

THE PASCHA AND THE ORIGIN OF SUNDAY OBSERVANCE

LAWRENCE T. GERATY

Berrien Springs, Michigan

Earle Hilgert¹ has reviewed the evidence for the thesis that the origin of the Christian weekly Sunday observance was influenced by an ancient Jewish sacerdotal calendar, perhaps through the practice of the Qumran Jews and their predilection for the calendar found in the Book of Jubilees,² or at least one similar to it. He concluded that "a psychological orientation toward Sunday derived from Qumran or related circles may well have been a contributing factor in the establishment of Sunday observance in the early church."³ And in the light of the emphasis of the Jubilees' calendar on the keeping of yearly feasts on specific days of the week rather than allowing them to rove through all the days of the week as did normative Judaism (an analogy in the United States might be Thanksgiving Day reckoning as opposed to Christmas Day reckoning), Hilgert further suggested that "a psychological predilection for Sunday in a paschal context could have been an encouragement for the observance of the weekly Sunday, and/or vice versa."⁴

It is the purpose of this article to review the historical evidence which may elucidate the possibility of a weekly Sunday service being encouraged by a prior annual Sunday observance of the Christian Pascha, later Easter.

¹ Earle Hilgert, "The Jubilees Calendar and the Origin of Sunday Observance," *AUSS*, I (1963), 44-51.

² Jubilees 6 : 29-38 in R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1913), II, 22, 23.

³ Hilgert, *op. cit.*, pp. 49, 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

The Pascha in the New Testament

The fact that the Synoptic and Johannine accounts of passion week differ is well known.⁵ But though there is apparent disagreement on the days of the month for the crucifixion and resurrection, all the Gospels agree on the days of the week on which these events took place, i.e. the crucifixion on Friday and the resurrection on Sunday. In the ensuing years, no doubt, Christians observed this paschal period in commemoration of the death and resurrection of their Lord at the same time as their Jewish neighbors were celebrating their Passover. Thus Paul's first letter to the Corinthians states, "For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, . . ." ⁶ Later in the same letter, Paul connects Jesus' resurrection with a special liturgical occasion, the Wave-Sheaf celebration, when he says, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." ⁷

On what days of the week would these early Christians have celebrated these feasts? Would it not have depended upon the time when their Jewish neighbors celebrated them as well as upon their own traditions? The divergent Jewish traditions would constitute differing backgrounds for the reckoning of the feasts first celebrated by Christians. Some Christians, emphasizing Christ's death, observed the Pascha on Nisan 14, while still others, emphasizing His resurrection, observed the feast on the Sunday following Nisan 14. ⁸

Since the day of the Lord's resurrection had made such a profound impression upon the early Christian community,

⁵ For a proposed solution in the context of the various calendrical traditions, see A. Jaubert, *La date de la Cène* (Paris, 1957), pp. 105-136.

⁶ 1 Cor 5 : 7, 8 (RSV).

⁷ 1 Cor 15 : 20 (RSV). Cf. James Moffatt's comment in *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (London, 1959), p. 238, where Clement of Alexandria is said to have used Lev 23 : 9, 10 to support the idea that as the sheaf was to be lifted on the morrow after the Sabbath, i.e., on the first day of the week, the third after Passover, so the Son of God was raised on the third day.

⁸ See n. 25, below.

could it be possible that the Pascha became known as the "Lord's Day" (that is, the "Lord's [Resurrection] Day")?⁹ Undoubtedly it would have first been an annual commemoration as indicated by the foregoing Corinthian references and by the very Jewishness of the early church. At least there seems to be no positive proof that it immediately became a weekly feast.¹⁰ It is interesting to note in this connection that 1 Cor, the (paschal?) letter which gives us the institution of the Eucharist, contains more than a fifth of all the NT references to Christ as Lord and nearly double that of any other single NT book.¹¹

The Pascha in the Early Christian Church

What hints, if any, are there in the early literature that the Pascha was celebrated as an annual Lord's Day festival? 1) Undoubtedly one of the earliest is the phrase "Lord's Day" in the *Didache*, an ancient baptismal or organizational manual. Although this rendition from κατὰ κυριακὴν δὲ κυρίου συναχθέντες¹² has been disputed,¹³ it is nevertheless the preferred translation. If so, the context would indicate that this could be an

⁹ Contrast, however, the apocryphal *Acts of John*: "And on the seventh day, it being the Lord's day, he said to them: Now it is time for me also to partake of food. And having washed his hands and face, he prayed, and brought out the linen cloth, and took one of the dates, and ate it in the sight of all." (All translations from the early sources are from *ANF* unless otherwise indicated.) It is not clear from the context whether "seventh day" refers to the seventh day of their journey or the seventh day of the week. If taken to be the former, it could conceivably be an annual day, but it is very possibly the latter.

¹⁰ C. W. Dugmore, "Lord's Day and Easter," *Neotestamentica et Patristica* (a Cullmann Festschrift and Supplement to *Novum Testamentum*, vol. VI; Leiden, 1962), pp. 274, 275.

¹¹ Vincent Taylor, *The Person of Christ in New Testament Teaching* (London, 1963), p. 144. "The Lord" is mentioned 222 times in the NT, 46 times in 1 Cor, 26 times in Acts, and infrequently in the other books, its mention being rare in the Gospels (with the exception of Lk), and completely absent in Tit, the Epistles of John and Jude.

¹² *Didache* 14 : 1.

¹³ E.g., F. H. Yost, *The Early Christian Sabbath* (Mountain View, Calif., 1947), p. 32.

annual day for baptism¹⁴ and the celebration of the Eucharist.¹⁵

2) Another early reference (*ca.* A.D. 112) comes from Pliny's familiar letter to Trajan, wherein reference is made to the affirmation of certain former Christians that "the whole of their guilt, or their error," had been that

they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.¹⁶

Keeping a weekly Sabbath (until the Jewish-Roman war of A.D. 132-135) or even a possible weekly Sunday would not necessarily have involved guilt, but an annual vigil service in honor of the Lord's resurrection might, because of its uniqueness. The Romans were used to, and permitted, the weekly religious rites of the Jews on their Sabbath, and

¹⁴ Cf. Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 19: "The Passover affords a more than usually solemn day for baptism; . . . After that, Pentecost is a most joyous space for conferring baptisms, . . ."

¹⁵ It is interesting to note that a recognition of this possibility existed in the nineteenth century when J. Rendel Harris tried to show from the tenor of the *Didache* and its context, that it must have had reference to some great annual festival, perhaps similar to the day of atonement. See his *The Teaching of the Apostles* (London, 1887), pp. 105, 106. More recently, C. W. Dugmore, *op. cit.*, pp. 276-279, after an analysis of similar passages in the *Didache* and *Apostolic Constitutions*, has argued convincingly that "the use of *κυριακή* as a technical term for Easter Day thus seems to be reasonably attested. Its use as a normal description of the first day of every week would only have been possible after Sunday had become a regular day of worship among Christians and had to be thought of as a weekly commemoration of the Resurrection." Jakób Jocz accepts Dugmore's contention with regard to *κυριακή* in "Tertia Die, Secundum Scripturas," *CJTh*, IX (1963), 181. Contrast O. Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (Chicago, 1953), p. 11: "The Lord's Day of the first Christians was therefore a celebration of Christ's resurrection. Each Lord's Day was an Easter Festival, since this was not yet confined to one single Sunday in the year."

¹⁶ Pliny, *Letters*, x. 96 (in *The Loeb Classical Library*).

possibly of pagan sun worshipers on their Sunday.¹⁷ However, now they had on their hands a new sect, the Christians, meeting on a *stato die ante lucem* and attributing divine honors to some person other than the Roman emperor; and this could certainly be looked upon as a danger to the Roman peace. Thus the reaction of the Romans, the time of meeting, and to a lesser degree the content of the service, would seem to indicate an Easter vigil celebration—if indeed earlier examples of this celebration were anything like what they later came to be.¹⁸

3) Towards the latter part of the second century, the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* twice applies the term "Lord's Day" to the actual day Christ rose from the dead.¹⁹ It may be illustrative of contemporary usage.

4) One of the strongest hints that "Lord's Day" may have originally referred to an annual resurrection day—a hint recognized in this passage by an editor of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*²⁰—comes from Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 170):

This [custom], of not bending the knee upon Sunday, is a symbol of the resurrection, through which we have been set free, by the grace of Christ, from sins, and from death, which has been put to death under Him. Now this custom took its rise from apostolic times, as the blessed Irenaeus, the martyr and bishop of Lyons, declares in his treatise *On Easter*, in which he makes mention of Pentecost also; upon which [feast] we do not bend the knee, because it is of equal significance with the Lord's day, for the reason already alleged concerning it.²¹

¹⁷ R. L. Odom, *Sunday in Roman Paganism* (Washington, D.C., 1944), p. 155.

¹⁸ The explanation that the Christians met in the dark for fear of the civil authorities is possible but not probable for the reason that this is not a characteristic response; at least this would appear to be the only instance if it were. Dugmore, *op. cit.*, p. 280, indicates that the evidence of this letter is too meager "to enable us to draw any conclusion other than the Christians met on some fixed day . . . to offer prayer and recite the Decalogue and that, at some unspecified time, they held a common meal."

¹⁹ *Gospel of Peter*, 9, 12.

²⁰ A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *ANF* (New York, 1896), I, 569, n. 9.

²¹ *Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenaeus*, 7 (in *ANF*, I, 569).

Here the Lord's Day is related directly to Easter and compared to Pentecost.²²

As the annual Lord's day festival developed, it undoubtedly followed the lines of the two differing traditions mentioned earlier. The "Asia Minor" custom, attributed to John and Philip²³ and patterning after normative Judaism, celebrated the festival on Nisan 14, whatever day of the week that happened to be. The "Roman" custom, attributed to Peter and Paul,²⁴ and following, perhaps, the precedent of the Jubilees-Qumran tradition (or one similar to it), celebrated the festival always on the Sunday after Nisan 14.²⁵ Both traditions were apparently so ancient and deeply rooted that any break with them caused bitter resentment and the history of the controversy over the two is well known.²⁶ The ultimately dominant tradition, i.e. that Easter had to be celebrated on Sunday, no doubt won out in the end, because 1) it was the more widespread, 2) it became the focal point of pressure for ritualistic uniformity, 3) it had influential backers, and 4) it was *not* the tradition of normative Judaism and thus less likely to be called "Judaistic" by a Jew-loathing world.

Influence of the Pascha on the Weekly Sunday

Having reviewed the historical evidence that may possibly indicate early Christian observance of the Pascha in the con-

²² It would not be impossible, in this particular context, to see a similar relationship in Tertullian, *The Chaplet*, 3: "We count fasting or kneeling in worship on the Lord's day to be unlawful. We rejoice in the same privilege also from Easter to Pentecost day." Cf. also his *On Prayer*, 23. In commenting on these passages, Jocz, *op. cit.*, p. 182, says Tertullian "obviously refers to Easter."

²³ Eusebius, *Church History*, v. 24. 2, 3; cf. Sozomen, *Church History*, vii. 19.

²⁴ Sozomen, *loc. cit.*; cf. Eusebius, *op. cit.*, v. 23. 1.

²⁵ The Qumranites themselves seem to have held their Wave-Sheaf celebration on the 2d Sunday after Nisan 14 (nevertheless *always on a Sunday*), but other ancient traditions, including the Boethusian, Samaritan, and Karaite, held to the 1st Sunday after Nisan 14.

²⁶ Eusebius, *Church History*, v. 23-25.

text of an annual Lord's Day festival, the question remains, how may this have encouraged a weekly Sunday service? The annual festival was natural, because of the impact of the original event (Christ's death and resurrection), supported by the fact that Jewish Christians retained from their backgrounds an already established festival (Passover and Wave-Sheaf Day). Keeping the form of the feast, they changed its content. In fact, not to have changed the content (from pointing towards deliverance from sin to a memorial of that deliverance) would have denied Christ's Messiahship. Would the immediate observance of a weekly Sunday festival for divine worship have been as natural? No, for at least two reasons: 1) As Rordorf²⁷ points out, there are no parallels in any sect of Judaism where it is known that divine services were held weekly on Sunday. Although Hilgert²⁸ allows for a psychological orientation toward Sunday from segments of Judaism, he also observes that "such an attitude by itself could scarcely have given rise to the observance of Sunday as a day of worship." 2) The Jewish Christians *already had* an established weekly day of religious worship on the seventh day of the week—the Sabbath. Why would there have been a need for a second? ²⁹

Nevertheless, by A.D. 150, it appears that in Rome, at

²⁷ Willy Rordorf, *Der Sonntag* (Zürich, 1962), p. 186.

²⁸ Hilgert, *loc. cit.*

²⁹ Why was there a need (and where was the authority) to change either the form or the content of the Sabbath day rest? Apparently many early Christians realized there was no need, because the seventh-day Sabbath was observed in apostolic times and widely kept until at least the fourth century. See Acts 13 : 14-16, 42-44; 15 : 19-21; 16 : 12, 13; 17 : 2; 18 : 4, 11; 25 : 8; 28 : 17; Chrysostom, *On Galatians*, I, 7; Socrates, *Church History*, v. 22; Sozomen, *op. cit.*, vii. 19; R. A. Kraft, "Some Notes on Sabbath Observance in Early Christianity," *AUSS*, III (1965), 18-33; C. W. Dugmore, *op. cit.*, p. 279: "As a matter of historical fact the Sabbath did not disappear as a day of Christian worship until the late fourth or early fifth century." Further, as Dugmore asks (*op. cit.*, pp. 274, 280), "Is it not remarkable how little evidence there is in the New Testament and in the literature of the sub-Apostolic age that Sunday was the most important day in the Christian week, if in fact it was the occasion of the supreme act

least, there were some who held services on a weekly Sunday. How did this "custom" arise? As van Goudoever correctly observes,

Of all parts of the liturgy the feasts are perhaps the most enduring: it is practically impossible to change the date and form of old festivals [as is illustrated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's attempt to change the week for Thanksgiving], the creation of a new religious festival is almost unthinkable.³⁰

If weekly Sunday observance was not "created" by Christians, would it not have come from Judaism? Undoubtedly so. But it could hardly have come from Judaism *except via the Sunday paschal tradition*. This possibility explains how the custom could have derived from Judaism and yet, in the fact of its *weekly* celebration, be distinctively Christian. Thus Christians would not have invented a new feast, nor would they have changed the day, but rather they would have "reduced" it, to use van Goudoever's expression: "In this process of reduction the 'Sunday' became the feast *par excellence* in the primitive Christian Church"³¹ (no doubt for similar reasons as have already been mentioned for the ultimate triumph of the Easter Sunday tradition over the Quartodeciman practice).³²

Van Goudoever also offers some interesting suggestions as to how the celebration of Easter Sunday may have influenced weekly Sunday observance. He holds that since Christ rose on the Sunday of the Omer (the Jewish ceremonial day for offering the first fruits of the barley harvest) and the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles on the Sunday of Pentecost (the Jewish ceremonial day for offering the first fruits of the wheat harvest), the whole fifty-day period was annually celebrated in the Christian Church, as it was in Judaism, but

of Christian worship, viz. the Eucharist? . . . It is not until about A.D. 150 that we find any clear and unmistakable reference to a regular meeting of Christians for worship, including the Eucharist, on the 'day of the Sun' (Justin, I *Apol.*, lxvii)."

³⁰ Van Goudoever, *Biblical Calendars* (Leiden, 1961), p. 151.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² See above, p. 90.

as a period of rejoicing and the founding of the New Covenant community.³³ Into this fifty-day period he puts Acts 20 : 7 as a Saturday night-Sunday morning vigil service (many lights, much speaking, and the breaking of bread).³⁴

Carrington suggests it is hardly possible to suppose that all first fruits of all crops everywhere in Palestine were offered on the two great Sundays especially set aside for the purpose, and asks whether it was not implied that *any* Sunday in this period of fifty days was a proper day for first fruits.³⁵ He thinks 1 Cor 16 : 2 may support this supposition since it directs that offerings be laid aside on Sunday, and since in 2 Cor 9 (where the same subject is continued), he finds that the theology of such offerings is worked out from the Hebrew theology of seed-time, harvest, and thank offering.³⁶

Van Goudoever also explains how he thinks Sunday observance could have spread from the seven Sundays within the fifty days to the other Sundays throughout the year by an analogy with the synagogue: Just as the weekly Sabbath was held in commemoration of the yearly Passover (Dt 5 : 15) as well as, of course, a memorial of creation (Ex 20 : 11), the early Christians could have begun to keep the weekly Sunday in commemoration of the annual Sunday when their Lord arose.³⁷

Rordorf, however, disagrees with this general thesis. His primary contentions are three: 1) The Sundays between the first and last Sundays of the harvest period had no special significance in Judaism, therefore the roots of Sunday observance must be sought in Christianity itself.³⁸ 2) Van Goudoever

³³ Van Goudoever, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-194, 221-235.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 167; cf. Philip Carrington, *The Primitive Christian Calendar* (Cambridge, 1952), p. 38.

³⁵ Carrington, *loc. cit.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Van Goudoever, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

³⁸ Rordorf, *op. cit.*, p. 186: "Die 5 Sonntage zwischen dem ersten und letzten Sonntag der Erntezeit hatten im Judentum keinerlei besondere Bedeutung. Wenn die Christen sie also durch Gottesdienste auszeichneten, dann haben wir im Judentum dafür keine Parallele

fails to solve the problem of how the weekly custom came from a yearly one.³⁹ 3) Throughout the first century the weekly Sunday service took place on Sunday evening while the yearly Easter service was celebrated from Saturday night to Sunday morning; this seems unmistakably to indicate that the Easter service had its own roots independent from the weekly Sunday service.⁴⁰

These objections may be answered with the following observations: 1) Carrington has suggested the possibility that any Sunday within the fifty days was appropriate for the offering of first fruits.⁴¹ Even without this conjecture, however, is it not possible to distinguish between the importance of a day and its regular observance? The writer would readily agree with Rordorf that the "observance" is distinctively Christian, but could it not have been influenced, all the same, by a psychological predilection based on the day's importance in Judaism? 2) Though van Goudoever may not have "solved" the problem of the gap from a yearly to a

und müssen die Wurzeln dieses Brauches im Christentum selber suchen."

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 186, 187: "Auch Goudoever löst das Problem nicht, wie es von einem jährlichen Brauch zu einem wöchentlichen kommen konnte. Er scheint zwar einen 'Übergang' dadurch zu schaffen, dass nach ihm nicht nur *ein* Sonntag (der Ostertag), sondern sieben aufeinanderfolgende Sonntage jährlich regelmässig gefeiert wurden; trotzdem bleibt die Frage nicht weniger brennend: wie kamen dann die Christen dazu, den auf die Zeit der Wochen von Ostern bis Pfingsten beschränkten Brauch der Sonntagsfeier auf das ganze Jahr auszudehnen?"

⁴⁰ Rordorf, "Zum Ursprung des Osterfestes am Sonntag," *ThZ*, XVII (1962), 170: "Der wöchentliche Sonntagsgottesdienst fand während des ganzen ersten Jahrhunderts am Sonntagabend statt, der jährliche Ostergottesdienst aber, . . . in der Nacht vom Samstag auf den Sonntag und am frühen Morgen des Sonntags. Es wäre höchst merkwürdig, ja geradezu unverständlich, wenn wir zwar eine innere Abhängigkeit des Osterfestes am Sonntag von der wöchentlichen Sonntagsfeier anzunehmen hätten, der Termin des Gottesdienstes aber in dieser Weise verschoben worden wäre. Diese Differenz scheint ein untrügliches Anzeichen dafür zu sein, dass der Ostergottesdienst *eigene*, von der wöchentlichen Sonntagsfeier unabhängige Wurzeln hat."

⁴¹ See above, p. 93.

weekly observance, he has, in the writer's estimation, made a significant contribution towards its solution.⁴² 3) The methodology by which Rordorf reaches his conclusion—particularly with respect to a Sunday *evening* service—may be questioned. Was there, indeed, *regularly in the first century* such a service *side-by-side* with an annual celebration? Moreover, was the weekly service (when it does come clearly to view) so radically different from the annual? The similarities between the two customs appear to be greater than the dissimilarities; and most investigators have seen a definite relationship, if none other than that they both commemorate the same event. Certainly, Rordorf's distinction is too easily made.

Conclusion

Though this investigation may not have *proved* anything startling, nevertheless there often is value in reconsidering what may too readily have been regarded as a foregone conclusion. The NT and historical evidence bearing on the problem is by no means complete, and what there is, certainly is not conclusive. But such evidence as we do have would seem to indicate the *possibility* of there having been a tradition from the beginning of the Christian church in which an annual Sunday celebration in honor of the Lord's resurrection was known and observed as the "Lord's Day." This tradition gradually won out over the Quartodeciman practice. At the same time, and along with other factors not investigated in this article, it began to encourage the weekly observance of Sunday as the Lord's Day—again a memorial of the resurrection. The transfer may have been accomplished in part through the influence of definite precedents in Judaism, such as the offering of first fruits on regular Sundays within the fifty days. It may also have been influenced through psychologically natural attitudes from Judaism towards keeping weekly days in commemoration of events which were already celebrated annually, such as the Exodus (of which the yearly

⁴² See above, p. 93.

Passover and weekly Sabbath were both commemorative⁴³). Whatever the solution, Rordorf has correctly pointed out the problem. But is it not simpler and more cogent, on the basis of the evidence, to postulate an annual Lord's Day celebration which gradually spread to become the weekly Lord's Day, rather than to assume the reverse, or even to conclude that both celebrations began together at the same time—the one with and the other without a direct precedent in Judaism?

⁴³ Cf. Max Joseph, "Sabbath," *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, 1943), IX, 295, 296: "However, the Sabbath is not merely a 'day of rest' and a 'day of blessing,' but also a 'day of sanctification.' As such it has been associated with three ideas: the idea of creation, the social idea, and the exodus of Israel from Egypt. . . . 'And thou shalt remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God brought thee out thence by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day' (Deut. 5 : 15), . . . The Sabbath became a 'memorial of the going out of Egypt,' presenting to the picture of the redemption expected in the future the counter-piece of the release achieved in the past."