

THE PASSOVER - EASTER CONNECTION

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Without question, a significant change has taken place in the way believers observe the Lord's Resurrection since the earliest days of the church. Prior to the fourth century, the day when Christians celebrated the resurrection was named *Pascha* in the Greek, which is derived from the Hebrew word *Pesach*, the same word usually translated as "Passover." So both Christians and unbelieving Jews shared a common event, but with different meanings.

There was also both commonality and differences in terms of the timing of the two celebrations. The western part of the church, including Rome and the rest of Europe, observed the resurrection on the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox. The eastern part of the church, especially in Asia Minor, celebrated the resurrection of Yeshua (Jesus) on the annual holiday of Passover, which was the 14th day of Nisan on the Hebrew calendar according to Exodus 12 and Leviticus 23.

This controversy came to a head around 195 A.D. when Victor, bishop of Rome, declared the practice of linking the Resurrection to the day of the Passover as being heretical. In response, Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, said this:

"We therefore observe the genuine day, neither adding thereto nor taking away. For in Asia great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again in the day of the Lord's appearing, in which he will come with glory from heaven, and will raise up all the saints; Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who sleeps in Hierapolis, and his two aged virgin daughters. His other daughter also, who having lived under the influence of the Holy Ghost, now likewise rests in Ephesus. Moreover, John, who rested upon the bosom of our Lord; who also was a priest, and bore the sacerdotal plate, both a martyr and teacher. He is buried in Ephesus also Polycarp of Smyrna, both bishop and martyr. Thaseas, also bishop and martyr of Eumenia, who is buried at Smyrna. "All of these observed the 14th day of the Passover according to the gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith."¹

It's important for us to recognize this point of history: The Apostle John had a disciple named Polycarp who later became bishop of Smyrna. His successor was Polycrates. They all observed the Resurrection on the day of Passover, not the first Sunday afterward, and they passed this practice on from one generation to the next. Polycrates made the point that, in addition to John, the Apostle Philip and his daughters and other church leaders who knew the Apostles were resolute in observing the Resurrection at the same time when the Jewish people were observing Passover.

Nevertheless Bishop Victor was not satisfied with the documented practices of the Apostles and the early church and considered anyone who held this position to be worthy of excommunication. For more than a century this controversy continued, but as time passed, the connection to the Apostles and the earliest church leaders faded away. This set the stage for the final act in this ecclesiastical drama.

¹ *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilius*, Book 5, Ch. 24:2-4,6.

That was when Constantine became emperor of Rome in 312 A.D. He was at first a pagan. But by the time he turned 40 he was professing himself to be a Christian. As the first Christian emperor, he sought to reverse centuries of persecution of Christians and to establish the Holy Roman Empire as the fulfillment of the kingdom of God. In the year 321 A.D. he enacted the “Venerable Day of the Sun” edict that formally established Sunday as the day when business and government would rest and would be closed in the Roman Empire (thus setting the stage for the Council of Laodicea in 363 A.D. which renounced Saturday as the Sabbath and formalized Sunday as the Christian Sabbath).

Then in 325 A.D. Constantine convened 318 Church leaders (none of which were Jews) at Nicea in present-day Turkey. Their stated purpose was to address a heresy instigated by an Alexandrian theologian named Arius who denied the deity of Jesus. The bishops produced a creed that clearly affirmed the long-standing belief that Jesus was fully God and fully man. But they went even further in their actions by addressing the Passover-Easter controversy. The Nicene Council declared that the Resurrection could no longer be observed in conjunction with the Passover date of Nisan 14. To do otherwise was now considered heretical. Constantine himself had this to say at the council:

“It was declared to be particularly unworthy for this, the holiest of all festivals, to follow the custom of the Jews, who had soiled their hands with the most fearful of crimes, and whose minds were blinded. In rejecting their custom, we may transmit to our descendants the legitimate mode of celebrating Easter. . . We ought not, therefore, to have anything in common with the Jews, for the Savior has shown us another way; our worship follows a more legitimate and more convenient course (the order of the days of the week); and consequently, in unanimously adopting this mode, we desire, dearest brethren, to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews.”²

From that day forward it was decreed by church leaders that the Resurrection should be celebrated on the Sunday immediately following the full moon that occurred on or after the vernal equinox on March 21. As a result, Passover and Easter are now celebrated in the same season, and often within days of one another, but are viewed as being independent holy days. Yet as we have seen in the historical record, that was not always the case.

By changing the date of the annual commemoration of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Church significantly distanced itself from the Jewish roots of Christianity. Based on the changes instituted at the Council of Nicea, the theology of the Church officially took on an anti-Judaic character. There was a pervasive effort to repudiate every vestige of Jewish culture. The church of Constantinople mandated acceptance of this profession:

“I renounce all customs, rites, legalisms, unleavened breads and feasts of lambs of the Hebrews, sacrifices, prayers, aspersions, purifications, sanctifications and propitiations, and fasts, and new moons, and Sabbaths, and superstitions, and hymns and chants and observances and synagogues, and the food and drink of the Hebrews; in one word, I renounce absolutely everything Jewish, every law, rite and custom...”³

Instead, new ways of worship and practice were instituted. The Jewish cultural elements were replaced by pagan ones. Much of the world in ancient times was pagan and worshipped a variety of gods and goddesses. One of these popular deities was the fertility goddess of spring

² Eusebius, “Constantine’s Letter to the Churches respecting the Council of Nicea,” *Vita Constantini.*, Book 3, Ch. 18.

³ Joseph Assemani, *Liturgies of the Universal Church 1*, p. 105.

that can be traced back to many ancient civilizations. In the Anglo-Saxon culture, this goddess was known as *Eostre*. And in recognition of *Eostre*, an annual celebration of the renewal of life took place at the time of the vernal equinox.

There is little doubt that the church fathers sought to abolish this popular festival by providing an alternative celebration. The biblical name *Pascha* that had been used by Christians for the resurrection observance was replaced by the pagan name Easter. But even though the focus of Easter was shifted to the resurrection of Christ, it also opened the door to incorporating pagan fertility symbols such as rabbits and eggs, and compromising some biblical principles.

So today, many centuries later, much of our world has little understanding of the historical and biblical connection between the celebrations of Passover and the Resurrection of Jesus. But such an understanding is important because it helps us to strengthen our recognition of the resurrection as an actual historical event, not a fable. Moreover when we consider the events that transpired during the last days of the life of Jesus, we can place them with great historical accuracy.

The timing of the observance of Passover

The first question that needs to be considered is: how can we reconcile the seeming paradox of Yeshua and His disciples keeping the Passover together *before* the actual day of observance? The answer will enable us to initiate the timeline of events.

It is claimed by some that the Last Supper was not a Passover Seder but some other kind of meal. But the synoptic Gospels clearly indicate they were keeping the Passover together. Yeshua told Peter and John: “Go and prepare the Passover for us, so that we may eat it” (Lk 22:8). On the other hand, Luke writes that this was the day on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed (v. 7) and it is clear that the majority of the people of Jerusalem were preparing to observe Passover the next day (cf. Jn. 18:28).

So was this a legitimate day for Yeshua and His disciples to observe Passover? Or was it an act that was independent of the Passover custom as some have suggested? If we go back to the time of the original Passover in Egypt, God commanded the Israelites:

“You shall keep it (the lamb) until the fourteenth day of the same month, then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel is to kill it at twilight” (Ex 12:6).

The Hebrew words *beyn ha'arbayim*, translated as “twilight,” literally means “between the evenings.” It is a phrase that refers to the period of time just before sunset, therefore the late afternoon. And since the Hebrew day is reckoned from sunset to sunset, it would be prior to the end of the day. This timing was confirmed by God’s instructions for the subsequent observance of Passover in the wilderness of Sinai beginning one year later (Num. 9:1-4) and as part of His instructions regarding the specifics of all of the feasts (Lev. 23:5-6).

So based on God’s original instructions, both the Passover sacrifice and the observance of the feast had to take place on Nisan 14. The feast didn’t have to end on that day, however. So the practice was to begin the feast before sunset on the 14th and continue on after sunset to the 15th, which was the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Exodus 12 goes on to say that the Angel of Death passed through Egypt at midnight on Nisan 15. Pharaoh then summoned Moses and Aaron that same night and told them to get the Israelites out of Egypt immediately. It says they left in haste without their bread having a chance to rise. So they departed that same day on the 15th of Nisan. Numbers 33:3 confirms this: “The Israelites set out from Rameses on the 15th day of the first month, the day after the Passover.”

The main point is that originally the sacrifice of the lambs and the observance of the feast both took place on Nisan 14. But later in the Pentateuch, a door was opened for a shift in the observance. Just before entering the promised land, the people of Israel were told by God that when they established a permanent place of worship for Him (which would be the temple in Jerusalem):

“you shall sacrifice the Passover in the evening at sunset, at the time that you came out of Egypt” (Deut 16:6).

Based on this instruction, after the Temple was built in Jerusalem, the observance of Passover was shifted to Nisan 15—the anniversary of their departure from Egypt. In other words, Passover is no longer observed ceremonially on the actual day of Passover as set forth originally in Scripture (Lev 23:5). That shift of observance merged Passover and Unleavened Bread into a single feast, known as the *seder*, which begins on the 15th of Nisan, right after sunset.

After the establishment of temple worship in Jerusalem, the original day of Passover on the 14th became known as the Preparation Day (Mat 26:17-19), when the lamb was sacrificed and homes were purged of leaven. So it is imperative to have this understanding that there were two ways of observing Passover in the Bible:

- The original Passover in Egypt and its subsequent observance in the wilderness of Sinai.
- The Passover merged with Unleavened Bread during temple times until the present.

All this to say that in the year when Yeshua died, it is apparent that He kept Passover with His disciples on Nisan 14 according to Exodus 12, Numbers 9 and Leviticus 23, while the Temple authorities and the rest of the people did so after sundown on the 15th according to the instruction of Deuteronomy 16. This enabled Yeshua to explain the fulfillment of the rich symbolism of the Seder while establishing the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper (Lk. 22:19) and also to die timely as the perfect, final Passover Lamb.

The timing of the death and resurrection of Yeshua

After Yeshua observed the Passover Seder/Lord’s Supper with His disciples in the evening that began Nisan 14, His late night betrayal occurred in the Garden of Gethsemane, followed by His unjust trial. Then, at 9:00 am in the morning of the 14th, He was placed on the Cross in order to die in capital punishment (Mk 15:25).

His death occurred at the ninth hour of the day (Mat 27:46). According to the way Romans reckoned time, His death occurred at 3:00 p.m. That was the time of day each year when the slaughter of the Passover lambs began.⁴

The *Mishnah* (written version of the oral tradition) describes the sacrificial process: Thousands of Jewish heads of households gathered in a designated area of the Temple in Jerusalem. Each one carried a lamb that was without spot or blemish—a visually perfect lamb. Each one laid his hands on the head of the animal, signifying his identification with it. And then, assisted by a priest, he slaughtered the animal and took it back to his home or where his family was staying for the observance of Passover. Meanwhile the priest took the sacrificial blood and poured it out on the altar.⁵

⁴ Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 6:9:3.

⁵ *Mishnah Pesachim* 58a.

So if we go back once again to that last day in the life of Yeshua, at the very moment when the sacrificial ritual of the Passover lambs was taking place, a short distance away on another part of the very same mountaintop of Moriah—a place called Golgotha—the death of Yeshua occurred. Coincidence? Certainly not for the one called, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29). It was perfect divine timing.

Now what about the day of the week? This is a topic that has stirred many opinions, often without taking into account the Hebraic way of reckoning time and the timing of the third biblical feast on the Hebrew calendar—*Bikkurim*, the Feast of First Fruits. These are both key factors for our understanding.

The Feast of First Fruits doesn’t have a specific date on the calendar, just a command by the Lord to observe it the “day after the Sabbath” (Lev 23:11). In Second Temple times, the Sadducees said it referred to the regular seventh day Sabbath. According to their reckoning, First Fruits was to be observed on the Sunday after Passover. So regardless of the day of the week when Passover occurred, they said First Fruits always took place on the first day of the week.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, said that it referred to the special Sabbath of Unleavened Bread because that was the day of rest referenced in the preceding verses of Leviticus 23 (vv. 6-7). So according to their reckoning, the Feast of First Fruits was to be observed every year on the 16th day of Nisan. That meant it could occur on any day of the week.

Which one is correct? Although we don’t have a direct statement in Scripture one way or another, eventually the Pharisaic interpretation of the timing of the feast became standardized in Judaism and today First Fruits continues to be acknowledged annually on Nisan 16 as the first day of the *omer* (the counting of days until *Shavuot*, the Feast of Weeks).⁶

Let’s consider what we do know for certain. The Scriptures state that Yeshua was crucified on a Preparation Day (Jn. 19:14), which we know to be the 14th of Nisan, and that He was placed in the tomb prior to sundown on that day (Luke 23:53-54). Preparation Days preceded all Sabbaths, whether it was a weekly Sabbath or a special Sabbath for one of the feasts. Either way, that was the time when you completed any necessary business and did your cooking, and if it preceded a feast, you made arrangements for its observance.

In biblical times, the combined feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread occurred on a regular weekly Sabbath once out of every seven years. When that took place, it was called a “high Sabbath.” Scripture clearly indicates that was the case in the year when Yeshua was crucified, for John states: “that Sabbath was high day” (Jn 19:31). Thus the day after Passover/Unleavened Bread that year was the first day of the week.

As a result, for the year when Yeshua died, both the Sadducean and Pharisaic ways of reckoning the timing of the feasts coincided with this sequence:

14th – The Preparation Day (the day before the Sabbath).

15th – The observance of Passover merged with Unleavened Bread, which was also a high Sabbath.

16th – The first day of the next week (the day after the Sabbath).

⁶ The Jewish calendar has been slightly modified since biblical times. As a lunar-based calendar, each month began with the sighting of the new moon. Thus in biblical times, the months could begin on any day of the week because it was invariably linked to the new moon. But subsequent to the destruction of the temple, a series of rabbinic measures manipulated the days of the week when the festivals could fall. Regarding Passover, Nisan 15 now always occurs on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, or Sunday. But these are rabbinical changes that were not in place during the second temple period. At that time, Passover could occur on any day of the week.

The resurrection of Yeshua from the dead fits this sequence exactly. The Bible makes it clear that Yeshua rose from the grave before sunrise on the first day of the week because that is when the two Marys arrived in order to anoint Him, but He was already gone (Mat 28:1-6). He could have risen any time between 6:00 p.m. (the beginning of the first day of the week) and sunrise before they arrived. And this was a year when the first day of the week was the 16th of Nisan, thus making it *Bikkurim*—the feast of First Fruits—no matter how you rendered the timing. And that is consistent with Paul’s declaration that Yeshua “has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep” (1 Cor 15:20).

Nisan 14 6th day of the week		Nisan 15 7th day of the week		Nisan 16 1st day of the week	
Preparation Day (original Passover)		Passover/Unleavened Bread and high Sabbath		Feast of First Fruits <i>(Bikkurim)</i>	
6pm	12am	3pm	6pm	12am	6pm 12am 6am
Last Supper		Crucifixion and burial		Resurrection	Marys at the tomb
Thursday	Friday		Saturday		Sunday

What about the length of time that Yeshua was in the grave? When asked what would be the sign confirming who He was, Yeshua responded by saying:

“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Mat 12:40).

Some people interpret that phrase to mean exactly 72 hours. But 3:00 p.m. on the sixth day of the week until the late-night hours at the beginning of the first day of the next week does not span 72 hours. It is one whole day plus parts of two others. How do we reconcile that seeming inconsistency?

According to the Jewish cultural understanding of time, Yeshua was credited with being in the tomb for three days and nights, even though it was not a total of 72 hours. In biblical culture, any part of a day was considered the same as a whole day. This is called inclusive reckoning of time. This way of thinking is manifested many ways:

- It is stated directly in rabbinic writings: “The portion of a day is as the whole of it” (*Bereshit Pesachim 4a*). And again in the Mishnah: “A day and a night are a period of time, and the part of a time is as the whole of it” (*Mishnah Shabbat 9:3*).
- Kings were considered to reign for an entire year, even if it was just one day (*Bereshit Rosh Hashanah 2a-b*). Two kings who reigned during part of a year were both given credit for a full year.
- In 1 Samuel 30:12-13, if “three days and three nights” were understood literally instead of inclusively, the servant would have said that his master left him “four days ago” rather than “three days ago.”
- Esther fasted for “three days” but went before the king “on the third day” (Est. 4:16;

5:1). Jeroboam was told to return “in three days” and returns “on the third day” (2 Chr 10:5,12).

- It is also reflected in Yeshua’s parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard where the landowner paid the workers the same amount of money regardless of how long they had worked (Mat 20:1-16). The men who started working at 9:00 a.m., noon, 3:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. all got credited for a full day’s wage, whether they had worked nine hours or one.

Yeshua repeatedly said that He would rise from the dead *on* the third day (Mat 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 1 Cor. 15:4). In each case the Greek word *treetos* was used, which is the ordinal number “third.” So the third day would be Nisan 16. Keep in mind that a full 72 hours would require a fourth day in contradiction of Yeshua’s own words.

In the Hebraic way of thinking, the phrase “on the third day” was the same as all or part of three days. Thus Yeshua being in the grave less than 72 hours was compatible with the Jewish cultural understanding of time if it spanned parts of three consecutive days, just as the Scriptures depict.

Finally, if we compare the Hebraic way of reckoning days from sundown to sundown, to the Roman way of reckoning days from midnight to midnight, we can see how the modern calendar corresponds to this time sequence. It places the Crucifixion at 3:00 p.m. on Friday and the Resurrection at some point during the night of Saturday/Sunday.

Much of the confusion regarding the death and resurrection of Yeshua can be cleared up by thinking Hebraically about time and by using the feasts as our guide. But the important thing for us to know is that the accounts recorded in the Bible are reliable. The events it describes are real history, not fables or filled with flaws that are common when human beings try to make up a story. The events are such that no human being could manipulate them in the real world so that they would be fulfilled exactly as had been foretold by the prophets. And they are perfectly consistent with the spiritual principles that they represent. Only God could cause something as complex as this to transpire without error.

When we consider the death and resurrection of Yeshua, we can be confident that He really did give His life as our atonement for sin, and that He really did rise again from the grave, so that we might have the same confidence in His return as a historical fact on a future day specifically ordained by God.