

Did the early Church keep the Passover?

A. Did the early Church keep the Passover?

1. The Passover is a command of the Lord and a Mo'ed, a divine appointed time, for all men to keep.
2. The early Church observed the Passover. The tradition was handed down by the apostles and the Church fathers to the early Church.
 - a. The Apostle John was the last apostle, and he handed this tradition down to his disciple Polycarp. Eventually this was passed down to a successor named Polycrates.
 - b. For a few generations, the Church of Ephesus remained faithful to the teachings of the early church, including observing the Passover on 14 Nisan. It is possible that the Corinthian church was also observing it (1 Cor. 5:7–8).
3. After the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70), the Jerusalem Council began to lose its authority over the churches regarding matters of faith and church tradition. Power began to shift westwards to Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire.

B. What happened after the First Century?

1. After the First Century, the Church was divided into Eastern and Western Church.
 - a. The Eastern Church held on to the traditions handed down by the apostles, holding the Passover Communion on the 14th day of Nisan in accordance to the teachings of the Bible.
 - b. On the other hand, the Western Church did not celebrate the Passover, and instead held Communion at Easter.
 - c. Why did the Eastern and Western churches hold the Holy Communion on different dates?
 - i. It was because the Western Church, on its own discretion, changed the date of observance of the Lord's Supper from Passover to Easter.
 - ii. This was probably an attempt to shift the focus away from Passover, which was a feast observed by the Jewish people according to the Hebrew calendar.
 - d. At that point of time, though the Eastern and Western Church held the communion on different days, the date of Easter was still determined by the date of the Passover.

-
2. Pagan associations of Easter:
 - a. During that period, there were already widespread celebrations of Easter among pagan cultures throughout the Roman Empire.
 - b. It was associated with pagan spring festivals involving idolatry, such as the worship of fertility goddess known as Ishtar, Astarte or Eostre (that was probably how the name Easter came about).
 - c. The Western church wanted to assimilate these new converts by syncretizing the Easter celebration with their pagan spring festivals. It was from these pagan influences that practices such as the Easter Bunny, dyeing of eggs and other non-Biblical Easter traditions had crept in. Thus, the association of Easter with pagan festivals is clear.
 3. Those who steadfastly resisted the shift to the celebration of Easter, which had supplanted the observance of Passover throughout the Roman empire, were called Quartodecimans (meaning fourteenth), because they commemorated the death of Jesus on 14 Nisan.
 4. Around 197 A.D., Victor the Bishop of Rome insisted that all churches should adopt the Roman practice of celebrating Easter instead of the Passover, but the churches in the East which were the foundation of the Christian Church greatly opposed this move.
 - a. Polycrates, Bishop of the Church of Ephesus, sent a letter to Victor, in which he strongly emphasized that the Passover should be kept instead of Easter. Note that Polycrates is an early church father and was a disciple from the lineage of Apostle John himself.

Below is an extract from his letter:

"We," said he, "therefore, observe the genuine day; neither adding thereto nor taking therefrom.

For in Asia great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again in the day of the Lord's appearing, in which he will come with glory from heaven, and will raise up all the saints; Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who sleeps in Hierapolis, and his two aged virgin daughters. His other daughter, also, who having lived under the influence of the Holy Ghost, now likewise rests in Ephesus. Moreover, John, who rested upon the bosom of our Lord; who also was a priest, and bore the sacerdotal plate (πεταλον), both a martyr and teacher. And is buried in Ephesus; also Polycarp of Smyrna, both bishop and martyr.

Thraseus, also, bishop and martyr of Eumenia, who is buried at Smyrna. Why should I mention Sagaris, bishop and martyr, who rests at Laodicea? Moreover, the blessed Papirius; and Melito, the eunuch, whose walk and conversation was altogether under the influence of the Holy Spirit, who now rests at Sardis, a waiting the episcopate from heaven, when he shall rise from the dead.

All these observed the fourteenth day of the passover according to the gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith. Moreover, I, Polycrates, who am the least of all of you, according to the tradition of my relatives, some of whom I have followed.

For there were seven of my relatives bishops, and I am the eighth; and my relatives always observed the day when the people (i. e. the Jews) threw away the leaven.

I, therefore, brethren, am now sixty-five years in the Lord, who having conferred with the brethren throughout the world, and having studied the whole of the sacred Scriptures, am not at all alarmed at those things with which I am threatened, to intimidate me. For they who are greater than I, have said, 'We ought to obey God rather than men.'"

Eusebius Pamphilus [*Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*](#), pp. 208-209 ²

- b. Basically, Polycrates is emphasizing that the Passover is the genuine day to be kept by the Church, and we are not to add to nor subtract from what has been laid down by the Lord.
 - i. Polycrates named the apostles who observed Passover (John, Philip), as well as the early Church fathers who did so. This Biblical tradition had been passed down to seven bishops of the Church of Ephesus and he himself, the eighth, was holding fast to it.
 - ii. In his last statement, he emphasised that we are to obey God and his command rather than to yield to the traditions and pressures of men.

C. The Council of Nicaea

1. In the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, Emperor Constantine made a decree concerning the dating of Easter according to the solar calendar, that completely eliminated the observance of Passover in the Church.
 - a. The council set the date of Easter to be on the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox.
2. Constantine elevated this to an official decree of the Roman Empire.
 - a. He wrote to the churches, encouraging the total separation of Christianity from Judaism. He referred to Jewish people "*as beyond salvation, in league with darkness, and as the killers of the Lord.*" ³
 - b. One of the main reasons this shift happened was because Gentile believers wanted to dissociate their holy days from the Hebrew calendar. They did so out of their hatred of the Jewish people whom they viewed as the ones who killed the Lord. This view is totally unbiblical and the underlying spirit is antisemitic.
3. Thus, Emperor Constantine had instituted a new human tradition, not following the Moed of God, but according the solar calendar.

4. As a result of what he did, the observance of Passover was completely abolished in the Gentile Church.

D. Conclusion

1. The Passover is a command of the Lord and a Mo'ed, a divine appointed time, for all men to keep.
2. The Lord had meant for the Church to keep the Passover, but after the First Century, mixture seeped into the Church through the form of human traditions and paganism, and that caused the Church to veer off track. The Council of Nicaea then brought a complete end to the observance of Passover for the Gentile Church.
3. The Lord is bringing a restoration of the understanding and importance of keeping the Passover and Mo'edim of God, so that we can align with Him.
4. In fact, the Lord has exhorted His people to keep His Mo'edim and to pass down understanding to our sons through the generations as a statute or ordinance forever (Ex. 12:14,24; Lev. 23:41).
 - a. At the End of the Age, there will arise another powerful, world leader, the Antichrist, who will seek to change the times (seasons) and the law (Dan. 7:25), so that the End-Time generation will be caught unaware of the times of Jesus' return.
 - b. The Antichrist may legislate laws to ban the keeping of Mo'edim and even abolish the Hebrew calendar. Will we be faithful and hold fast to keeping the Passover until the end?

Sources:

1. Moshe Gold, <https://www.jewishawareness.org/passover-easter-and-the-early-church/>
2. <https://www.ecatholic2000.com/eusebius/untitled-145.shtml>
3. *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1982, Appendix H: Another Letter of Constantine, pages 51-54