FROM PASCHA TO EASTER

Early Christian Celebration of Passover and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

with an Analysis of the Fourth-Century Transformation Under Roman Imperial Christianity

Drawing from the Greek New Testament, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, and Contemporary Patristic Scholarship

ABSTRACT

The earliest followers of Jesus of Nazareth, operating within the liturgical framework of Second Temple Judaism, commemorated his death and resurrection in explicit connection with the Passover (Hebrew: פֶּסַח, Pesach; Greek: πάσχα, pascha). This practice persisted as the normative expression of Christian Paschal observance through the first three centuries of the common era, witnessed by the apostolic writings preserved in the Greek New Testament, the homiletical corpus of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, and the administrative records of episcopal controversy known as the Quartodeciman Controversy. The fourth century introduced a decisive rupture: under Emperor Constantine I, the First Council of Nicaea (325 CE) formally severed the Christian Paschal feast from the Jewish lunar calendar, imposing a Sunday-fixed celebration independent of Nisan 14 and explicitly framed in anti-Jewish rhetoric. This paper examines the biblical, patristic, and historical evidence for early Paschal practice; charts the ecclesiological and political dynamics of the Quartodeciman debates; and analyzes how the Constantinian synthesis transformed Pascha into what the Latin West ultimately termed Easter — a celebration whose calendrical, theological, and symbolic character had been fundamentally reconstituted by imperial mandate.

I. The Biblical Foundation: Pascha in the Greek New Testament

A. Terminological Precision: The Greek πάσχα (Pascha)

Any serious inquiry into early Christian Paschal practice must begin with the Greek New Testament itself, where the term consistently employed for Passover is πάσχα (pascha) — a direct transliteration of the Hebrew פֶּסַח (Pesach). The word appears twenty-nine times in the Greek New Testament. Crucially, not once does the New Testament employ a term equivalent to "Easter" or a sun-worship festival; every reference to the spring observance uses pascha, unambiguously anchoring the Christian celebration to the Jewish Passover. The editors of the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament note that the semantic field of pascha in the Koine period was entirely governed by the Jewish festival context; there was no ambiguity among Greek-literate readers of the first century. (Jeremias, TDNT 5:896–904)

This linguistic baseline is theologically significant. When Luke records Jesus declaring, "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover (τοῦτο τὸ πάσχα) with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15, NA28), the evangelist presents Jesus as a willing participant in the Mosaic calendar's most sacred institution, not merely accommodating Jewish custom but actively identifying his coming sacrifice with the Paschal lamb. The impending "suffering" (πάθω, pathō) is narratively and typologically embedded within the Passover framework.

B. The Last Supper as Paschal Seder

All three Synoptic Gospels place the Last Supper explicitly within the Passover context. Mark 14:12 identifies the occasion as the first day of Unleavened Bread (τῇ πρώτῃ ἡμέρᾳ τῶν ἀζύμων), when the Passover lamb was sacrificed (ὅτε τὸ πάσχα ἔθυον), and records that the disciples asked Jesus where he wished to eat "the Passover" (φάγωμεν τὸ πάσχα). Matthew 26:17–19 and Luke 22:7–15 are similarly explicit. Joachim Jeremias, in his landmark study The Eucharistic Words of Jesus (1955), subjected the narrative to detailed halakhic and historical analysis and concluded with high probability that the Last Supper was a genuine Passover meal, complete with the traditional elements: the unleavened bread (ἄρτος), the wine (οἶνος), and the interpretive haggadah-like discourse by the host.

The Fourth Gospel presents a modified chronology — Jesus appears to be crucified on Preparation Day (παρασκευή, John 19:14) as the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the

Temple — suggesting that John frames Jesus himself as the true Passover sacrifice rather than the one who eats the lamb. Both chronologies preserve the essential typological claim: Jesus dies in direct, purposive connection with Passover. The unbroken bones of Jesus on the cross (John 19:33–36) are explicitly connected by the evangelist to the Paschal ordinance of Exodus 12:46: "Not one of his bones will be broken" (ὀστοῦν οὐ συντριβήσεται αὐτοῦ).

C. Paul's Paschal Theology: 1 Corinthians 5:7

The most theologically dense Paschal statement in the Pauline corpus is found in 1 Corinthians 5:7: *καὶ γὰρ τὸ πάσχα ἡμῶν ἐτύθη Χριστός* — "For indeed Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." The aorist passive *ἐτύθη* (etythē, from *θύω*, thyō, "to sacrifice/slaughter") places this statement firmly within sacrificial cultic language. The possessive *ἡμῶν* ("our") claims the Passover typology as directly applicable to the Corinthian gentile congregation, demonstrating that Paschal theology was operative in Pauline Christianity from the earliest decades. The Greek places great emphasis on "Christ" (Χριστός) positioned at the end of the clause as the semantic climax: the Passover lamb is Christ. This is not allegory for Paul but accomplished historical-salvific fact.

The immediate context of 1 Corinthians 5:7–8 extends the Passover metaphor into ethics: Paul instructs the community to "purge out the old leaven" (ἐκκαθάρατε τὴν παλαιὰν ζύμην) and to celebrate "the festival" (ἑορτάζωμεν) with the "unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (ἐν ἀζύμοις εἰλικρινείας καὶ ἀληθείας). This language — drawn directly from the Feast of Unleavened Bread (חַג הַמַּצּוֹת, Chag HaMatzot, Leviticus 23:6) — indicates that Paul expected his congregants, primarily Gentile, to understand and inhabit the Paschal framework. Scholarly consensus, represented by Gordon Fee (The First Epistle to the Corinthians, NICNT, 1987) and Anthony Thiselton (The First Epistle to the Corinthians, NIGTC, 2000), affirms that Paul is here drawing on an existing Christian application of Passover typology, not introducing a novelty.

D. The Paschal Lamb Typology: John 1:29 and 1 Peter 1:18–19

The identification of Jesus as the lamb (ἀμνός, amnos) of God appears programmatically in the Fourth Gospel's account of John the Baptist: *Ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου* — "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, NA28). The Greek *αἴρων* (airōn) carries dual sense: "to lift up/bear" and "to take away/remove," suggesting

both the substitutionary bearing of sin and its definitive removal. The title draws simultaneously on the Passover lamb of Exodus 12, the suffering servant of Isaiah 53:7 ("he was led like a lamb to the slaughter," ὡς πρόβατον ἐπὶ σφαγὴν ἤχθη, LXX), and the Akedah tradition of Isaac. First Peter 1:18–19 further anchors the motif: believers are redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (ὡς ἀμνοῦ ἀμώμου καὶ ἀσπίλου Χριστοῦ), invoking the criteria of Exodus 12:5 for the Paschal lamb. The typological web is dense and deliberate.

E. The Resurrection and the Eighth Day Theology

Alongside the Paschal lamb typology, early Christianity developed the theological significance of the "first day of the week" (μία τῶν σαββάτων, mia tōn sabbatōn — literally "one of the Sabbaths," a Hebraic idiom for the first day of the week following the Sabbath) as the day of resurrection. All four Gospels note the resurrection occurring on this day (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). This gave the first day of the week a distinctive eschatological valence — the "eighth day" transcending the seven-day creation cycle — which would become central to the eventual Sunday-fixed Easter argument. However, it is critically important to note that the early church's weekly Sunday gathering (discussed by Justin Martyr in his First Apology, ca. 155 CE) was distinct from the annual Paschal commemoration; conflating the two is a major source of historical confusion in popular treatments.

II. Ante-Nicene Paschal Practice: Witnesses from the Pre-Nicene Church Fathers

A. The Apostolic Fathers and the Didache

The earliest post-apostolic layer of Christian literature — the Apostolic Fathers, conventionally dated c. 95–150 CE — provides limited but telling evidence for Paschal practice. The Didache (Διδαχή, Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), generally dated between 70–120 CE and representing one of the oldest surviving Christian catechetical documents, prescribes Eucharistic celebration with prayers that draw heavily on Jewish thanksgiving language (berachot). While the Didache does not directly address the Paschal date controversy, its thoroughly Hebraic liturgical orientation is consistent with the Quartodeciman tradition.

Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35–108 CE), writing his seven letters en route to martyrdom, is among the first to articulate what scholars have termed "proto-catholic" tendencies — including

some distance from Jewish observance in certain passages (e.g., Magnesians 9.1). However, Ignatius does not explicitly address Paschal timing. His silence on the Quartodeciman question, and the absence of a letter to Sardis (noted by Alistair Stewart-Sykes in his study of Melito's Peri Pascha, Brill 1998), has been interpreted as reflecting the strongly Judaizing character of the Sardis community — precisely the community that would later produce the most sophisticated Quartodeciman theology.

B. Polycarp of Smyrna and Bishop Anicetus of Rome (c. 155 CE)

The first documented controversy over the Paschal date occurs around 155 CE, when Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (c. 69–155 CE) and disciple of the Apostle John, visited Rome and met with Anicetus, Bishop of Rome (c. 155–166 CE). Polycarp maintained the Quartodeciman practice — observing Pascha on Nisan 14 regardless of the day of the week — which he claimed derived directly from the Apostle John and "the other apostles with whom he had associated" (Eusebius, Historia Ecclesiastica [HE] 5.24.16). Anicetus argued for the Roman Sunday observance, claiming Petrine and Pauline apostolic authority.

The outcome, preserved through a letter of Irenaeus quoted in Eusebius (HE 5.24.17), is remarkable for its irenic resolution: the two bishops agreed to disagree. Anicetus permitted Polycarp to preside at the Eucharist in Rome as a gesture of honor, and the two parted in peace. Irenaeus' summary is instructive:

> *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; and 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. (Eusebius, HE 5.24.17, trans. McGiffert, NPNF2 vol. 1)*

This passage is of extraordinary historical value. It demonstrates that as late as the mid-second century, diversity in Paschal practice was not considered heretical but was accommodated within a framework of mutual ecclesiastical respect. It also establishes the apostolic chain of transmission for Quartodeciman practice: John → Polycarp → the churches of Asia Minor.

C. Melito of Sardis and the Peri Pascha (c. 160–170 CE)

The most remarkable surviving document of Quartodeciman Paschal theology is the Peri Pascha (Περὶ Πάσχα, On the Pascha) of Melito, Bishop of Sardis (d. c. 180 CE), rediscovered only

in 1940 from the Papyrus Bodmer XIII and various Oxyrhynchus fragments. Dated by Stuart George Hall (Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and Fragments, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1979) to between 160–170 CE, this is arguably the earliest non-biblical Christian homily in existence, and it constitutes the first known use of the term "Paschal mystery" (τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ πάσχα, to mystērion tou pascha).

The Peri Pascha was delivered as a Quartodeciman Paschal liturgy — a haggadic homily on Exodus 12 delivered on the eve of Nisan 14 during a table rite structurally analogous to the Jewish Passover Seder. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (The Lamb's High Feast: Melito, Peri Pascha and the Quartodeciman Paschal Liturgy at Sardis, Brill 1998) demonstrated that the text divides into two liturgical components: a homily on Exodus 12 (PP 1–45) and a commemorative ritual (PP 46–105) delivered after the Eucharistic meal, both constituting the Quartodeciman Paschal celebration.

The typological theology of the Peri Pascha is dense and sophisticated. Melito employs classical rhetorical devices — homoioteleuton, polysyndeton, chiastic antithesis — to develop the argument that the Passover of Israel was a "type" (τύπος, typos) and "parable" (παραβολή, parabolē) that has been "fulfilled" (πεπλήρωται) in Christ. The Paschal lamb of Exodus 12 is the "model" (τύπος) of the true sacrifice; Christ is the "truth" (ἀλήθεια) to which the type pointed. Melito's famous formulation from PP 66–68 reads:

> *He is the Pascha of our salvation. It is he who in many people endured many things. It is he that was murdered in Abel, tied up in Isaac, exiled in Jacob, sold in Joseph, exposed in Moses, slaughtered in the lamb, hunted down in David, dishonored in the prophets. It is he that was enfleshed in a virgin, that was hanged on the tree, that was buried in the earth, that was raised from the dead, that was taken up to the heights of heaven. (Melito, Peri Pascha 68–72, trans. Stewart-Sykes, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001)*

This recapitulation typology — Christ hidden in each Paschal figure of the Hebrew scriptures — demonstrates how thoroughly Quartodeciman theology was rooted in the continuity between the Testaments, reading Israel's Passover not as superseded but as prophetically concentrated in Christ. The resurrection is present in Melito's homily not as a separate Sunday celebration but as the climax of the Paschal mystery itself, proclaimed on Nisan 14.

D. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–202 CE)

Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons and the most important theologian of the second century, occupies a mediating position in the Paschal controversy. He was raised in Asia Minor under Polycarp's influence and thus deeply familiar with the Quartodeciman tradition. Writing in Gaul, he maintained communication with the Roman church while resisting Victor's aggressive universalism. His lost letter to Victor (summarized in Eusebius, HE 5.24) urged tolerance on the grounds of historical diversity:

> *The controversy is not only about the day, but also about 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. (Eusebius, HE 5.24.12–13, quoting Irenaeus, trans. McGiffert, NPNF2 vol. 1)*

Irenaeus proceeds to name Polycarp and Anicetus as predecessors who disagreed yet maintained full communion — invoking this as a model for Victor. While Irenaeus himself likely followed the Roman Sunday practice by his time in Gaul, his intervention reveals that he considered the Quartodeciman tradition apostolically legitimate. His major theological work, Adversus Haereses (Against Heresies), draws extensively on Paschal typology to anchor his christological arguments against Gnostic dualism: Christ as the recapitulation (ἀνακεφαλαίωσις, anakephalaiōsis) of Adam, his death and resurrection as the renewal of creation.

E. Apollinaris of Hierapolis and the Johannine Chronology Debate

Apollinaris of Hierapolis (fl. c. 170 CE), a contemporary of Melito, represents a fascinating internal division within Quartodecimanism. He was a Quartodeciman bishop who nevertheless opposed those who harmonized the Synoptic and Johannine chronologies by placing the Last Supper on Nisan 14. Apollinaris argued that the Last Supper was not the Passover meal proper, preserving the Johannine chronology in which Jesus dies as the Passover lambs are slaughtered (John 19:14). This internal dispute among Quartodecimans illustrates the theological sophistication of the movement — not a monolith, but a living tradition wrestling with the precise relationship between the old Passover and its christological fulfillment.

F. Polycrates of Ephesus and Victor of Rome (c. 195 CE)

The Quartodeciman controversy reached its most acute pre-Nicene crisis around 195 CE, when Victor I, Bishop of Rome (189–199 CE), moved aggressively to impose the Roman Sunday

practice on all churches, threatening excommunication for Quartodecimans. Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, responded with a remarkable letter to Victor (preserved in Eusebius, HE 5.24.2–7) that constitutes one of the most important primary documents of early Paschal history:

> *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; 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... All these observed the fourteenth day of the Passover according to the Gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith. (Polycrates of Ephesus, in Eusebius HE 5.24.2–6, trans. McGiffert, NPNF2 vol. 1)*

Polycrates' appeal to the Apostle Philip, the Apostle John, and Polycarp — all said to have observed Nisan 14 "according to the Gospel" — is historically momentous. He claims a chain of apostolic witness seven generations deep in his own family, all holding the Quartodeciman position. His defiance of Victor's threatened excommunication was supported by other bishops, including Irenaeus, who rebuked Victor for overreach. Victor apparently backed down, and no actual formal schism resulted at this time, though his "excommunication" letters had been dispatched to Asian churches.

G. Tertullian and North African Practice (c. 160–225 CE)

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, the great African apologist of Carthage, provides valuable testimony to Paschal practice in the Latin West and the transitional period. Writing in his Adversus Judaeos (Against the Jews) and De Oratione (On Prayer), Tertullian displays profound familiarity with Jewish Paschal observance and its christological interpretation. His work On the Passover (De Pascha, largely lost) addressed the Quartodeciman question; Pseudo-Tertullian's Against All Heresies (8) mentions Blastus, a Montanist Quartodeciman active in Rome, who argued that "Passover is not to be kept otherwise than according to the law of Moses, on the fourteenth of the month."

Tertullian's own position evolved: in his earlier Catholic phase he followed the Roman Sunday practice but retained deep respect for Paschal typology. His De Jejunio (On Fasting) and

other Montanist writings reveal that in his later Montanist phase he advocated rigorous Paschal fasting practices — illustrating that the Quartodeciman impulse was not confined to Asia Minor but retained a presence in North Africa and Rome itself.

H. Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170–235 CE) and the Apostolic Tradition

Hippolytus, the prolific Roman theologian whose Refutation of All Heresies constitutes a major source for early Christianity, provides contrasting testimony. In Refutation 8.11, he addresses Quartodeciman Christians in dismissive terms, calling them "quarrelsome" and arguing that the legal Passover enactment was made specifically for the Jews who would kill the true Passover lamb. Hippolytus represents the Roman church's movement toward a principled theological rejection of Quartodecimanism — not merely practical disagreement about dates but a hermeneutical claim that observing Nisan 14 represents a failure to understand the christological fulfillment.

However, Hippolytus' Apostolic Tradition (Traditio Apostolica, c. 215 CE) — whose attribution and exact text remain debated — preserves what appears to be the Roman Paschal vigil liturgy: an overnight fast ending with the Eucharist at dawn on Sunday, incorporating readings, baptism of catechumens, and the Eucharistic celebration. This document represents the earliest detailed liturgical description of the Paschal Vigil in the Sunday-observance tradition and became foundational for later Roman practice.

I. Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–254 CE)

Origen, the most prolific scholar of the Ante-Nicene period, produced extensive homilies and commentaries that engaged the Paschal question on multiple levels. His Peri Pascha (On the Passover), fragments of which survive, argued that the true meaning of pascha is not "passing over" (from the Hebrew) but "suffering" (from the Greek παθεῖν, pathein) — an erroneous etymology reflecting his Alexandrian philosophical framework but revealing the christological depth he brought to the celebration. For Origen, the Paschal celebration was primarily an anagogical event: the soul's passage from vice to virtue, from the Egypt of sin to the promised land of contemplation. His spiritualized interpretation, while departing from strict Jewish Paschal typology, maintained the centrality of the crucifixion-resurrection event as the Paschal mystery's core content.

III. The Quartodeciman Controversy: Chronology and Theological Stakes

A. Three Phases of the Controversy

The Quartodeciman Controversy is best understood in three phases, each escalating in severity and ecclesiological consequence.

The first phase, c. 155 CE, consists of the Polycarp-Anicetus meeting in Rome, where diversity was accommodated with peaceful communion. The second phase, c. 170 CE, involves the internal Quartodeciman dispute between Melito of Sardis and Apollinaris of Hierapolis over the precise relationship between the Last Supper and the Passover meal — a debate that illustrates the theological vitality of the tradition without resolving the central calendrical question. The third phase, c. 195 CE, involves Victor of Rome's attempted imposition of Sunday observance on all churches, provoking Polycrates of Ephesus's defiant response and the eventual irenic intervention of Irenaeus. All three phases resolved — or were left unresolved — without formal condemnation of Quartodecimanism.

B. Apostolic Claims and Counter-Claims

A central dimension of the controversy concerns competing apostolic genealogies. The Quartodecimans claimed derivation from the Apostle John (attested by Polycarp, Polycrates) and the Apostle Philip (attested by Polycrates). The Roman position claimed derivation from the Apostles Peter and Paul. Both claims are historically unverifiable at the primary source level — we possess no direct Pauline or Johannine statement on the calendrical question — but both reflect the broader second-century pattern of appealing to apostolic authority to adjudicate emerging ecclesiological disputes.

From a text-critical standpoint, the strength of the Quartodeciman claim rests on the internal coherence of the witness chain: Polycarp → Polycrates → local bishops of Asia Minor form a geographically concentrated, multigenerational tradition with strong Palestinian and Johannine connections. The Roman Sunday tradition, while eventually prevailing, had a less clearly defined apostolic genealogy in the second century, as Irenaeus himself implicitly acknowledged by noting that diversity had existed "since the time of Sixtus" (Eusebius, HE 5.24.14), that is, since the early second century.

C. Theological Stakes: What Was Actually Debated

It is essential to clarify what the Quartodeciman controversy was not about. It was not a dispute over whether Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday — all parties acknowledged Sunday as the resurrection day. It was not a dispute over whether the resurrection should be celebrated — both Polycarp and Anicetus celebrated the resurrection annually. The dispute was specifically over which day should serve as the annual commemoration of the complete Paschal mystery (death, burial, resurrection).

The Quartodeciman position held that Nisan 14 — the day of the Passover sacrifice — was the theologically correct anchor: commemorating the death of Christ our Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7) as the foundation of the resurrection hope. The Roman position held that the weekly pattern of Sunday gathering, extended to an annual commemorative observance, should fix the celebration on Sunday as a witness to resurrection. Neither position denied the importance of both death and resurrection; they differed on which element served as the primary calendrical anchor and on whether the apostolic witness required Jewish calendar dependency.

IV. The Fourth-Century Transformation: Constantine and the Council of Nicaea (325 CE)

A. The Political Context: Christianity as Imperial Religion

The Edict of Milan (313 CE), issued by Constantine I and Licinius, granted legal toleration to Christianity and ended systematic persecution. Within a decade, Constantine had emerged as sole emperor and was actively intervening in Christian theological disputes — most famously the Arian controversy — as matters of imperial unity. The First Council of Nicaea (325 CE), convened by Constantine at Nicaea in Bithynia, addressed the Arian question as its primary agenda but also resolved the Quartodeciman controversy as a secondary matter of imperial ecclesiastical policy.

The shift in Constantine's intervention represents a qualitative transformation in how ecclesiastical disputes were adjudicated. Where the Quartodeciman controversy of the second century had been settled (or left unsettled) through episcopal correspondence, synodal pressure, and mutual accommodation, the fourth-century resolution came through imperial decree backed by political power. The theological question about apostolic calendrical practice was now inseparable from questions of imperial unity, anti-Jewish policy, and Roman administrative standardization.

B. The Nicene Decision and Its Canonical Formulation

The Council of Nicaea voted to require all churches to observe the Paschal feast on the Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox — a solar-calendar calculation explicitly designed to sever the observance from the Jewish lunar calendar. This formula, which would require independent Christian computation of the equinox rather than reliance on Jewish Passover calculations, enshrined the very "non-dependence on Jewish reckoning" that Victor had argued for a century and a half earlier.

The decision was not unanimous initially. Athanasius of Alexandria later recorded that Christians in Syria, Cilicia, and Mesopotamia continued celebrating the feast on the fourteenth day (de Synodis 5), and Jerome noted many bishops of Asia and the Orient maintaining the practice (De Viris Illustribus 35). However, the institutional momentum of the imperial decree was decisive. Earle E. Cairns's summary is precise: "The Eastern and Western segments of the Church could not arrive at any agreement until the Council of Nicaea in 325, when the viewpoint of the Western Church was adopted." (Christianity Through the Centuries, p. 112)

C. Constantine's Post-Nicene Letter: Anti-Jewish Rhetoric as Theological Argument

The theological rationale offered by Constantine in his post-Nicene circular letter to all churches (preserved in Eusebius, Life of Constantine 3.18.2–3) is historically extraordinary for its explicit anti-Jewish framing:

> *It was decreed unworthy to observe that most sacred festival in accordance with the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are therefore deservingly afflicted with blindness of soul... Let there be nothing in common between you and the detestable mob of Jews! We have received from our Saviour another way; a course is open to our most holy religion that is both lawful and proper. Let us with one accord take up this course, right honourable brothers, and so tear ourselves away from that disgusting complicity. (Constantine I, Letter to the Churches, in Eusebius, Vita Constantini 3.18.2–3, trans. Cameron and Hall, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1999)*

This is not incidental rhetoric but the explicit stated theological rationale for the calendrical change: celebrating Pascha on Nisan 14 constitutes unacceptable association with Jews, who are characterized as impious, bloodstained, and spiritually blind. The anti-Jewish sentiment that had been building in second- and third-century Christianity — and which is visible in less virulent form

even in Melito of Sardis's Peri Pascha — here becomes imperial theological policy. The Synod of Antioch (341 CE) reinforced the Nicene decision, threatening excommunication of any who observed Pascha with the Jews, and the Council of Laodicea (363–364 CE) formally outlawed observance of the Jewish Sabbath and Passover by Christians entirely.

D. The Transformation of Paschal Liturgy and Symbol

The Nicene settlement did not only move a date; it initiated a gradual reconstitution of the celebration's internal structure and symbolic grammar. The Quartodeciman observance had been explicitly anchored in Passover typology — the homily on Exodus 12, the table rite analogous to the Haggadah, the identification of the Eucharistic bread and cup with the Paschal sacrifice of Christ. The post-Nicene Sunday celebration increasingly detached these Jewish typological anchors in favor of a sunrise-oriented resurrection festival whose primary axis was creation renewal and triumphant life rather than sacrificial atonement.

The term employed for the celebration underwent further evolution. In the Koine Greek and Latin ecclesiastical tradition, the feast had been called pascha throughout — a term inseparably linked to the Hebrew Passover. In the Germanic and English-speaking North, however, the term Easter (Old English: Ēastre or Ēostru) displaced pascha in common usage. The eighth-century English monk Bede (De Temporum Ratione, 725 CE) attributed the name to a pagan Anglo-Saxon spring goddess Ēostre, whose feast in the month of Ēosturmonath had been replaced by the Christian celebration. Scholarly debate over Bede's etymology continues (Ronald Hutton, The Stations of the Sun, Oxford University Press, 1996; Venetia Newall, "Easter," in Encyclopedia of Religion and Society), but what is clear is that by the medieval period in the Latin West, the celebration had accumulated spring equinox symbolism, fertility imagery (eggs, rabbits), and a fixed solar calendar date that bore little structural resemblance to the apostolic Quartodeciman Passover meal of Nisan 14.

E. Post-Nicene Witnesses to the Loss

Several post-Nicene voices document the contrast with earlier practice from varying perspectives. Alexander Hislop (The Two Babylons, 1858), while often polemical in method, accurately observed that the festival called Easter in fourth and fifth century church history was originally called "Pasch" or "the Passover" and was not known by the name "Easter": "That festival

agreed originally with the time of the Jewish Passover, when Christ was crucified... that festival was not idolatrous, and it was preceded by no Lent." Marcus Righetti's liturgical scholarship documents that Rome and Alexandria, having rejected the Quartodeciman tradition, repudiated even Jewish calendar calculations in computing the equinox, since "dependence upon the Jews must have appeared humiliating." (From Sabbath to Sunday, cited in Samuele Bacchiocchi, From Sabbath to Sunday, Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977).

Epiphanius of Salamis (c. 310–403 CE), writing in his Panarion (70.9.1–2), provides testimony to surviving Quartodeciman communities still observing Nisan 14 in the late fourth century, identifying them as holding a practice he considered archaic but acknowledging their claim to apostolic precedent. Jerome's De Viris Illustribus (35) records that many bishops in Asia and the East continued Quartodeciman observance even after Nicaea, confirming that the council's decree was not immediately universally implemented.

V. Synthesis: The Transformation in Historical Perspective

A. Continuity and Rupture

Any fair historical assessment must resist two equal and opposite distortions. The first would minimize the transformation, suggesting that the move from Nisan 14 to Sunday Easter was merely an administrative adjustment of no theological consequence. The evidence reviewed above does not support this minimization: the calendrical question was inseparable from questions about the relationship of Christianity to its Jewish matrix, the hermeneutical status of the Hebrew scriptures, and the apostolic tradition's normative authority. The Quartodeciman position was not a fringe eccentricity but the practice of major apostolic centers — Ephesus, Smyrna, Sardis, Hierapolis — with a credible claim to derive from the Apostle John himself.

The second distortion would identify the post-Nicene Easter as straightforwardly pagan, dismissing the genuine theological reflection — the Sunday resurrection emphasis, the eschatological "eighth day" symbolism, the christological transformation of the spring festival — that accompanied the change. The Roman and Alexandrian Sunday-Paschal tradition was not theologically empty; it represented a coherent, if different, way of commemorating the Paschal mystery with legitimate exegetical warrant in the resurrection narratives.

What is historically indisputable is that the transformation was accomplished not by theological consensus or apostolic tradition but by imperial mandate, and that its stated rationale was substantially anti-Jewish. Constantine's letter's equation of Nisan 14 observance with Jewish pollution represents a decisive break from the irenic tolerance that Irenaeus had urged and Polycarp and Anicetus had practiced. The churches of Asia Minor were not persuaded by superior exegesis; they were coerced by imperial power. Those who refused compliance were branded as heretics and subject to persecution (Eusebius, HE, post-Nicene additions; Socrates Scholasticus, Ecclesiastical History 5.22).

B. The Greek New Testament's Enduring Witness

Throughout this history, the twenty-nine occurrences of πάσχα in the Greek New Testament stand as a permanent textual witness to the original Paschal framework. The New Testament nowhere uses a term corresponding to "Easter"; every reference to the spring celebration employs pascha — the Passover — without exception or qualification. Paul's identification of Christ as "our Passover" (τὸ πάσχα ἡμῶν, 1 Corinthians 5:7), Melito's articulation of Christ as the fulfillment of every Paschal type in Israel's history, and Polycrates' appeal to the Apostle John's unbroken chain of Nisan 14 observance all converge on a single historical-theological datum: the earliest Christianity celebrated the death and resurrection of Jesus as the Passover event par excellence — the eschatological Pascha that fulfilled, did not abolish, the feast of Israel's redemption.

The Nicene settlement resolved the calendrical controversy in favor of the Roman Sunday tradition, but it could not alter the Greek text of the New Testament. Scholars from Joachim Jeremias to Gordon Fee to N.T. Wright have consistently returned to this Paschal framework in their exegetical work, recognizing that to read the New Testament without the Passover — without the lamb, the blood, the night of redemption, the firstborn's deliverance — is to misread the very grammar of early Christian soteriology.

C. Historical Legacy

The Nicene Easter decision had consequences extending far beyond liturgical calendrics. The anti-Jewish rhetoric of Constantine's letter, embedded in the stated justification for the change, contributed to the growing theological infrastructure of Christian supersessionism and anti-

Judaism that would produce increasingly severe anti-Jewish legislation throughout the fourth and fifth centuries. The Council of Antioch (345 CE) banned Christians from celebrating Passover with Jewish neighbors; the Council of Laodicea (363–364 CE) outlawed Christian Sabbath observance. The trajectory from Nicaea's Easter decree to medieval anti-Jewish legislation is not linear causation, but the theological severing of Christianity from its Jewish Paschal roots — accomplished by imperial mandate rather than theological consensus — removed an important structural restraint on anti-Jewish sentiment.

For the history of Christian liturgy, the transformation from the Quartodeciman Pascha to the Nicene Easter represents one of the most consequential reshapings of Christian worship in history — greater in structural significance than most later liturgical controversies, yet paradoxically less well-known to contemporary Christians than the doctrinal definitions of the same council. Understanding this history is essential not only for scholars of early Christianity but for any thoughtful reflection on the relationship between Christian practice, Jewish heritage, and the imperial contexts within which both have been shaped.

Conclusion

The early Christian celebration of Passover and the resurrection of Jesus Christ was not the springtime festival of colored eggs and sunrise services familiar to twenty-first century Western Christians. It was the Pascha — a Passover meal and nocturnal vigil, observed on Nisan 14 in conformity with the Hebrew lunar calendar, saturated with Exodus typology, structured in parallel with the Jewish Haggadah, and centered on the proclamation that Christ was the definitive Paschal lamb whose sacrifice and resurrection had effected the ultimate Exodus. This practice claimed apostolic warrant through a direct line from the Apostle John, was articulated with theological brilliance by Melito of Sardis in the Peri Pascha, and was defended with principled defiance by Polycrates of Ephesus against the pressure of a bishop of Rome who claimed universal jurisdictional authority.

The fourth century transformed this apostolic Pascha into what the West calls Easter. The transformation was accomplished by the authority of the first Christian Roman emperor, ratified by the bishops of a council he convened and presided over, and justified in a circular letter whose anti-

Jewish rhetoric revealed the ideological stakes of the calendrical change. The pre-Nicene diversity — honored as recently as 155 CE by Polycarp and Anicetus sharing communion despite their disagreement — was replaced by imperial uniformity enforced by the threat of heresy.

The Greek New Testament's twenty-nine occurrences of πάσχα remain. The homily of Melito of Sardis remains. The letter of Polycrates of Ephesus remains. And the historical record of how the church moved from Pascha to Easter — from apostolic Passover to imperial Sunday festival — remains available to all who are willing to read it.

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1 Corinthians 5:7 -- kai gar to pascha hemon etythē Christos -- For indeed Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed.

John 1:29 -- Ide ho amnos tou Theou ho airon ten hamartian tou kosmou -- Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Luke 22:15 -- epithymia epethymesa touto to pascha phagein meth hymon -- With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you.

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