

1 *The Easter Error*

Jesus' Command Of A Passover Remembrance

The Hebrew word for Passover is *Pesach*. The King James Bible translates the word for *Passover* in Greek (*Pascha*) with the word *Easter* in Acts 12:4. The King James translators thus believed *Easter* was synonymous with *Passover*. Why was this? To find the answer, we need to go back to what early Christians understood (and everyone but English-speaking Christians still understand) was the *context* in which Jesus intended the communion command to be fulfilled.

We English-speaking Protestants are generally ignorant of Jesus' intention behind the "remembrance of me" command at the Passover dinner before He was crucified. (Luke 22:19.) As explained below,¹ the command from Jesus was supposed to be part of the Passover service that his Jewish apostles were to keep and celebrate annually. When Jesus said "do this in remembrance of me," He did not envision a new ceremony called Communion. When He did likewise with the cup of wine, Jesus was not envisioning a new second step to what we call Communion. Rather, Jesus was saying when you "do this," that is, recite remembrances as the head of the table shares the unleavened bread and as each table-participant drinks from the Cup of Redemption in the Passover Dinner, the participants were henceforth to now do this in remembrance of Jesus. The story of Jesus' sacrifice for our sins would now be added as a remembrance at these two junctures of the Passover Dinner.

This explains why the early church practiced Passover. The Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp (died 155 A.D.), asserted Passover observance was *directly handed to him by*

1. See "Jesus' Intention to Transform the Passover Dinner" on page v.

the apostles. Polycarp also said he was taught by them to keep it on 14 Nissan, exactly as prescribed as the day for Passover in the Law given Moses.²

It may surprise an English-speaking evangelical to learn this, but it was this apostolic practice which explains why the Catholics and Orthodox *still keep Passover each year*. We find the Catholics in Italy call it *Pasqua*. In the Orthodox church, *Pascha*. Among Catholics it is an eight day period.³

In fact, even in the *evangelical Protestant church* outside English-speaking lands, the celebration week ending with Resurrection Sunday still retains its correct name of *Passover*, e.g., *Pascua* in Spanish; *Paschen* in Dutch, *Pâques* in French, etc. I first learned this by living abroad in Costa Rica. I was puzzled why Protestant Christians there called Easter *Pascua*. That's how I stumbled across this issue.

The Law of Passover

The Passover Season was comprised of two parts: a Passover dinner and a week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread. The Passover dinner was celebrated at a dining-room table in a house (Exodus 12:46) besides at the Temple (Deut. 16:2). The home-observance was typically led by the head of a family. The house had to be cleaned of all scraps of unleavened bread in preparation for passover and the feast of unleavened bread. The sojourner (Gentile sharing community with the Jews) was enjoined *only* not to eat unleavened bread in this season. Exodus 12:19. Otherwise, the sojourner did not have

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2. Of this there can be no doubt. Polycarp (martyred 155 A.D.) spoke of Christians keeping Passover at 14 Nissan, which he claimed he learned from Apostle John (whom he claimed to know as a child) and other apostles. Eusebius records that Polycarp went to Rome to convince the bishop of Rome to change back to apostolic practice. Eusebius says the bishop of Rome could not "persuade Polycarp not to observe what he had always observed with John, the disciple of our Lord, and the other apostles with whom he associated." (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Ch. XXIII.) Likewise, passover for Christians on 14 Nissan was recorded in the *Apostolic Constitution* which dates somewhere between 220 A.D. and the late 300s.
 3. "In the Roman Catholic Church, Easter is actually an eight-day feast called the Octave of Easter." ("Easter," *Wikipedia*, at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Easter> (last accessed 1/7/07).)

to keep the Passover dinner or celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Yet, if the sojourner chose to keep the Passover dinner, he had to be circumcised first. Exodus 12:49. Thus, it was an honor that a sojourner could share in, but it was not a requirement to do so.

How the Timing Was Changed From 14 Nissan

Why does Passover in the Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical Protestant communities no longer coincide with the Jewish day of observance of Passover?⁴ Why in particular is this true even if they retain the name *Passover* as the festival-season they celebrate?

At the Council of Nicea in 325, Passover's day of celebration was changed at the urging of the Emperor of Rome. He specifically demanded it be a different day other than 14 Nissan so as to *spite the Jews*. Emperor Constantine's ostensible reasons were all blatantly grounded on a virulent anti-semitical tirade!⁵

However, there were actually some other competing considerations not specifically mentioned in the records from the Council of Nicea. The true Passover could fall in March. However, the new chronology guaranteed Passover would land in April. Why was this important? Because in that era, the English and Germanic name for April was *Eostremonat* or *Ostaramonath* respectively. What did this name mean? In April, the pagans celebrated the festival of Osiris. It was her month. In Britain, her name was *Eastre*. There is no dispute this is the origin of the name for *Easter*. In the Eighth century, a Christian monk and historian, Bede, explained why

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4. For reasons too complex to narrate, the Orthodox do not agree with the Catholic date for Passover.
 5. Emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. stated the ostensible rationale for the change. He thought it imperative Passover *not be held on the same day* as Jews keep Passover. Constantine stated victoriously at the Council: "It was, in the first place, declared improper to follow the custom of the Jews in the celebration of this holy festival....Let us, then, have *nothing in common* with the Jews, who are our adversaries.... avoiding all contact with that evil way.... Therefore, this *irregularity* must be corrected, in order that we may *no more have any thing in common* with those parricides and the murderers of our Lord.... *no single point in common* with the perjury of the Jews." (*Theodoret's Ecclesiastical History*.)
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English-speaking lands persisted in calling the Passover by the name *Easter*. He explained: “Eosturmonath, which is now interpreted as the paschal month, was formerly named after the goddess Eostre, and has given its name to the festival [Passover in Britain].”⁶

Thus, there was a more compromising rationale and purpose to Constantine’s change. He desired to appease pagan citizens. This is why Constantine would not tolerate those who wanted to retain the apostolic practice of keeping Passover on 14 Nissan. These were known as *Quatordecimans*, i.e., *14-ers* in Latin. Like we call the gold-rush enthusiasts *49ers*, these adherents were called the *14ers*. Because Constantine was able to heavily influence doctrine, the Roman Catholic church now inflicted excommunication on all Quatordecimans. This resulted in all kinds of civil penalties, e.g., inability to inherit, etc.⁷ This is how the true apostolic practice of observing 14 Nissan as the true day for Passover was wiped out in the Roman territories. Yet, the name *Passover* continued to be used. This is why the feast is still called *Passover* in all of Christendom except in English-speaking lands.

Thus, it was the British who solely refused to observe Passover under any name other than that of their goddess *Eastre*. She would have a priority over *Passover*. The Catholic church tolerated this in Britain. This was simply inherited by the Protestant English Church without any re-examination. As a result, Protestants in English-speaking lands came to completely forget the very context in which the drama of the Resurrection was to be recreated each year: it was the PASS-OVER week, which starts with the Passover Dinner and continues in what is called the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

6. He wrote in Latin: “Eosturmonath, qui nunc paschalis mensis interpretatur, quondam a dea illorum quae Eostre vocabatur et cui in illo festa celebrabant nomen habuit.” (*Venerable Bede: The Reckoning of Time* Faith Wallis (trans.) (Liverpool University Press, 1999) at 54.)

Jesus' Intention to Transform the Passover Dinner

But why did the early apostolic church follow Passover? Because Jesus commanded a change within the Passover Dinner. (Luke 22:19.) It was not something new called Communion. Jesus instead was adding a memorial to step four of the traditional Passover Seder where the unleavened bread is broken. He added another memorial at a later juncture where the Cup of Redemption was drunk. At each point, the bread and wine are shared by the head of the table with a recitation of certain traditional remembrances. Thus, the early church had to know this was the true nature of Jesus' command regarding Communion. This is why the *apostles* kept Passover, as Polycarp affirmed.

How do we know this was Jesus' meaning? First, the Passover ceremony had been standardized for millennia prior to Jesus Christ. It had fifteen clearly defined steps. We have Gospel-confirmation there had been no significant change in the fifteen steps by Jesus' day. The record in the Gospels

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7. The Quatordecimans were vigorously routed out by Roman Catholicism which deemed them heretics for refusal to move Passover to a day of man's choosing. See "Quatordecimanism," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quartodeciman> (last accessed 1/7/07). A subsidiary issue was that Catholics insisted that the Resurrection celebration *must always coincide with a Sunday*. The Quatordecimans disagreed. If you kept 14 Nissan as Passover as a memorial each year, the celebration of the Resurrection does not always fall on a Sunday. Why? Because 14 Nissan is not always a Thursday in our solar calendar as it was in the year Jesus was crucified. (The Jews used a lunar calendar which is why variances will creep in from year-to-year.) There is no doubt this was the day of Passover in the year of Jesus' crucifixion. The Passover Sabbath falls on 15 Nissan regardless of the day that the weekly Sabbath may fall. (Exodus 12:16; Lev 23:7; Num 28:16-18.) The Gospels say Jesus was crucified and died just before the Passover Sabbath. This is called the "day of preparation." (Matt. 27:62.) This was a reference to just before the beginning of 15 Nissan. Thus, when Jesus resurrected Sunday, Jesus would be *three days and three nights in the grave*, as He predicted. (Matt. 12:40.) But if you accept a memorial of Passover as 14 Nissan, but tolerate the Catholic idea of always celebrating the Resurrection on a Sunday, then because of the variance in the solar versus lunar calendars involved, sometimes Sunday will be *less than three days and more than three days* from 14 Nissan. Anyone knowing Jesus' prophecy will suspect Jesus was a liar. (Sometimes atheists spot the inconsistency, and they hurl this back as proof that Jesus was a liar.) Thus, the Quatordecimans were additionally trying to argue Sunday was an inappropriate day to celebrate the Resurrection in a week in which you were observing the Passover correctly on 14 Nissan. Such Sunday-observance combined with Passover on 14 Nissan would leave the faith open to attack by making Jesus appear to be a liar. The Quatordecimans had a compromise solution. They suggested, to simplify things, that the resurrection should be celebrated on 14 Nissan (with the Passover) even though technically the Resurrection did not fall on Passover. Look at the validity of the Quatordecimans' concerns even among Protestants. We Protestants like Catholics persist in calling the Friday before Easter Sunday the "Good Friday." Good Friday commemorates the crucifixion. Now do the math! Three *days* and three *nights* later is Monday, not Sunday.

shows Jesus followed six of the fifteen steps in exactly identical order. The only thing not mentioned are the steps involving the meal itself in the middle. While those steps are not mentioned, the six steps mentioned in the Gospels do not vary in the slightest from the traditional Passover seder even as it is kept to this very day by Jews.⁸ The dinner's outline was never enacted as a law in the Bible or otherwise, yet one can see Jesus went through it step-by-step in the First Century A.D.

Therefore, we know that Jesus was first saying at step four, we need to change something. This is when we eat the unleavened bread. It was at that point that Jesus *commanded* we were to “**do this** in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19.) Next, Jesus clearly henceforth was associating the Passover Cup of Redemption with Himself: “this is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” (Luke 22:20.) Our Redemption was now from His blood, symbolized by that cup.

What else confirms Jesus' intent to modify the Passover Seder? His *remembrance* terminology in Luke 22:19 also fits in with the nature of the Passover Seder. The head of the table leads the participants in a series of remembrances of the work of God with the people of Israel. It includes not only the Passover but the bitter herbs the people of Israel ate in the desert. There is a remembrance too that Elijah will come back before Messiah, and so on. All Jesus was saying was He wanted to *add one more work* of God to the list of remembrances which were already being recounted at every Passover.

8. There are fifteen points covered in a standard Passover Seder. When you correlate John, Matthew and Luke, steps one through four are mentioned in exact parallel; steps five through twelve (*i.e.*, the particulars of the meal) are omitted; and then steps thirteen and fourteen are repeated again in identical parallel to the standard service. (See <http://home.earthlink.net/~lionlamb/PassoverSeder.html>.) What Jesus was saying *in context* was He wanted step four (the bread) and step thirteen (the wine) to now be done “in remembrance of Me.”

Now hopefully you can understand why it was so imperative to retain Passover within the early church. This is why Roman Catholicism and the Orthodox Church continued the observance of Passover all these centuries. To rid ourselves of Passover's observance completely would be to rid ourselves of the very context in which at least a Jewish Christian was to obey the commandment of Jesus to "do this in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19.) If our intent is to enjoy the privilege of Passover, then our persistent use of the word *Easter* for *Passover* has a negative effect. It has led to ignorance. What else explains an otherwise brilliant and famous commentator like Gill actually saying: "the passover was... abolished, and not to be observed by Christians." (Commentary on Acts 20:6.) Due to the *Easter* moniker for Passover, no one within English-speaking Christianity has any footing to even begin to suspect Gill is wrong. At least for the Jewish-Christian, Jesus intended they "do this in remembrance of me," *i.e.*, share the bread and wine at Passover with a remembrance of Jesus' work on the cross. For the Gentile Christian who exercises the privilege to keep Passover, then he must follow Jesus' revision to that dinner celebration.

*The Orthodox Confront English-speaking "Easter"
Terminology*

This background now allows you to understand why the Orthodox Church in English countries cannot fathom the practice of calling this feast *Easter*. As Michael Harper, an Orthodox 'father,' notes: "This is a much more important subject than a mere dispute about words." Harper acknowledges that virtually no one realizes the original pagan goddess worshipped in April was named *Easter*. Yet, it is this very meaninglessness of the name *Easter* which effectuated a loss of the real meaning of the season. This is how we lost the content of what we were trying to *do* — amend the Passover service to remember Jesus while we simultaneously remem-

bered all the other works of God which were part of the Passover dinner. Harper explains the Orthodox' Church's viewpoint on this phenomenon among English-speakers:

[There is a] constant temptation to drop the word *Pascha* and for clarity (and sometimes charity) use the western word *Easter*. But perhaps the ***time has come for us to make a stand against this***. In our increasingly secular and pagan society the use of a pagan word, of which ***no one knows the meaning***, is hardly suitable to describe the greatest day in the Christian year. When most people knew ***the Christian meaning of the word Easter [as Passover]*** one could perhaps make out a case for using the word. But not today!⁹

In other words, if we did retain the substance of Passover practice within our Easter-observance, perhaps you could say using *Easter* as a name is harmless. But now the word *Easter* obscures rather than highlights what we are trying to celebrate to honor Jesus' command to revise the Passover ceremony.

Any Imperative To Reform?

There is absolutely no dispute factually that the early apostolic church kept Passover. There is no dispute that universal non-English speaking Christianity has always kept Passover, whether Protestant, Orthodox or Catholic. There is no dispute that it was only in 325 A.D. that this observance was moved from 14 Nissan to a date that coincides instead always with a date in April. (This is because the Christian Passover-Easter is measured in relation to the vernal equinox.) There is no dispute that the current date does not coincide with the Passover in God's Law. There is no dispute that the only reason English-speaking Christianity lost the memory of the Passover festival was due to the stubbornness of Englishmen. By the time of the Eighth Century, as recorded by Bede, the British Christians preferred to worship under their pagan goddess' name of *Eastre*.

9. See Michael Harper, *It IS Pascha not Easter!* <http://www.antiochian-orthodox.co.uk/pascha.htm> (accessed 1/5/2007).

With these indisputable facts, what should a Christian do? First, assuming Passover is something still to be observed, it is impermissible to move the timing.

When King Jeroboam moved the feast of tabernacles by one month from the time specified in the Law, the way this is described shows God's displeasure. (1 Kings 12:33.)¹⁰ The Spanish Reina Valera is the closest to the correct translation. Jeroboam selected a "month he *invented* in his heart." (Reina Valera.) The Hebrew is *bada*, which means "to invent." (Strong's #908.) Cf. "devised in his own heart" (ASV KJV); "fixed by him at his pleasure" (BBE); "of his own choosing" (CEV).

What did Jesus likewise teach when we *invent* our own traditions in place of God's commands?

(6) And ye have made **void the word of God because of your tradition**. (7) Ye hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, (8) This people honoreth me with their lips; But their heart is far from me. (9) But **in vain do they worship me**, Teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men. (Matt. 15:6-9 ASV.)

Thus, moving Passover, if we observe it, to anything other than 14 Nissan is vain (empty) worship, so says the Lord Jesus Christ. It is moved solely by tradition. Jesus says God does not accept vain worship. Jesus was alluding to the second commandment which says "do not use the Lord's name in vain."

Nor can one ignore that Daniel says what will mark "another" who "puts down three rulers" (Dan. 7:24) is that he "shall wear out the saints of the Most High; and he shall think to **change the times and the Law**; and they shall be given into his hand until a time and times and half a time." Dan 7:25. Thus, God gives us an idea that this "other" acts wrongly by changing the "times and the Law."¹¹ If this is so, then how

10. Keil & Delitzsch explain this was an "arbitrary alteration of the Law." They explain: "Jeroboam also transferred to the eighth month the feast which ought to have been kept in the seventh month (the feast of tabernacles, Lev 23:34)."

can moving the date for Passover as provided in the Law given Moses be correct? As the Psalmist says, “Your royal laws cannot be changed.” (Ps. 93:5.)

The remaining question, and the most important, is whether Jesus intended the apostles to keep Passover.

First, in broad terms, it is undisputed that the command to keep the Passover applied to Jews. It was optional for sojourners (Gentiles), but if they elected to keep it, they had to be circumcised. Thus, only if God abrogated the Law as to Jews can one say Jesus did not intend the apostles to keep Passover.

There are some fundamentally difficult passages to overcome if we contend God intended to abrogate the Law (Torah) in the New Testament. The New Testament was prophesied to “inscribe the Law (Torah) on our hearts.” (Jeremiah 31:31-33.) When a Redeemer is sent to Israel to create a new covenant, God promises that “*these words* that *I have given you*” (the Law) “will be on your lips and on the lips of your children and your children’s children *forever*.” (Isaiah 59:21 NLT.)¹² When His Servant (Messiah) comes, God “will *magnify the Law* (Torah), and make it honorable.” (Isaiah 42:21 ASV/KJV.) Jesus, for His part, did everything possible to put the Law given Moses on our lips and in our hearts forever. Jesus said immediately after just referring to the “Law (given Moses) and the Prophets” (Matt. 5:17):

Whosoever therefore shall break *one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so*, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever *shall do and*

11. Daniel shows this *other’s* activity is viewed negatively by saying in Daniel 7:26 “But the judgment shall be set, and they *shall take away his dominion*, to consume and to destroy it unto the end.” Then in turn the kingdom taken from him “shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High: His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.” (Dan. 7:27.)

12. All commentators agree Isaiah 59:21 is a promise of the New Covenant. Barnes says “these words” or “my words” means God’s truth previously given “for the guidance and instruction of the church.” Clarke says this means the “words of Jesus.” But this overlooks the tense, which is a *past* tense. “These words” are words given prior to the coming of the Redeemer. Keil & Delitzsch concur, but they try to claim the prior “words” are the words of a covenant given to Abraham in Genesis 17:1 *et seq*. No one wants to accept the simplest solution: Isaiah is saying the same thing as Jeremiah. God intended the Law is on the lips and in the hearts of all those who belong to the New Covenant.

teach them, the same shall be called *great in the kingdom of heaven*. (Matt. 5:19 KJV)

In an identical spirit, Jesus excoriated the Pharisees for a shallow teaching of the “less weighty matters of the Law,” but leaving the “weightier matters of the Law undone.” Matt. 23:23. Jesus attacked the Pharisees’ oral traditions which made of none effect the written commandments of God given Moses. Matt. 15:6-9 (the Pharisees taught that a special *korban* payment which they invented would excuse later having to honor one’s parents if they fell into poverty — in violation of one of the Ten Commandments.) Jesus did everything He could to elevate obedience to the Law given Moses. Jesus’ critiques all reveal the Pharisees had a *shallow* defective Law-negating doctrine. The people merely assumed the Pharisees were teaching the Law because the people were told by the Pharisees what the Law was. Bible-texts were not ubiquitous as they are now. But Jesus said this supposition about the Pharisees was untrue.

Moreover, if the New Testament somehow abrogates the Law, including the Law of Passover, this would contradict God’s repeated emphasis that “these ordinances” of the Law shall be “everlasting for all generations.” (Ex. 27:21; 30:21; Lev. 6:18; 7:36; 10:9; 17:7; 23:14, 21, 41; 24:3; Num. 10:8; 15:15.)

Luther recuctantly came to accept Jesus intended the Law given Moses remains the rule of life for the Christian. While Luther originally subscribed to an anti-Law position in his *Commentary on Galatians*, Luther eventually made an about face. He insisted the Law, in particular the Ten Commandments, applies to Christians. (*Shorter/Longer Catechisms* (1531-32); *Antinomian Theses* (1537); *cfr. Commentary on Galatians* (1531).)¹³

Thus, it would appear that Jesus at least intended His Jewish apostles to keep Passover. It remained an honor for a Gentile to keep it.

What confirms this is that Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, said the apostles themselves *personally* taught him to keep Passover. If Polycarp were lying, it makes no sense

13. See page 102 *et seq.*, *viz.*, at 106. See also page 472.

that there is such a strong universal memory (other than in English-speaking lands) that the festival we call Easter is everywhere else called Passover, and is universally kept.

Finally, Jesus' command to "do this in remembrance of Me" during the Passover dinner has one obvious meaning. Jesus gave two remembrances that would be spoken of when the apostles "do this"— distribute the unleavened bread and share the Cup of Redemption at Passover. The context defines what *do this* meant. The later tradition of what we do on Sunday in Communion does not define what Jesus meant by *do this*. To think Jesus meant "do this" in a vacuum of a Sunday church communion service which observance is itself nowhere commanded in Scripture is replacing tradition for what is the import of Jesus' command. He clearly assumed that the apostles would keep the Passover dinner, as the Law mandated upon a Jew. It is within this context the apostles would fulfill His remembrance-commands of the communion cup and wine. To use tradition to avoid the import of Jesus' command would be "empty" worship. Jesus specifically said worship is vain when *tradition* replaces *commandments of God*. (Matt. 15:6-9.) This includes commandments from Our Lord to remember Him when we 'do this' (*i.e.*, keep passover sharing of the bread and wine).

Thus, we should re-examine our own practice of Easter: do you know it is Passover that we are attempting to celebrate? If not, that is the first sign of an *empty* and *vain* worship. Do we know we are being told to exchange unleavened bread and a Cup of Redemption as remembrances at a Passover dinner *at home* if we are electing to keep the Passover season as a Christian? If not, that is a second sign of an *empty* and *vain* worship. Finally, are we troubled in the slightest that we are worshipping Christ under the name of a pagan goddess albeit a long forgotten association? If not, then that is a final sign that our worship has become so *empty* and so *vain* that even the clear historical taint of idol-worship does not concern us.