the 15th of Nisan.

The Gospels record that Jesus was raised from the dead early (before dawn) on the “first day” of the week. Romans 16:5 shows us the connection between Resurrection Day and the Leviticus 23 Feast of First Fruits.

**“But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”
Romans 16:5**

5. Beginning with the Feast of First Fruits, 50 days were counted out – and the 50th day was to be a Feast – the Feast of Pentecost. Pentecost was one of three Feasts that God commanded all His people to go up to “the place where His Name dwelled” (in this case the Temple in Jerusalem).

In Acts 2:1 we read that there were a huge number of Jews present in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost when God sent the Holy Spirit in power upon His waiting Apostles – on the 50th day after the Feast of First Fruits – bringing in a harvest of souls.

The first four Feasts of the LORD from Leviticus 23 provides an actual timetable for the events surrounding the last week of Jesus’ ministry and the sending of the power of the Holy Spirit – down to the events occurring on the very day. Is there any doubt then that we should be concerned to not replace those commemorative times with ones of our own choosing – or of the decree of man? We need to be most concerned about the history of the name and dating for the pagan festival called “Easter” – and not use it to replace the biblical Feasts and dating of the Resurrection of Jesus. We should focus on all three of the Feasts during this week of commemoration – after all, Scripture gives a reason for these Feasts: they are teaching aids. Passover shows us how only the perfect Lamb of God (Jesus) can provide the innocent blood to apply to the “posts” – in order that the wrath of God not be visited on us. The Feast of Unleavened Bread shows us that Jesus was without sin – without pride – and calls us to live lives that are modeled upon that principle. Leaven is a biblical picture of pride and sin. First Fruits gives us the sure hope that Jesus is the first of the harvest – and that just as He was raised from the dead – so we all will follow after Him.

**“Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover [Pesach Lamb], was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened *bread of sincerity and truth.*”
1 Corinthians 5:8**

There is honest debate about what day it best to celebrate the Passover meal in a way consistent with Leviticus 23. Many believe that it should be done at sunset on the 14th of Nisan. Because the Gospel of John seems to indicate that Jesus and His disciples celebrated a last meal the night before, some like to celebrate a Seder (Passover meal) at sunset on the 13th of Nisan and then again at sunset on the 14th of Nisan. Both of these positions are attempts to find precisely what Scripture says and act accordingly – instead of blindly following traditions that replace and obscure the truth.

Regardless of what we choose to do with regard to such issues that are left unresolved in Scripture, let’s leave “Easter” for those who know no better – **instead, let’s keep the Feasts!**