

# The Quartodeciman Practice

## INTRODUCTION

Easter has always been the core festival of the Christian faith, yet the history of its origin and practices has certainly been intriguing. For example, the name “Easter” comes from the Teutonic goddess of Spring, “Eastre,” and that fact alone evidences pagan influence on our Christian festival. It is difficult to discern when it was substituted for the name “Pascha” but it seems most likely in the 4<sup>th</sup> century when Constantine the Great was the Roman emperor and many Pagan celebrations were being enculturated into Christianity. It is also pertinent to note it can take a considerably long time for words to be adapted into a certain language’s vocabulary. Consequently, it may have even been the 5<sup>th</sup> century when the term “Easter” was used widely among the early church.

The differing original practices of Easter are just as intriguing. All of them no doubt celebrated our Lord Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. However, in the first century A.D. some said it was a celebration of Jesus’ whole redemptive act, starting with the incarnation and ending with his glorification. This is where the word “Quartodeciman” enters the discussion and presents an interesting theological viewpoint on the festival of Easter. Quartodecimans believed in memorializing all of Jesus’ life – not just his death and resurrection – during the Jewish Passover and quickly distanced themselves from other Christians who decided to celebrate Easter specifically on the Lord’s Day.

This created two camps in the early Christian church concerning when to celebrate Easter, or “Pascha” as it was called back in the first century: those who began the festival on the

14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan (the Quartodecimans) and those who waited until the Sunday after Passover ended. Interestingly, before the 20<sup>th</sup> century most researchers believed the Lord's Day practice was the norm while the Quartodeciman observation was an aberration.<sup>1</sup> But recently, some more evidence has appeared that celebrating the glorification of Jesus during Passover was the usual custom until Rome adopted the date of Easter on Sunday around 170 A. D.<sup>2</sup> This treatise will argue the Quartodeciman practice was the norm until 170 A. D. and provides the 21<sup>st</sup> century church a deeper, more comprehensive view of Easter.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE QUARTODECIMAN CELEBRATION

As stated earlier, there was much more to Pascha to the Quartodecimans than just the passion week of Christ. They believed remembering Jesus as an infant, teacher, redeemer, and sacrifice was necessary, and to enact that recollection they transformed the Passover ritual from the Jews into a Christian version. Of course, the highlight of this rite was the agape meal and many researchers agree it went until cockcrow.<sup>3</sup> Sources also shed light that these Quartodecimans understood Christ typologically as the Passover lamb. The *Twelfth Demonstration* of Aphraates and the *Paschal Hymns* of Ephrem, both from the early fourth century, viewed the Passover lamb as foretelling Christ's crucifixion and the exodus as prefiguring Jesus' liberation of humanity.<sup>4</sup> This image is taken from 1 Corinthians 5:7, where Christ is portrayed as the Passover lamb. The same can be said in the gospel of John. There Jesus is named "the Lamb of God" (John 1:36) and then is said to have died on the cross on the day of

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<sup>1</sup> A. A. MacArthur, *The Evolution of the Christian Year* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 98-107.

<sup>2</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Work of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 122-123.

<sup>3</sup> CE Hill, *The Epistula Apostolorum: An Asian Tract from the Time of Polycarp* (JECS 7, 1997), 53.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Bradshaw, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts, and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2001), 44.

the preparation of the Passover (John 19:14). This day would have been the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, where the Quartodecimans get their name, “the fourteeners.” Furthermore, Christ was killed when the lambs for the feast were being slaughtered, and the soldiers refrained from breaking the legs of Jesus. This fulfilled the Scripture requiring that no bone of the Passover lamb be broken (John 19:32-36, Exod. 12:46, Num. 9:12).

One particularly striking characteristic of the Quartodeciman practice was its eschatological bent. Joachim Jeremias notes in *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* the fact that the Passover feast contained four major elements: the creation of the world, the binding of Isaac, the redemption of Israel from Egypt, and the coming of the Messiah. Since the core events of the paschal mystery of Christ (passion, death and resurrection) are closely associated with the Passover, the Quartodeciman celebration could easily emphasize the last point of “the coming of the Messiah” – in Jewish-Christian words, Jesus’ second coming. In fact, Jeremias deduced the earliest Christians expected Jesus to return back to the world during Passover. And when Christ did not appear at midnight to commence the expected eschatological banquet, the Quartodecimans celebrated the agape meal. This was done to assist the brethren in anticipating the “Parousia,” a term now meaning the second-coming of Jesus, throughout the year until the next 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, this paschal eucharist was so pertinent to the evening Quartodecimans fasted from the evening sacrifice, which was around 3:00 p.m. until midnight in order to better prepare themselves for the event. This ordinance comes directly from the Jewish *Mishnah* – Pesachim 10.9.

That particular pre-paschal fast was observed for different reasons. According to the *Didascalia*, the fast designated a time of intercession for the Jews and a lament for them killing

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 68.

Jesus. The former reason could easily have functioned as a prayer *against* the Jews (instead of for their conversion) since sources concerning the Quartodeciman circles, and nascent Christian literature in general, are characterized by an anti-Semitic tone.<sup>6</sup> Pertaining to the latter reason, the *Diataxis* (a Syrian text which was known by Epiphanius of Salamis in the 4<sup>th</sup> century) instructed all Christians to “be fasting and mourning for them, because they crucified the Christ on the day of the festival, and when they mourn by eating unleavened bread with bitter herbs, you should eat.” In other words, this gives more evidence the Quartodecimans would have commenced their celebration when the Jewish one ended. Plus, another reason to postpone the agape meal was for the Quartodecimans to differentiate themselves from the Jews. Sometimes they kept a vigil together from six to midnight, singing hymns and psalms together to help bid the time and demonstrate their particular identity in Christ. There is one source, however, which seems to state the fast lasted considerably shorter. The *Gospel of Peter* states the disciples fasted and grieved from the time that Christ died “until the Sabbath.” As the Sabbath began at nightfall that day, this would mean for only three hours. If the phrase were understood as denoting “up to and including the Sabbath,” the period would be longer, but that interpretation has been dismissed by Gerald Rouwhorst on the grounds that the Greek preposition cannot support it.<sup>7</sup>

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE LORD’S DAY CELEBRATION**

For now, that is all the information needed for an exposition of the Quartodeciman practice and hence we turn to the practice of celebrating Jesus’ resurrection on Sunday. The Friday and Saturday beforehand was viewed as a commemoration of his death and entombment while Sunday focused on his resurrection. It should be stated this three day sequence, now

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<sup>6</sup> Gerald Rouwhorst, *The Quartodeciman Passover and the Jewish Pesach* (QL 77, 1996), 161.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald Rouwhorst, *Liturgy on the Authority of the Apostles* (Boston: Brill Leiden, 2004), 71.

known as the triduum, did not become an established tradition churchwide until the fourth century, but the seed of this idea was nonetheless planted in the first century. To accurately portray this celebration, one needs to hear from a certain pilgrim named Egeria who was in Jerusalem in the 380's. Here she describes the morning of Good Friday, starting at 8 a.m.:

The bishop's chair is placed on Golgotha Behind the Cross, where he now stands, and he takes his seat. A table is placed before him with a cloth on it, the deacons stand round, and there is brought to him a gold and silver box containing the holy Wood of the Cross. It is opened, and the Wood of the Cross and the Title are taken out and placed on the table... Thus all the people go past one by one. They stoop down, touch the holy Wood first with their forehead and then with their eyes, and kiss it, but no one puts out his hand to touch it. Then they go on to a deacon who stands holding the Ring of Solomon, and the Horn with which the kings were anointed. These they venerate by kissing them, and till noon everybody goes by, entering by one door and going out through the other.<sup>8</sup>

This is then followed by a long reading of passages concerning Jesus' suffering. Those included some psalms, prophecies, and gospels, until the ultimate reading at 3:00 p.m. of John's account of Jesus giving up his spirit. During the next day, what we call "holy Saturday," there was only one special service, in which the newly baptized were taken immediately to Jesus' tomb, where after a hymn the bishop said a prayer for them before returning to the church on Golgotha. There the Eucharist was celebrated, but immediately after the dismissal, the whole congregation returned to Jesus' tomb, "where the resurrection Gospel" was read and the Eucharist was celebrated a second time. Apart from the resurrection Gospel reading, which was a feature of every Sunday morning's liturgy in the Jerusalem tradition, the second celebration of the Eucharist did not include a liturgy of the word, according to the Armenian Lectionary.

On Sunday, the paschal vigil began at the church on Golgotha, also known as the "Martyrium." During this same time, the baptismal candidates were baptized and then led back

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<sup>8</sup> John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (Oxford: OXBOW BOOKS, 2015), 155.

to the Martyrium in order to partake in the Eucharist with their brethren. The liturgy, of course, was centered around Jesus' resurrection, and throughout the service the offering was taken twice. After the people were dismissed, the bishop took the newly-baptized up to the Mount of Olives, where monks and anyone else who wished, could encourage and pray with them. This happened approximately in the afternoon and lasted for a couple hours. Afterwards, the bishop and the baptized returned to Jesus' tomb for another service, which lasted until eight o'clock. Then all the Easter festivities were officially ended.

## **EVIDENCE OF THE QUARTODECIMAN PRACTICE BEING THE NORM**

Having now described both practices of Easter, it is now appropriate to investigate which one was the norm and the other an anomaly. Before the twentieth century, the Quartodeciman custom was judged to be no more than a second-century local aberration, brought about by an apparently common tendency among some early Christians to "Judaize," a practice already criticized by St. Paul in the first century. Most of this research came from A. A. McArthur in his *The Evolution of the Christian Year* and Josef Jungmann's *The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory the Great* in the 1950s. They deduced their hypothesis from the writings of Eusebius, a fourth century historian, who recorded the dispute that broke out around 195 between the Quartodecimans and those churches which were by then keeping Easter on Sunday, as to which of them was correct.

That document which McArthur and Jungmann extracted from was Eusebius' *Historia ecclesiastica*, the one of very few sources found before 1950 describing the Quartodeciman practice. However, more sources have come to light in the past 70 years and a much different hypothesis can be created from them. One of those documents is the *Peri Pascha* of Melito of

Sardis, written in 165 A.D., and most of it is devoted to a Christian innovation of the Passover ritual.<sup>9</sup> One of the usual passages the Jews read from during the Seder was Exodus chapter 12, but typically there was no commentary or sermon given about it. Melito's *Peri Pascha* reveals a practice in which the Christians added a typological explanation of Exodus 12. This was to portray Jesus as the Passover Lamb, which was discussed above, and as Melito asserts, can justify it was a regular reading during the vigil that preceded the Easter Eucharist. This observance, in itself, isn't the truly appealing characteristic of the evidence; the fact it's dated 165 A.D., and that there is no substantial material describing the Sunday Easter practice Egeria's journal in 380 A.D., gives strong supporting evidence the Quartodeciman celebration was well established, while the Sunday practice was not.

The next two exhibits of evidence pertain to when Christians actually first began to observe the weekly Lord's day. This is an important consideration, because it is less likely Christians could have chosen a Sunday occasion for their annual Easter feast until a regular weekly gathering had been established. There is no firm evidence for that to have happened before the beginning of the second century, and this could easily mean the Quartodeciman practice does appear to have preceded the other by a considerable point of time. This theory of the Sunday celebration being derived from the Quartodeciman one also helps explain a puzzling feature of the general early Christian observance of Easter: Jesus' death as the main focus. In other words, there is more connection to the death of Jesus as the Passover Lamb than anything else, including his resurrection. A strong piece of writing detailing this is from *Adversus haereses* by Irenaeus of Gaul in the second century: "The passages in which Moses reveals the Son of God are innumerable. He was aware even of the day of his passion: he foretold it

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<sup>9</sup> Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 34.

figuratively by calling it Pascha. And on the very day which Moses had foretold so long before, the Lord suffered in fulfilment of the Pascha.”<sup>10</sup> One can see this naturally orients the paschal feast to be situated on the Jewish Passover as opposed to the Sunday celebration. Once again, since this piece is dated before 200 A.D., it gives more evidence the Quartodeciman celebration was established before the Sunday practice.

To conclude the evidence of the Quartodeciman practice preceding the Easter celebration, it is pertinent to note most scholars agree that almost all of the Christians around 33 A.D. were Jewish Christians. This means it is more probable the earliest Christians observed the Quartodeciman practice as opposed to the Sunday memorial, because they most likely transferred their Jewish customs over into their new faith. This is just speculation, however, and the opposite could also be argued. One could say the nascent Christians wanted to differentiate themselves from the Jews; hence they intentionally started to celebrate the Lord’s death on Sunday. Either way of viewing this fact is justifiable, and so this piece is left on the table, not in favor of either side of the argument.

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATION**

Having read the differences between the Quartodeciman practice and the Sunday Pashca observance, along with the evidence which supports the former as the norm of the two, it is time to discuss how the Quartodeciman’s views could help the 21<sup>st</sup> century church. First, it is fairly disappointing some churches do not honor the season of Lent anymore. It is not being argued that all churches should adopt this liturgical season, especially for those church traditions which do not adhere to the liturgical calendar, but at least some repeated, intentional remembrance of

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<sup>10</sup> Irenaeus of Gaul, *Adversus haereses* (4.10.1, ET from Cantalamessa), 50.



Christ's passion for a period before Easter would make Resurrection Day more meaningful. In today's culture, Easter has barely become more than 1 day out of 365. In high church traditions, the celebration has become 3 or 4 days out of 365. Those church at least specifically commemorate Jesus' death and passion, but how would Easter be like if Jesus' whole redemptive act (incarnation to his glorification) was intentionally celebrated beforehand? How would reflecting on this essential Quartodeciman theology affect one's experience of Easter? I argue it would have a profound effect. Spending perhaps three weeks beforehand, intentionally inserting the whole life of Jesus into the liturgy or order of worship would make Easter more than a flitting one day party.

Additionally, implementing the Exodus story and some readings from the *Mishnah* could increase the scope of history and describe God's proclivity for redemption. Consequently, the conspicuous connection between the Passover lambs and Jesus would make Easter more deeply satisfying. This is exactly what the Quartodecimans enacted each year and why they were quite fervent for the celebration. They thoroughly understood the implications of a risen Messiah! Now it seems today's Christians don't nearly understand those implications. Secular culture has watered down Easter throughout the centuries and it is prime time to reverse the trend. The first step, perhaps, is to give the Quartodeciman celebration some exposure and list the reasons why one could benefit from studying that practice Secondly, as noted above, intentionally planning Jesus' whole redemptive act into a period before Easter would prove those reasons to be efficacious.

In conclusion, Easter stands at the center of Christianity. Christmas is a close rival, but Christians should agree that Jesus Christ's death and resurrection is at the core of their faith. Hopefully one can now understand that early Christians particularly celebrated the whole

redemptive act of Christ and not just his resurrection. The Quartodecimans especially focused on his death and how he was typologically the Passover lamb. Lastly, by remembering this, it would serve a Christian well to view Easter along these lines – not necessarily as an event to interpret Christ as the Passover lamb, but instead – as a celebration which encapsulated much more of Jesus Christ's life.

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