

Dinner Party Host:
Celebrating Passover and Easter

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Athanasius of Alexandria is a scholar before anything else, and he has become the patron saint of theologians.¹ As such, his arguments for the inclusion of a specific line of text in the Nicene Creed rely not only on the Bible, but on diverse outside sources as well. His adherence to the Bible's dictation of Easter's date is confounded by others who have a misunderstanding of astronomy and forces who wish to excessively distinguish the Christian faith from the Jewish one. Athanasius promotes a post-equinox Passover date, celebrating Easter on the Sunday that follows; therefore, the Nicene Creed should state, "For our sake he became a paschal sacrifice; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures."

The Bible clearly states that Jesus' death and resurrection occurs around Passover. In Corinthians, Paul writes, "Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed."² Luke details the events leading to the Last Supper: "Now the feast of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called the Passover. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to put him to death; for they feared the people," following with, "Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the passover lamb had to be sacrificed."³ They share language, referring to Jesus as the paschal or Passover lamb and to unleavened bread that were part of the Passover meal. The Gospel according to Mark reaffirms that Luke's observation that Romans sought to capitalize on Passover in order to seize Jesus: "It was now two days before the Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by

¹ "Saint Athanasius," Catholic Online, accessed June 27, 2018.
https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=336.

² 1 Cor .5:7 RSV.

³ Luke 22:2-2, 7.

stealth, and kill him.”⁴ These reflect the symbolic and literal importance of this Jewish holiday in the story of Christ’s death and resurrection. John reiterates this message in the gospel stating, “Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”⁵

It is important to celebrate the Last Supper, Crucifixion, and Resurrection on the appropriate dates because the Passover dinner is when Jesus performs the first communion rites. He offers bread and wine to his disciples as his body and blood, a sacramental ceremony with the Eucharistic host that is the core of every mass. Priests quote Jesus in the transubstantiation as they say, “he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And likewise the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’”⁶ In what is presumed to be a Good Friday sermon, Athanasius says, “No fatted calves will be offered you, but the body of Jesus Christ will be offered you. No intoxicating wine shall we drink, but the blood of Jesus Christ shall we drink from the holy cup.”⁷ Athanasius respects the importance of this holy day and its connection to communion. To deny the significance of Passover is to deny the significance of Jesus’ words when he serves the men around him, “And when the hour came, he sat at their table And he said to them, ‘I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.’”⁸

⁴ Mark: 14:1 RSV.

⁵ John 13:1 RSV.

⁶ Luke 22:19-20 RSV.

⁷ J.B. Bernardin, "A COPTIC SERMON ATTRIBUTED TO ST ATHANASIUS," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 38, no. 150 (1937): 113, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23956499>.

⁸ Luke 22:14-16 RSV.

Passover may seem to be a Jewish holiday, but its origins are in the Old Testament, which Judaism and Christianity share. The Lord explains the lamb that is to be slaughtered, how it shall be cooked, what will be done with its blood.⁹ In performing these rights, the Jews protected themselves from a mass slaughter, literally being passed over for the nonbelievers, protected through the religious rites that demonstrated their faith. He tells them, “I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you, upon the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall fall upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt.”¹⁰ Integrating the Passover holiday into holy week does not interfere with Christians’ distinct and honored religion because it is already part of their religious canon.

Those who wish to deny Passover’s association with Easter do so not out of religious adherence, but out of an effort to create a distinct identity. The Gospel clearly states that “Christ was crucified on Friday, the 14th day of the Jewish month of Nisan, and was resurrected on the following Sunday,” and was originally celebrated on these days.¹¹ This became controversial in the Eastern and Western churches, which differed in celebrating the Passion versus the resurrection, but Pope Victor I placed the holiday firmly on the Sunday after the 14th day of Nisan in 190. Note that both of these holidays avoided celebrations on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, likely in an effort to avoid association with Judaism. In the third century, some Christians began celebrating Easter according to the vernal equinox, and this division among the Christian community, which “generated much ridicule among the non-Christians.”¹² Constantine himself wanted to separate the two holidays, saying “It appeared an unworthy thing that in

⁹ Exod. 12:1-11 RSV.

¹⁰ Ibid., 12-13.

¹¹ Eviatar Zerubavel, "Easter and Passover: On Calendars and Group Identity," *American Sociological Review* 47, no. 2 (1982): 285, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2094969>.

¹² Ibid., 286.

celebration of this most worthy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews.”¹³ Zerubavel, a sociologist, believes that “The temporal segregation of Easter from Passover was actually an attempt to emancipate the ecclesiastical calendar from the Jewish calendar, and, through that, to achieve the actual social segregation of Christians from Jews.”¹⁴ There is no reason to sacrifice theology for sociology.

The solution to the issue of the Passover and Easter date is to align the holidays in a way that accurately reflects their beliefs and the lunar calendar. Easter should align with Passover, and both should align with the lunar calendar; this condition respects both Old and New Testament texts and eliminates separations caused by animosity rather than theology. Athanasius, as a scholar beyond theology, understands this: “indeed holds to the fragment’s argument that the Jews observed a proper post-equinox Passover date before the fall of the Temple,” arguing against later Jews who moved it before the equinox.¹⁵ In fact, Alexandria was the first city to move Easter to the appropriate astrological placement.¹⁶ Passover’s appropriate placement is with the first full moon alongside or after the vernal equinox, with Easter on the following Sunday. Integrating Passover in the Nicene Creed solidifies the core belief of Christianity: the death and resurrection of its savior, Jesus Christ.

¹³ Ibid., 287.

¹⁴ Ibid., 288.

¹⁵ David Brakke, “Athanasius’ *Epistula and Epiphanius* and Liturgical Reform in Alexandria,” *Studia Patristica* vol 36 (2001): 486.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=XBLtIGhU9UYC&lpg=PA482&dq=%22Athanasius%20Epistula%22&pg=PA482#v=onepage&q=%22Athanasius%20Epistula%22&f=false>

¹⁶ Zerubavel, 285.

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