

The Council of Nicaea, the Dating of Easter, and Its Implications Concerning the Church's Relationship to the Jewish People

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The story of what led up to the Council of Nicaea's decision to unify the Church's dating of Easter is a window into the kinds of decisions that resulted in the parting of the ways between the Church and the Jewish people. The road to Nicaea was not the only factor that caused this separation. However, it is emblematic of how things developed that led to the Christian-Jewish schism we see today. Ultimately, the decisions made at Nicaea reverberated for the next 1700 years. This included the championing of Nicene Christology but also the Nicene view that Jewish presence and Jewish practice were not welcome within the Church. The aim of this paper is to help educate the Gentile wing of the Church about this history surrounding the Council of Nicaea, the dating of Easter, and its implications concerning the Church's relationship to the Jewish people. My hope is that this paper, presented on the 1700th anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea, might give a positive vision for Gentile Christians to seek out their Jewish brothers and sisters, their covenant partners (Eph 2-3; Rom 11), from whom they can learn much about their own faith and the celebration of Easter.¹

Reasons Why the Dating of Easter Was Prioritized at Nicaea

How did a controversy over the dating of Easter in the fourth century rise to such a level of importance that it was placed at the very top of the Council of Nicaea's agenda, next to the question of whether Jesus was eternally divine or a created being?!² I'd like to suggest a couple of possibilities:

First, the dating of Easter had to do with unifying the Church. Easter was the most important day of worship on the Church's calendar in the fourth century, but different churches celebrated it on different days, which reflected a lack of unity. The Council of Nicaea's agenda was to try to get everyone to celebrate Easter on the same day. It was thought that this would help unify the Church.

Secondly, the controversy over the dating of Easter was more fundamentally a controversy over the identity of the Church. One way of dating Easter reminded the Church of its Jewish roots and

¹ See David Rudolph, "The Science of Worship: Astronomy, Intercalation, and the Church's Dependence on the Jewish People," *Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology* 4:1 (2017): 44-47.

² Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 3.4-5.

its dependence upon the Jewish people. While another way of dating Easter reminded the Church of its Roman roots and reflected a clear parting of the ways between the Church and the Jewish people. The decision made at Nicaea related to the deeper question of whether the Church needed the Jewish people. And even more deeply, could the Church be fully the Church without any present and future relationship with the Jewish people?

It is because of these kinds of questions that the dating of Easter was placed at the top of the agenda at the Council of Nicaea next to the issue of Jesus' eternal divinity, something that Arius, a Christian priest from Alexandria, had called into question.

Before we look at Constantine's letter that summarizes the decision made at Nicaea concerning Easter, and the reasons for this decision, I think it is helpful to have an overview of the dating controversy leading up to the Council of Nicaea so that we can understand how the dating of Easter relates to the Jewish people.

Terminology: *Pascha* → Easter

A note about terminology. For at least the first seven hundred years of the church, Easter was called *Pascha*, the Aramaic, Greek, and Latin word for Passover. *Pascha* is derived from the Hebrew word *Pesach* which means "Passover." Even today, *Pascha* is how Greek, Italian, Spanish, and Russian speakers refer to the festival of Jesus' resurrection.

"Easter" is an English word first attested in the writings of an eighth century Anglo-Saxon monk named Bede. He associated the timing of *Pascha* with the month called *Eosturmonath* named in honor of the Anglo-Saxon goddess *Eostre* or *Ostara* (German).

Why did early Gentile Christians call the centerpiece of their ecclesial calendar *Pascha* (Passover)? It is because the early Gentile Christian holiday centered on the remembrance that Jesus is the Passover lamb of God (John 1:29; 19:14, 31–36; 1 Cor 5:7; Rev 5:6;) who died and rose from the dead during Passover week. Essentially, we might say, Easter is a Gentile Christian adaptation of Passover.

Jesus and His First Followers Celebrated Passover

We must not forget that Jesus the son of David, and his Twelve Apostles, were all Second Temple Jews who lived in the land of Israel and celebrated Passover (Luke 2:41-42). The Last Supper was a Passover meal (Matt 26; Mark 14; Luke 22). According to Luke-Acts, the membership of the early Church was entirely Jewish until Acts 10 when Cornelius (a Gentile) and his family received the Holy Spirit. This shocking event (at least from a Jewish perspective) is followed by Acts 11 when not a few Gentiles in Antioch also become followers of the Messiah of Israel and became known as "Christians."

Acts 15 and Its Implications Regarding Gentile Christian Observance of Passover

The existence of Gentiles filled with the Spirit of God raised the halakhic and ecclesiological question in the early Church: Do Gentiles need to become Jews in order to be part of the people of God? A controversy ensued. Ultimately, the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, led by Ya'akov (James) the brother of Yeshua (Jesus), ruled that Gentile followers of Jesus did not need to become Jews. They were not required to be circumcised or to take on the covenantal obligations entailed in circumcision, such as the observance of Passover (cf. Acts 21:25; 1 Cor 7:17–24; Gal. 5:3; Exod 12:48). The Jewish apostles recognized that the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit as Gentiles and should therefore be regarded as Gentile brothers and sisters in the Lord. They were asked to keep the four essentials listed in Acts 15:20, 29 and 21:25, what became known as the apostolic decree.³ Moreover, Paul's subsequent letters to the Gentiles indicate that they were expected to keep Torah ethics, of which there were many.

Polycarp and Anicetus Agreed to Disagree About Their Different Ways of Dating Passover

While neither the Torah nor the New Testament includes a commandment for Gentiles to keep Passover,⁴ many Gentiles in the early Church likely experienced Passover in some way due to their close association with Messianic Jews who observed Passover on Nisan 14.⁵ This is in fact what happened with Polycarp (69-156 CE), a Gentile Christian disciple of John. Polycarp celebrated Passover with John, and other Messianic Jewish apostles. After John's death, Polycarp continued to celebrate Passover as the bishop of Smyrna. We don't know the details of what Polycarp's Passover celebration looked like but we do know that he was adamant about observing Passover on Nisan 14 in keeping with the tradition of John and the other apostles he knew. Polycarp thus tried to convince Anicetus, the bishop of Rome (154-155 CE), to follow this early church tradition (of observing Passover on Nisan 14) but he was unsuccessful. Eusebius quotes Irenaeus about this irenic conversation between the two Gentile bishops:⁶

[A]nd when the blessed Polycarp was staying in Rome in the time of Anicetus [the bishop of Rome], though they disagreed a little about some other things as well, they immediately made peace, having no wish for strife between them on this matter. For neither was Anicetus able to persuade Polycarp not to observe it [Passover on Nisan 14], inasmuch as he had always done so in company with John the disciple of our Lord and the other apostles with whom he had associated; nor did Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it [Passover

³ For a discussion of James' words in Acts 21:21 ("For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."), see David Rudolph, "Towards Paul's Ephesians 2 Vision of the One New Man: Navigating Around Hebrew Roots and Replacement Theologies," *Kesher: A Journal of Messianic Judaism* 41 (2022): 13-15.

⁴ For a discussion of Paul's words in 1 Cor 5:8 ("let us celebrate the festival"), see Rudolph, "Towards Paul's Ephesians 2 Vision of the One New Man," 16-17.

⁵ The book of Acts also records that some Gentiles attended synagogues as God-fearers before becoming followers of Yeshua. This would have added to their exposure to Passover and knowledge of the festival.

⁶ For a discussion of the historical reliability of Irenaeus' testimony about Polycarp, see Frederick W. Weidmann, *Polycarp and John: The Harris Fragments and Their Challenge to the Literary Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 125-33.

on Nisan 14], for he [Anicetus] said that he ought to keep the custom of those who were presbyters before him (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.16 [LCL]).⁷

Notably, Anicetus did not claim that the date when Roman Christians celebrated Passover (on the Sunday following Nisan 14) was in keeping with apostolic tradition. Rather, he claimed that the date was in keeping with the custom of the “presbyters before him” whom Irenaeus identifies as “Pius and Telesphorus and Xystus.”

It should be underscored that Polycarp’s conviction about observing Passover on Nisan 14 was not an attempt to keep the Torah commandment given to Israel. Rather, Polycarp sought to walk out what he considered to be an early church tradition that the apostles, and especially John his mentor, modeled in his own life.

Differences Between Jewish and Gentile Christian Celebrations of Passover

When we piece together early Christian texts and Patristic sources to try to gain a picture of what Gentile Christian Passovers looked like in the second and third centuries, we discover diverse practices. There were a few Jewish elements. For example, the Hellenistic Jewish name of the festival – *Pascha* - was retained, which is significant because it reminded the Church of its Jewish roots. Also, those churches that followed in the tradition of Polycarp preserved the Jewish date – Nisan 14. This implicitly required dependence on Jewish people. But in terms of ritual practice, the Gentile Christian Passover bore little resemblance to how Jews in the Greco-Roman world celebrated Passover during this period.⁸

Here are some examples of the divergence. Jews (including Messianic Jews) held Passover seders that included a festival meal. Proto-seders, like the Last Supper, over time developed into the kind of Rabbinic Passover seder we read about in Mishnah tractate Pesachim 10.

The Gentile Christian tradition by contrast typically included one to two days of fasting leading up to Passover. This was to commemorate Jesus being in the tomb and the bridegroom having been “taken away” (Matt 9:15).⁹ Perhaps the most notable distinctive of the Gentile Christian Passover is that it did not include a seder, the central element of the Jewish observance. Instead, Gentile Christians celebrated Passover by participating in the Eucharist. Christians who observed Passover on Nissan 14 held a vigil on the first night of Passover and broke their fast by taking

⁷ Cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.14.1; 5.20.5-6; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.3.4; Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 17.

⁸ See Daniel P. McCarthy, “The Council of Nicaea and the Celebration of the Christian Pasch,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Young Richard Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 177-201; Paul F. Bradshaw, “The Origins of Easter,” in *Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 81-97; Raniero Cantalamessa, *Easter in the Early Church: An Anthology of Jewish and Early Christian Texts* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993); Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *The Didascalia Apostolorum: An English Version with Introduction and Annotation* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2009), 211-23; Alden Mosshammer, ed., *The Easter Computus and the Origins of the Christian Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991).

⁹ Notably, the Jewish Fast of the Firstborn (*Ta’anit Bekhorim*), which takes place prior to Passover is limited to firstborn Jews and is a much later tradition first mentioned in *Soferim* 21.3, an eighth century CE minor tractate in the Talmud.

the Eucharist at cockcrow (around 3am)¹⁰ as a reminder of when Jesus was resurrected. Roman Christians also fasted leading up to their celebration of Passover. However, their vigil was always on Saturday evening. They had baptisms at cockcrow and then broke the fast with the Eucharist at first light (around 5-6am) on Sunday morning in commemoration of Jesus' resurrection. The Gentile Christian tradition of lent (a forty-day period of fasting leading up to Easter) developed out of a forty-hour fast leading up to Passover on Sunday. Also, notably the Passover Eucharist was celebrated with leavened bread (not matzah) in Gentile Christian tradition – which precluded Torah observant Messianic Jews from participating. Moreover, Gentile Christians did not abstain from leavened foods after the Eucharist was over. Some of the early Gentile Christian Passover celebrations also included lighting a Paschal candle to symbolize the light of Messiah who was risen from the dead, praying for the Jewish people,¹¹ readings from Scripture, preaching, and instructions for catechumens.

Gentile Departure from Jewish Passover Traditions Is Not a Problem

While Gentile Christian Passover customs departed widely from Jewish ones (something that in part may have been intentional), there is no reason in my opinion to view this as problematic. That is because Gentile believers did not have the same covenantal responsibilities as Jews, which the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 made clear. There was no imperative for Gentile Christians to avoid leavened bread and eat matzah during the festival of Pesach, though providing matzah for Jews would have been a way to walk out Paul's words in Romans 15:7 to "welcome one another." Another consideration is that the Jewish Passover seder is fundamentally a covenant renewal ceremony that focuses on the Jewish journey. If Gentile believers had imitated the Jewish seder and embraced its rituals, the resulting Christian seder would have likely reinforced emerging replacement theologies in which Gentile Christians viewed themselves as the new Israel. The Gentile Christian Passover seder would have then become an example of cultural (and identity) appropriation.

Doing Jewish Things with Jewish People: Early Adopters of the Principle, and the Blessing That Came from It

That said, there was a special blessing that the Church experienced in the early second century (until the year 135 CE) when many local churches followed the example of Polycarp and observed Passover on Nisan 14 when the Jewish world did. Epiphanius indicates that these churches depended on the Jewish bishops in Jerusalem to determine the date of Passover, and that this enriched the Church with unity. He writes:

For this was their chief and entire concern: the one unity, so that there would be no schisms or divisions...Now altogether there were fifteen bishops from the circumcision, and it was necessary at that time, when the bishops from the circumcision were being ordained in

¹⁰ The tradition of Passover being a *leil shimurim* (a night of vigil) was well established in early Judaism (cf. Exod 12:40-42) but the seder functioned as the vigil and Jews generally did not stay up all night. Thus, the Gentile Christian Pascha on Nisan 14 typically took place after Jews concluded their seders.

¹¹ Perhaps this tradition should be readopted today.

Jerusalem, for the whole world to follow them and celebrate the feast with them, that there might be one accord and one confession, one feast celebrated; this was the reason for their solicitude which gathered the minds of people into the unity of the church (Epiphanius, *Pan.* 70.10.3-5).¹²

Similarly, Epiphanius quotes the *Regulation of the Apostles* which states:

You shall not calculate, but celebrate the feast whenever your brethren from the Circumcision do. Keep it together with them...Even if they err, do not be concerned (*Pan.* 70.10.2, 6).¹³

This was a church unity that was in touch with the Jewish roots of the faith, that understood the Church to be a body of Jews and Gentiles in Messiah who remained Jews and Gentiles. And, strikingly, it was a unity that valued the leadership of Messianic Jews within the body of Messiah.

The Event That Caused the Passover Dating Controversy

The emperor Hadrian expelled the Jewish bishops from Jerusalem in 135 CE, after the Bar Kokhba revolt. This resulted in a leadership vacuum and led to disputes among Gentile Christian bishops about the proper dating of Passover.¹⁴ The controversy lasted for almost two hundred years (Epiphanius, *Pan.* 70.9.8-9).¹⁵

The Bishop Who Went Ballistic: Victor's Excommunication of Churches That Observed Passover on Nisan 14

According to patristic literature, post-135 CE Gentile churches followed two different calendar traditions concerning the Christian celebration of Passover. Churches in Judea, Asia, Asia Minor, Cilicia, Syria and Mesopotamia observed Passover on Nisan 14.¹⁶ By contrast, churches in the

¹² Philip R. Amidon, trans., *The Panarion of St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 274; *GCS* 3.243; italics mine. Cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.5-6.

¹³ Cantalamessa, trans., *Easter in the Early Church, 73-74*. Cf. Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 13; Peter L'Huillier, *The Church of the Ancient Councils: The Disciplinary Work of the First Four Ecumenical Councils* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 21; Stewart-Sykes, *The Didascalia Apostolorum*, 219. Epiphanius rejects the Audian interpretation of the Regulation that "Keep it together with them" refers to Gentile Christians celebrating Passover with non-Jesus-believing Jews.

¹⁴ See Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.5-6.

¹⁵ Trans. Amidon, *The Panarion of St. Epiphanius, 273-74*; *GCS* 3.242.

¹⁶ Epiphanius, *Pan.* 70.9.2; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.23.1; 5:24:1; Athanasius, *Syn.* 2; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 70.9.8-9; 10.3-5; Theodoret, *Haer. Fab. Comp.* 3.4. "The Quartodeciman controversy, which continued for over two centuries in Asia Minor (Canon no. 7 of the Synod of Laodicea, ca. 350), testifies with clarion voice to the perennial desire of many Anatolian Christians to maintain the Jewish heritage of the Christian observance of Easter/Passover' (Oster 1992). Athanasius (*Syn.* 2) writes in the fourth century that 'the Syrians, Cilicians, and those who dwell in Mesopotamia dissented from us and kept the Pascha at the same time as the Jews'" (Cantalamessa, *Easter in the Early Church*, 162; cf. 128b). See Bruce Chilton, *Redeeming Time: The Wisdom of Ancient Jewish and Christian Festal Calendars* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 82-83.

West, including those in Italy, Greece, Spain, Britain and Gaul observed Passover on the Sunday after Nisan 14.¹⁷

In the late second century CE, Victor (the bishop of Rome) threatened to excommunicate the churches in Asia unless they abandoned their tradition of observing Passover on Nisan 14. In response to this threat, the bishops in Asia appointed Polycrates (bishop of Ephesus) to reply to Victor. Polycrates wrote to Victor in 191 CE. Eusebius describes the historical context and then quotes from the letter. He writes:

At that time, no small controversy arose because all the dioceses of Asia thought it right, as though by more ancient tradition, to observe for the feast of the Saviour's Passover the fourteenth day of the moon, on which the Jews had been commanded to kill the lamb. Thus it was necessary to finish the fast on that day, whatever day of the week it might be. Yet it was not the custom to celebrate in this manner in the churches throughout the rest of the world, for from apostolic tradition they kept the custom which still exists that it is not right to finish the fast on any day save that of the resurrection of our Saviour. Many meetings and conferences with bishops were held on this point, and all unanimously formulated in their letters the doctrine of the church for those in every country that the mystery of the Lord's resurrection from the dead could be celebrated on no day save Sunday, and that on that day alone we should celebrate the end of the paschal fast...but the bishops in Asia were led by Polycrates in persisting that it was necessary to keep the custom which had been handed down to them of old. Polycrates himself in a document which he addressed to Victor and to the church of Rome, expounds the tradition which had come to him as follows:

Therefore we keep the day undeviatingly, neither adding nor taking away, for in Asia great luminaries sleep, and they will rise on the day of the coming of the Lord, when he shall come with glory from heaven and seek out all the saints. Such were Philip of the twelve apostles, and two of his daughters who grew old as virgins, who sleep in Hierapolis, and another daughter of his, who lived in the Holy Spirit, rests at Ephesus. Moreover, there is also John, who lay on the Lord's breast, who was a priest wearing the breastplate, and a martyr, and teacher. He sleeps at Ephesus. And there is also Polycarp at Smyrna, both bishop and martyr, and Thraseas, both bishop, from Eumeneae, who sleeps in Smyrna. And why should I speak of Sagaris, bishop and martyr, who sleeps at Laodiceae, and Papius, too, the blessed, and Melito the eunuch, who lived entirely in the Holy Spirit, who lies in Sardis, waiting for the visitation from heaven when he will rise from the dead? All these kept the fourteenth day of the Passover according to the gospel, never swerving, but following according to the rule of the faith. And I also, Polycrates, the least of you all, live according to the tradition of my kinsmen, and some of them have I followed. For seven of my family were bishops and I am the eighth, and my kinsmen ever kept the day when the people put away the leaven. Therefore, brethren, I who have lived sixty-five years in the Lord and conversed with brethren from every country, and have studied all holy Scripture, am not afraid of threats, for they have said who were greater than I, "It is better to obey God rather than men"...

¹⁷ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.23.1; *Vit. Const.* 3.18.

Upon this [the receiving of the letter] Victor, [the bishop] who presided at Rome, immediately cut off from the common unity the dioceses of all Asia, together with the adjacent churches, on the ground of heterodoxy, and he indited letters announcing that all the Christians there were absolutely excommunicated. But by no means all were pleased by this, so they issued counter-requests to him to consider the cause of peace and unity and love towards his neighbours (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.23.1–5.24.11 [LCL]).¹⁸

The Council of Arles (314 CE)

One hundred and twenty years later, in 314 CE, the Council of Arles (a regional council) was convened and it declared in Canon 1, which was addressed to Sylvester, the bishop of Rome, that Passover “be observed by us on one day and at one time in all the earth, and that you [Sylvester, the bishop of Rome] should send out letters to all, as is the custom.”

In other words, this regional council – the Council of Arles – sought to make the date of Passover, as determined by Rome, the tradition that all churches followed, including the churches in Asia. By this time, Rome maintained that Passover should always be observed on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. Note that the Roman way of dating Passover did not require any help from Jews, and by specifying that Pascha would be observed after the equinox it generally precluded the possibility of the Christian celebration of Passover coinciding with Nisan 14.¹⁹ The problem was that the bishop of Rome lacked the ability to enforce the Roman Passover tradition on churches in the East.

What is often not realized is that the Emperor Constantine personally convened the Council of Arles. And it was likely here that he gained the vision to convene an ecumenical council to confirm the Roman dating of Passover universally and to use his political power to enforce it.

¹⁸ I have not found any evidence that Quartodeciman Christian leaders were less prone to replacement theology and anti-Judaism than their non-Quartodeciman counterparts. For example, Melito, the bishop of Sardis, a Quartodeciman, blamed the Jews for killing God, “God has been murdered, the king of Israel has been destroyed, by the hand of Israel” (96). This notwithstanding, I conjecture that when Quartodeciman practice and dependence on Jews was combined with close personal relationship with Messianic Jews (as in the case of Polycarp being disciplined by John), there would have been a heightened sensitivity to antisemitism and replacement theology.

¹⁹ “A consensus emerges in Christian sources, from the beginning of the fourth century, that the Jews in this period ignored the rule of the equinox and frequently celebrated Passover on the preceding full moon... The observance of Passover before the equinox, widespread in the fourth century, contrasts with our findings for the first century, when Passover appears to have occurred considerably later, sometimes over a month after the equinox... the late observance of Passover before the destruction of the Temple (in 70 CE) may have been to enable pilgrims to reach Jerusalem in good time. If this is correct, it would follow that after the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the postponement of Passover would no longer have been necessary. Passover could then have been celebrated as soon as the conditions required for *’aviv*; however defined, were considered to be met; which might often have been before the equinox (Sacha Stern, *Calendar and Community: A History of the Jewish Calendar, Second Century BCE—Tenth Century CE* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], 66, 70-71). In some Jewish communities, “it was the ‘rule of March’ that regulated the intercalation. The decision whether or not to intercalate could have been made quite simply, from year to year, depending on whether Passover would not otherwise occur in the month of March” (Ibid, 77-78). Cf. L’Huillier, *The Church of the Ancient Councils*, 21.

The First Council of Nicaea (325 CE)

Ten years after the Council of Arles, Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea and even led the discussion concerning the date of Passover, sitting in the middle of the bishops.²⁰

There are various estimates of how many bishops attended the Council, ranging from 250-318,²¹ and we do not know if any of the bishops were Jewish. A quarter of the bishops were from churches in the East who observed Passover on Nisan 14. Three quarters of the bishops were from churches that had already adopted the Roman dating of Passover.²² After the Council was over, a synodal letter was sent out on behalf of the bishops stating that:

...all of the brethren in the East who have heretofore kept this [Passover] festival when the Jews did, will henceforth conform to the Romans and to us...²³

Constantine also sent out a letter to various bishops summarizing what the Council had decided. Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea, preserved a record of that letter. Constantine wrote:

At this meeting [the Council of Nicaea] the question concerning the most holy day of Passover was discussed, and it was resolved by the united judgment of all present, that this feast ought to be kept by all and in every place on one and the same day. ... And first of all, it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are, therefore, deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul. For we have it in our power, if we abandon their custom, to prolong the due observance of this ordinance to future ages, by a truer order, which we have preserved from the very day of the passion until the present time.

Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd; for we have received from our Saviour a different way. A course at once legitimate and honorable lies open to our most holy religion. Beloved brethren, let us with one consent adopt this course, and withdraw ourselves from all participation in their baseness. For their boast is absurd indeed, that it is not in our power without instruction from them to observe these things. For how should they be capable of forming a sound judgment, who, since their parricidal guilt in slaying their Lord, have been subject to the direction, not of reason, but of ungoverned passion, and are swayed by every impulse of the mad spirit that is in them (Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 3.18).²⁴

²⁰ Eusebius, *On the Celebration of the Pascha* 8.

²¹ 250+ (Eusebius); 300+ (Constantine); 318 (the traditional view), which represents the number of Abraham's servants in Gen 14:14. The leader from Palestine was named Macarius of Jerusalem; he was joined by the metropolitan, Eusebius of Caesarea.

²² Eusebius, *On the Celebration of the Pascha* 8.

²³ Socrates, *Hist. eccl.* 1.9. Cf. Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.* 1.9. See L'Huilier, *The Church of the Ancient Councils*, 23, 87.

²⁴ For a survey of Christian critiques of Jewish intercalation in the fourth century CE, see Stern, *Calendar and Community*, 65-85. Constantine regarded the Council of Nicaea's decision to be the will of God, "Receive, then, with all willingness this truly divine injunction...For whatever is determined in the holy assemblies of the bishops is to be regarded as indicative of the Divine will" (Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 3.20). Cf. Socrates, *Hist. eccl.* 1.9.

Considerations

I would like to make several comments about this text.

First, one motivation behind the Council of Nicaea's decision concerning the dating of Passover was antisemitic. Constantine describes the Jewish people as a whole as sinful, spiritually blind, and detestable. The letter also charges the Jewish people with "slaying their Lord" and having thus committed the crime of deicide (that is, the killing of God).²⁵

Second, the letter envisions the Church parting ways with the Jewish people when it says, "Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd; for we have received from our Saviour a different way."

Third, the implication of the letter is that Messianic Jews (i.e., Jews who believe in Jesus and continue to live as practicing Jews) and Messianic Judaism are not welcome in the Church when it states, "And first of all, it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews." Sixteen years later, the Council of Antioch (341 CE), Canon 1, made the continued celebration of Passover on Nisan 14 [the Messianic Jewish practice] punishable by excommunication and expulsion from the church. All of this, together with subsequent anti-Jewish councils and church laws,²⁶ set the trajectory for the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE, which formally prohibited baptized Jews from continuing to live as Jews.²⁷ These councils and legislations undermined the One New Man (Eph 2-3) through making the Jewish covenant partner *persona non grata*.

Fourth, the letter sets a trajectory for the Church to be fully independent of the Jewish people when it says, "we have it in our power" and "For their boast is absurd indeed, that it is not in our power without instruction from them to observe these things." The full adoption of the Roman dating of Passover that did not require help from Jews to calculate was a symbolic statement that the predominantly Gentile Church was no longer committed to learning from the Jewish people. The history after the Council reflects this vision to no longer depend on Jews. If you ask the average Christian pastor or priest today, "Does your church depend on modern-day Jews in any way?" he or she would probably say they do not. This is the legacy of the Council of Nicaea.

²⁵ An appropriate response to learning about this history would be for Gentile Christians today to be that much more committed to fighting antisemitism in the Church and public square and protecting Jewish people.

²⁶ James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 379-400.

²⁷ Canon 8 states, "Since some of those who come from the religion of the Hebrews mistakenly think to make a mockery of Christ who is God, pretending to become Christians, but denying Christ in private by both *secretly continuing to observe the sabbath and maintaining other Jewish practices, we decree that they shall not be received to communion or at prayer or into the church*, but rather let them openly be Hebrews according to their own religion; they should not baptize their children or buy, or enter into possession of, a slave. But if one of them makes his conversion with a sincere faith and heart, and pronounces his confession wholeheartedly, disclosing their practices and objects in the hope that others may be refuted and corrected, such a person should be welcomed and baptized along with his children, *and care should be taken that they abandon Hebrew practices*. However if they are not of this sort, *they should certainly not be welcomed*" (Italics mine).

Fifth, there are churches today that have intentionally returned to celebrating Easter on Nisan 14 to connect more with the Jewish roots of their faith. I know one church in Japan that does this in emulation of early Gentile Christian tradition among the churches of the East and not as a response to the Torah commandment to Israel concerning Passover. This Japanese church is balanced and healthy. By contrast, sometimes the anti-Jewish legacy of Nicaea has led to Christians going to the opposite extreme. By this I mean Gentile believers developing a Hebrew Roots/One Law theology that all Gentile Christians should not only celebrate Passover on Nisan 14 but they should ideally observe all the Jewish festivals if they want to experience the fullness of God's blessing in their lives. While this view is well intentioned, there are a host of biblical and theological reasons why going to the opposite extreme of Nicaea is ill advised.²⁸

Sixth, and finally, some in the Catholic Church have recently argued that Constantine's letter did not necessarily reflect the views of the 250+ bishops at Nicaea. For example, the International Theological Commission document "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour" has this to say about Constantine's summary of the Council decision and the reasons for it:

It should be noted that it was at the Council of Nicaea that the Church decisively chose to separate itself from the date of the Jewish Passover. The argument that the Council wanted to distance itself from Judaism has been put forward, based on the Emperor Constantine's letters as reported by Eusebius, which include anti-Jewish justifications for the choice of an Easter date not linked to 14 Nisan. However, a distinction must be made between the motivations attributed to the Emperor and those of the Council Fathers. In any case, nothing in the Council's canons expresses this refusal of the Jewish way of doing things.²⁹

This statement attempts to distance Constantine's interpretation of the Council decision from that of the bishops. However, the argument is a red herring. The fact of the matter is that the International Theological Commission's argument is speculative. There is no evidence that, after Nicaea, any of these bishops called into question Constantine's interpretation of the Council's decision. Moreover, multiple bishops echoed Constantine's antisemitic perspective, such as Eusebius in his work *On Easter* and Athanasius in his work *Festal Letters*.³⁰ The history of the Church's antisemitism, anti-Judaism, and replacement theology leading up to and following 325 CE further supports the view that Constantine's letter reflected the consensus view of the bishops who voted in favor of the Council's decision.

²⁸ See Rudolph, "Towards Paul's Ephesians 2 Vision of the One New Man," 3-31.

²⁹ International Theological Commission, *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour: The 1700th Anniversary of the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea 325-2025* (Rome: 2025), 1.46.

³⁰ Eusebius, *On Easter* 8; Athanasius, *Ep. fest.* 6, 11, 19-20, 24, 27, 36/37, 39, 41. See David M. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 134-35.

Dealing with the Antisemitic Reasons behind the Council's Decision as a Step Toward Jew-Gentile Unity in the Church, and Healing the Schism between the Church and the Jewish People

In conclusion, we have an antisemitic problem here when it comes to the reasons behind the Council's decision regarding the date of Passover. Father Peter Hocken once wrote a paper entitled "Towards a Deeper Repentance for Our Sins Against the Jewish People." In it, he advises that the proper response to Christian antisemitism begins with recognizing our sins, confessing our sins, and lamentation. Father Peter explains:

The process of repentance needs to go through these three phases. It is clear that one has to begin with a recognition of what happened and its wrongness. But this recognition needs to become a confession of sin, and then this confession of sin has to move from the head to the heart and the guts. It is only as our repentance reaches the level of lamentation that it will go as deep in the human psyche as the sinful behaviour being lamented. The full restoration of right relationships requires that all repentance has to reach the same human depth and intensity as the sins that are being confessed. In this light, it would seem that much of the Christian world is only at the stage of initial recognition of the evils inflicted upon the Jewish people, with only a minority having progressed to the level of confession of sin and an explicit asking for forgiveness.³¹

When it comes to the Council of Nicaea's decision concerning the dating of Passover, and the anti-Jewish reasons given for this decision, I would suggest that 1700 years have passed, and the time has come to address the negative side of Nicaea head on and not bury our heads in the sand.

Paul writes in Ephesians 2:22 that God is forming a household in which Jews and Gentiles are being "built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." When we are built together in this way, through God's Holy Spirit, there is no more schism. Let us therefore do whatever it takes to arrive at this Jew-Gentile unity that God desires to see, even if that means stepping into the deep waters of recognizing our sins, confessing our sins, and lamentation.

The Church is fundamentally a table fellowship of Jews and Gentiles in Messiah who are called to relate to one another in a spirit of interdependence, mutual blessing, and mutual humbling. That is the kind of relationship that we are experiencing together today at this forum for unity and renewal. Let's cherish it and build on it.

³¹ Peter Hocken, "Towards a Deeper Repentance for Our Sins Against the Jewish People," Toward Jerusalem Council II, April 2001, 2.