

SUNDAY EASTER AND QUARTODECIMANISM IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

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Various studies have suggested a chronological priority of the annual Easter Sunday over the weekly Christian Sunday, whereby the latter may have arisen as a development from the former.¹ This annual Sunday celebration would likely have arisen in apostolic times concurrent with the rise of "Quartodecimanism" (the term given to the Christian practice of observing the annual paschal feast on the basis of the 14th day of Nisan as the time for sacrificing the paschal lamb, the 15th as the passover sabbath, and the 16th as the day for the wave sheaf of the barley firstfruits [*ōmer*, "sheaf"]). The weekly Sunday, according to this view, was a development of the second and third Christian centuries.

What seems to be the most viable alternative thesis regarding the origin of Easter is that it originated in Rome during the episcopate of Xystus (Sixtus), ca. A.D. 115-125.² In this case, the weekly Sunday could have had the chronological priority, or it might have developed in conjunction with, rather than subsequent to, the annual Sunday celebration.

¹See, e.g., C. W. Dugmore, "Lord's Day and Easter," in Oscar Cullman *Festschrift* volume *Neotestamentica et Patristica*, Supplements to NovT, vol. 6 (Leiden, 1962), pp. 272-281; and Lawrence T. Geraty, "The Pascha and the Origin of Sunday Observance," *AUSS* 3 (1965): 85-96. Also a number of my own publications have set forth this view: e.g., "John as Quartodeciman: A Reappraisal," *JBL* 84 (1965): 251-258; "Another Look at 'Lord's Day' in the Early Church and in Rev. 1:10," *NTS* 13 (1966-67): 174-181; *The Early Christian Sabbath* (Worthington, OH, 1979), pp. 43-55. Also in a more popular vein I have treated the subject in a series of two articles entitled "How Sunday Displaced the Sabbath" in the April and May 1968 issues of *These Times* magazine and subsequently in a series of three articles entitled "How Sunday Became the Popular Day of Worship" in the November and December 1978 and January 1979 issues of the same magazine.

²Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome, 1977), pp. 198-211 (and notes), has so argued and refers to other sources. Points of argumentation for this position that are noted hereinafter have been set forth by Bacchiocchi and some of the modern authorities he cites. His discussion has been taken as a reference point because of its comprehensiveness.

A further suggestion has been made to the effect that the Christian Sunday Easter was instituted still later, by Pius (ca. A.D. 140-155), this opinion being based on a reference in the *Liber pontificalis* concerning Pius' celebration of the Pascha on Sunday.³ This view hardly needs attention, for not only is the *Liber* sketchy and unreliable for the earliest Christian centuries, but the thesis also flies in the face of concrete documentary evidence to the contrary, as will be noted below.

The question we address in the present essay relates, therefore, to which of the first two alternatives is the more viable in view of the evidence available. In dealing with this topic, we consider also the pattern of distribution of the Sunday Easter and Quartodecimanism in the second to early fourth centuries.

1. *The Thesis of a Second-century Origin of Easter*

The concept that Xystus originated the Easter Sunday observance rests primarily on a misreading of evidence from Irenaeus, as given by Eusebius. The assumption is that Irenaeus indicates the time of origin of Easter in his letter to Bishop Victor of Rome (ca. A.D. 190) during the Quartodeciman controversy. In this letter Irenaeus calls to Victor's attention the fact that a number of Victor's predecessors in the Roman bishopric had had cordial relationships with Quartodeciman Christians. Irenaeus mentions specifically a series of Roman bishops before Soter—namely, Anicetus, Pius, Hyginus, Telesphorus, and Xystus (given in this reverse chronological order).⁴

It should be noted, however, that Irenaeus' letter, including this listing of bishops, does not address itself at all to the matter of the *origin* of the Sunday-Easter observance. What it does do is to rebuke Victor for endeavoring to excommunicate Quartodeciman Christians in the Roman province of Asia for their unwillingness to come into compliance with the Sunday-Easter practice which was prevalent throughout the rest of the Christian world. In the process of giving this rebuke, Irenaeus mentions these predecessors

³E.g., Robert L. Odom, *Sabbath and Sunday in Early Christianity* (Washington, DC, 1977), pp. 112-113.

⁴Irenaeus' letter is quoted in Eusebius *Eccl. Hist.* 5.24.12-17 (NPNF, 2d Series, 1:243-244).

of Victor as examples of Roman bishops who had treated Quartodecimans with kindness and favor.⁵

Thus, to find in this list of bishops the basis for determining the origin of Easter is indeed hazardous. But the several supporting considerations given in connection with such a thesis are no better:

1. It is suggested that the Sunday Easter arose in Rome at the time of Xystus in opposition to Jewish Quartodecimanism, because of anti-Judaistic feeling among Christians in Rome at the time of Emperor Hadrian (A.D. 117-138). That there were anti-Jewish sentiments in Rome at this time is not to be doubted. The Quartodecimanism in question was not, however, Jewish; it was Christian. And the evidence from Irenaeus clearly indicates, as we have seen, that Xystus and his successors down through at least Anicetus manifested the very opposite of anti-Judaistic feelings on this matter toward Quartodecimans.

2. It is also suggested that Eusebius, our source for information on the late-second-century Quartodeciman controversy, simply exaggerated the wide geographical distribution of the Easter Sunday at the time of Victor, a distribution throughout virtually the entire Christian world from Gaul to Mesopotamia, except for the Roman province of Asia and Christians who may have migrated from there. Eusebius' account, however, was not based on his own suppositions but on *documentary evidence* which he had in hand *from the very time of Victor*.⁶ He makes reference to a number of letters and reports of synods from bishops in both East and West, including Palestine itself.⁷ Moreover, it is not methodologically

⁵The most likely reason for Irenaeus' choice of the *termini* for this selective list is that both Xystus and Anicetus were *particularly noted* for their friendly dealings with Quartodecimans—Xystus for instituting the practice of sending the *fermentum* (consecrated Eucharistic bread) to the Quartodeciman Christians in Rome and its environs, and Anicetus for his cordial attitude toward Quartodeciman bishop Polycarp of Smyrna (even having Polycarp administer communion during a visit of that bishop to Rome!).

⁶This is clear from the account itself, in Eusebius *Eccl. Hist.* 5.23.2-3 and 5.25 (NPNF, 2d Series, 1:241-242, 244).

⁷In *Eccl. Hist.* 5.25 (NPNF, 2d Series, 1:244) Eusebius refers to Bishops Narcissus and Theophilus of Palestine, Cassius of Tyre, Clarus of Ptolemais, and "those who met with them" as stating many things about "the tradition concerning the passover which had come down to them in succession from the apostles" (namely the Sunday-Easter tradition). Eusebius goes on to say that they added "at the close of

sound to try to refute Eusebius' account of the situation at the time of Victor by using sources that deal basically either with the Roman province of Asia (admittedly Quartodeciman at that time) or with a later period (by which time some significant changes had occurred, as I shall show below).⁸

3. A further suggestion sometimes made is that the Roman bishop and Roman church were powerful enough in the early second century to have so quickly enforced Easter Sunday on the rest of the Christian world that Eusebius' account is credible. This argument is irrelevant, however, unless there is also some indication that such an imposition of the Sunday Easter was actually attempted and carried through; but, as noted above, the evidence from Irenaeus on the attitude of Roman bishops before Soter reveals that they had not manifested any inclination along this line. Even if they had been so inclined, further considerations invalidate the thesis, such as Victor's inability to stamp out even the last relatively small vestige of Quartodecimanism ca. A.D. 190.⁹

their writing" reference to the fact that "in Alexandria they keep it [Easter] on the same day that we do." Earlier, in 23.1-3 (NPNF, 2d series, 1:241-242), he had already mentioned a synod called by the aforementioned Palestinian bishops (Theophilus "of Caesarea" and Narcissus "of Jerusalem"), but notes other synods and assemblies in the following places: Rome (under Victor), Pontus (under Palmas), Gaul (under Irenaeus), and Osrhoëne (an area in northwestern Mesopotamia); and he adds that there was also a personal letter of Bacchylus, Bishop of Corinth, "and of a great many others, who uttered the same opinion and judgment and cast the same vote." Thus, in Palestine itself, as well as both westward and eastward, the rule was to observe the paschal celebration annually on a Sunday ca. A.D. 190. For further information, including reference to information from Sozomen, see my "John as Quartodeciman," pp. 253-254.

⁸Polyrates of Ephesus, as quoted by Eusebius *Eccl. Hist.* 5.24.2-8 (NPNF, 2d series, 1:242), does, of course, refer to the "great multitude" of bishops in the province of Asia who concurred with him in regard to Quartodecimanism, *but* it is important to note that that reference pertains to the province of Asia solely, and the complete context of the description in Eusebius *Eccl. Hist.* 5.23-25 surely demonstrates the limited extent of Quartodecimanism when compared to the prevalence of the Sunday Easter virtually *everywhere else* in the Christian world. See n. 7, above.

⁹See my "Some Notes on the Sabbath Fast in Early Christianity," *AUSS* 3 (1965): 167-174, for another practice in Rome (namely, fasting on the seventh-day sabbath) that never prevailed in the East and which had not been adopted in Milan even as late as the time of Ambrose and Augustine (ca. A.D. 400).

2. *Jewish Backgrounds for the Christian Sunday Easter*

The suggestion of Jewish backgrounds for the Christian Sunday Easter, which I have outlined in more detail elsewhere,¹⁰ may be summarized as follows: The Essene and Boethusian practice of observing the firstfruits celebration of the barley harvest wave sheaf annually on Sundays furnishes a background for the rise of the Christian Easter Sunday as early as apostolic times. This Christian Easter Sunday would, as an *annual Resurrection festival*, celebrate Christ in his resurrection as the antitypical Firstfruits, just as in his death he was considered the true Paschal Lamb (see 1 Cor 15:20; 5:7). Then later, during the second century and onward, the *weekly* Christian Sunday would have developed from this original Easter Sunday, and thereby the new weekly Sunday would also have taken on the character of a Resurrection festival.

This particular thesis solves several historical problems: 1) It explains how the Easter Sunday could have acquired such widespread geographical distribution by the time of Victor in the late second century; namely, it had been disseminated since apostolic times. 2) It makes understandable how Irenaeus, a strong advocate of apostolic tradition who had grown up in the Quartodeciman tradition in Asia, could so readily have adopted the Sunday-Easter practice of Gaul (a practice which he held at the very time he was defending the Asian Quartodecimans!); namely, that in his view, he was simply exchanging one apostolic tradition for another.¹¹ 3) It explicates how the weekly Sunday, when it did arise, took on the connotation of a Resurrection festival or a "little Easter"; namely, it grew out of the already existing *annual Easter festival*.¹²

The main objection that has been raised against this proposal regarding the origin of Easter focuses on the lack of explicit evidence as to 1) whether there was actual use of the priestly 364-day solar calendar attributed to the Essenes and Boethusians, a calendar known from the Book of Jubilees ca. 103 B.C. and from Qumran in the first century A.D.; and 2) whether, even if the calendar was in

¹⁰See my publications referred to in n. 1, above, especially "Another Look at 'Lord's Day.'"

¹¹See my "John as Quartodeciman," p. 35, including n. 16.

¹²Cf. Bacchiocchi, p. 205, on the concept of "little Easter."

use, Christians would have adopted the times for their festivals from the practices of sectarians such as the Essenes and/or Boethusians.¹³

Before analyzing the situation more specifically, we should first note that much historical reconstruction pertaining to ancient times, as well as to more recent developments, has had to be pieced together in places where precise documentation is lacking. The historian constantly faces gaps in knowledge, but those gaps can frequently be filled plausibly and reasonably by a careful consideration of all the surrounding data that are available. In view of this fact, the lack of precise documentation for Christian adoption of an antitypical Sunday-Easter celebration based on Jewish sectarian precedents should not be grounds for rejecting the hypothesis. A more pertinent question is, What kind of a reconstruction does most justice to *all* the available data in spite of any gaps that may exist in our knowledge? (After all, other alternatives, such as the idea of the origin of Easter with Xystus, also face gaps in knowledge.)

Although I would agree with those scholars who believe that the Jubilees/Qumran solar calendar was actually operative for at least a limited period of time,¹⁴ the crucial question of concern here is not so much whether the calendar itself was actually used. Rather, it is whether the *ʿōmer* celebration was held regularly on Sundays in these sectarian traditions. Conceivably, such an annual celebration of *ʿōmer* regularly on Sundays could have taken place whether or not the 364-day solar calendar was ever in use. Or it may have been instituted at a time when the calendar was operative, and then continued after the calendar itself fell into disuse.¹⁵

In any event, the interpretation of *ʿōmer* as falling on a Sunday, and of Pentecost also on a Sunday, rests specifically on understanding the reference in Lev 23:11, 15 to "the morrow after the

¹³Cf. my extensive bibliographical notations in "John as Quartodeciman," p. 33, n. 3, which include authorities on both sides of the question. Interestingly, more recently Jacob Milgrom ("The Temple Scroll," *BA* 41 [1978]: 113) has referred to the calendar as "utopian."

¹⁴One might assume the same from the struggle between Boethusians and Pharisees, evidenced, e.g., in *Menaḥ.* 10.3, as well as from the fact that it appears emphatically in the Book of Jubilees and at Qumran.

¹⁵Details about this calendar are given in various sources I have cited in "John as Quartodeciman," p. 351, nn. 1-4; see especially the works by A. Jaubert, D. Barthélemy, J. Morgenstern, and E. Hilgert.

sabbath" as meaning the *day after the weekly sabbath* rather than as the day after the "passover sabbath" (i.e., Nisan 15). This is precisely the interpretation by Boethusians and Essenes, with the Boethusians selecting the Sunday after the sabbath *during* the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the Qumran community choosing the Sunday a week later, *following* the Feast of Unleavened Bread.¹⁶ An amplification of the Qumran emphasis on Sunday annual festivals, including that of the barley firstfruits, has come to light through the publication of the Temple Scroll. This Scroll explicitly locates the following four festivals as falling on Sundays: New Barley, New Wheat, New Wine, and New Oil.¹⁷

The further question mentioned above—namely, whether any Christians would have adopted a reckoning of annual festivals on the basis of Jewish sectarian practice (or Jewish sectarian promulgation)—may at first sight seem somewhat problematical. However, researchers have discovered various significant affinities (as well as some striking differences) between early Christianity and sectarian Judaism.¹⁸ This fact, together with the NT's polemical silence about the Essenes in contrast to its severe denunciation of Pharisees and Sadducees (especially the former), surely gives indication that Jewish sectarian observance could have readily furnished a background for Christian practices.¹⁹

Moreover, given the temple orientation of the early Christian community in Jerusalem (cf. the early chapters in the book of Acts), could it be that there was among the early Christians a predilection for the Boethusian approach to the times for festivals? Indeed, could it also be that the "great number of priests" who "were obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7) were in fact Boethusians? If so, there obviously existed a basis for a direct link from a Jewish sectarian practice to the Christian Easter Sunday.

¹⁶See J. van Goudoever, *Biblical Calendars*, 2d rev. ed. (Leiden, 1961), pp. 19-22, 25-26.

¹⁷See Milgrom, p. 113.

¹⁸See "John as Quartodeciman," pp. 255-256.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 256; see also p. 244, n. 21. Van Goudoever, p. 162, pertinently remarks, "Peter, Bishop of Alexandria, explicitly declared that Passover was only to be celebrated *after* the spring equinox, 'according to the Divine command.' And Anatolius refers to Philo, Josephus and Enoch. In fact, only in the Book of Enoch and Jubilees is it clear that Passover must always fall after the spring equinox, because in these books a 'solar' calendar of 364 days is used. It is interesting that early Christians referred to such an 'heretical' book for their own calendar."

3. *Easter Sunday and Quartodecimanism in the Second and Fourth Centuries*

It remains now only to notice very briefly the geographical distribution of the Sunday Easter and Quartodeciman practices at the time of Emperor Constantine and the Council of Nicaea in the early fourth century as compared with the distribution at the time of Victor in the late second century. Unfortunately and inadvisedly, efforts have been made to refute Eusebius' picture of the second-century geographical distribution of Easter Sunday on the basis of sources dealing with Constantine's time in the early fourth century.²⁰ The question that must be asked is, Could there not have been a spread of Quartodecimanism during this period of more than a century?

By way of general background, we must remember that after Christianity's initial separation from Judaism, a trend developed of influx of synagogue influences into Christianity (particularly in the East). This precise phenomenon has not been adequately researched, but the trend is clear, e.g., through positive evidence regarding liturgical developments and through negative evidence afforded by anti-Judaistic polemic that *eventually* arose concerning Quartodecimanism and other matters. (The polemic against Jewish practices and views implies, of course, that certain Christians were adopting such practices and views.) Epiphanius (late fourth century), moreover, refers to Quartodecimanism as rising up again.²¹

As for the further documentary evidence, we may note that Constantine's Nicene conciliar letter implies a more widespread Quartodecimanism at the time of the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) than existed at the time of Victor. Interestingly, however, the formerly Quartodeciman Roman province of Asia had by Constantine's time, according to that same letter, adopted the Easter Sunday.²² Constantine in his letter did not explicitly list places adhering to Quartodecimanism, but he did refer to specific places

²⁰E.g., Bacchiocchi, pp. 198-199, n. 97.

²¹Epiphanius *Panarion* 50.1. The rise of the practice is described as *palin*, indicating a reappearance. In the NT, typical renditions are "back," or "again" (cf., e.g., Matt 4:8; 20:5; 21:36; Acts 11:10), or "the second time" for the phrase *eis to palin* (2 Cor 13:2).

²²The letter is quoted in Eusebius, "The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine," 3.17-20 (NPNF 2d Series, 1:524-525).

observing Easter and in a more general way describes them as "the western, southern, and northern parts of the world" and "some of the eastern also."²³ Thus he implies, by way of omission, that some places in the East did not observe the Sunday Easter.

Eusebius, who quotes Constantine's letter, gives the impression (in an earlier passage) of possibly an even more widespread geographical distribution of Quartodecimanism than we would gain from Constantine himself; Eusebius points out that until Constantine convoked the Council of Nicaea, people were "in every place[!] divided" with respect to the two practices and "the controversy continued equally balanced between both parties."²⁴

Perhaps the most specific and accurate description, however, comes from Athanasius of Alexandria. At the time of the Council of Nicaea, he referred to Quartodecimanism as being current among the "Syrians, Cilicians, and Mesopotamians."²⁵

Obviously, the pattern of geographical distribution of Quartodecimanism and the Sunday Easter changed considerably between the late second century and the early fourth century. By the time of Constantine, the Christians from the Roman province of Asia in western Asia minor were no longer the sole or major Christian adherents of Quartodecimanism; in fact, they had given up the practice! The locus of Quartodecimanism now had shifted farther East to a larger geographical area and presumably to a greatly increased number of adherents.

4. Conclusion

Of the three alternative positions mentioned at the beginning of this essay concerning the origin of the annual Christian Sunday-Easter observance, the one most favored by the evidence is that the practice derived from Jewish antecedents, just as was also the case

²³Ibid., 3.19 (NPNF, 2d Series, 1:525). The specific places mentioned as observing the Sunday Easter are Rome, Africa, Italy, Egypt, Spain, the Gauls, Britain, Libya, Greece, and the dioceses of Asia and Pontus, and Cilicia. But cf. also n. 25 below.

²⁴Ibid., 3.5 (NPNF, 2d Series, 1:521).

²⁵See Athanasius *De synodis* 1.5, and *Ad afros epistola synodica* 2. Regarding Cilicia, there appears to be a contradiction here with what was stated in Constantine's letter (see n. 23 above). Athanasius' depiction is probably the more reliable one, but it is also possible that Cilicia was one of the places quite accurately included in Eusebius' description as "divided."

with regard to Quartodecimanism. The proposal that the Sunday Easter was introduced by Roman bishop Pius about the middle of the second century falls flat, for Irenaeus specifically names several of Pius' predecessors who observed Easter on a Sunday. The theory that Xystus a quarter of a century earlier inaugurated the practice is likewise suspect, since it is based on a misreading of Irenaeus and is hard put to account for the widespread distribution of the Sunday Easter by the time of Victor (ca. 190)—throughout virtually all of Christendom from Gaul to Mesopotamia (including Palestine), with the sole exception being the Roman province of Asia in western Asia Minor.

The pattern of distribution changed during the next 135 years, however, so that by the time of the Council of Nicaea in 325 Quartodecimanism had arisen in Syria, Cilicia, and Mesopotamia. During this same period of time the Christian community in the Roman province of Asia had, curiously enough, dropped Quartodecimanism in favor of the Sunday Easter.