

WHY ARE PASSOVER AND EASTER CELEBRATED AT DIFFERENT TIMES?

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During some years, the celebration of Passover and Easter have coincided, other years, they are a month apart. Why is this? If Yeshua died at Passover, why does the Christian church mark his death and resurrection at a different time? How did they get separated?

How the Passover date is set

The Jewish calendar by which the Jewish feasts are given their dates is very different to the Western calendar. It's not a straightforward lunar calendar, but every time there is a new moon, that indicates a new Jewish month or "Rosh Hodesh", which means "head of the month". Passover is always bang in the middle of the Jewish month of Nissan – when the moon is full. God says this is to be the first month of the year (Exodus 12:2). The Western calendar, on the other hand, does not follow the moon's movements so closely, and so the cycle of the Jewish year is different.

More than that, the process of accurately fixing the dates according to the moon is not a simple one. Sometimes Jewish holidays are celebrated twice when there is discrepancy about the precise day, just to be on the safe side! In ancient times, the sky would be carefully observed, and then the message sent to the Jewish communities far and wide by beacons and messengers. But this was not a foolproof method, with some scoundrels lighting fires at the wrong time to deliberately confuse and aggravate the Jewish people. Date setting became a political power struggle within the Jewish diaspora.

How the split occurred

In the first centuries after Yeshua, the early disciples naturally remembered his death and resurrection every Passover, which was when it happened. And rightly so, since the Passover feast was designed from its outset to foretell the redemptive sacrifice of the Messiah. It is laden with symbolism all pointing to Yeshua, and how his death and blood would purchase our freedom, forcing death to "pass over" us as it did for the faithful Israelites who daubed the blood of the lamb on their doorframe. But as the years went by, the Messianic community became more and more Gentile, and Gentile leaders grew weary of liaising with, and depending upon the rabbinic authorities for the right date on which to commemorate this important event. Relations between the Rabbinic Jewish community and the Christians had deteriorated significantly by this point, and there was a lot of hostility in both directions. So the church leaders decided, at the Council of Nicea in 325, to take matters into their own hands:

“It was declared to be particularly unworthy for this, the holiest of all festivals, to follow the custom[the calculation] of the Jews, who had soiled their hands with the most fearful of crimes, and whose minds were blinded. In rejecting their custom, we may transmit to our descendants the legitimate mode of celebrating Easter... We ought not, therefore, to have anything in common with the Jews, for the Savior has shown us another way.... we desire, dearest brethren, to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews...” (From “Letter of the Emperor to all those not present at the Council: Eusebius, Vita Const., Lib. iii., 18-20)

If these words are not shocking to you, they should be! The Nicean Council decided that they would celebrate a separate festival on the first new moon after the Spring Equinox, (which is always March 21st in the Gregorian Calendar) to make a deliberate break with the people of Israel. Easter doesn't feature even once in the Bible. The King James Version erroneously translates the word Pascha (from the Aramaic for Passover) to Easter in Acts 12:4, but that is the closest we get. The English word “Easter” comes from “Eostre” – a goddess associated with Spring, and was co-opted for the name of the new festival to celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus, which was decidedly NOT Passover.

The implications, and the situation today

It's heartbreaking that such animosity had developed between the two communities, and it led to a ripping away of Yeshua's followers from the roots of the tree that they had been grafted into. They decided to separate themselves not just from the people of Israel, but also from God's festivals, which were deliberately created to help us appreciate more about God's plan of redemption. Passover was God's initiative, and he devised each detail of it on purpose. We are not judged for not celebrating the Passover, but we miss out on many treasures that God placed in his word for us to learn from. Sadly, the Nicean Council decided on behalf of all Christians from that time onwards that Passover had no relevance to them.

Not only were Christians cut off from the roots of their faith, their heritage, God's own feasts, laid out in their own Bible, but also the message of Yeshua became more and more obscured and alien to the Jewish people. The church became a foreign, gentile “no-go-zone” for Jews. The two were severed apart, and the evil root of anti-semitism crept into Christianity, and for much of church history, Jewish people were persecuted, tortured and murdered by Christians for simply being Jewish. This happened especially at Easter times, when angry mobs would rage against those they considered to be “Christ killers”. Most Christians have no idea about the scale to which this sad statement is true – it's not something that is taught in Sunday School, or even church history classes. There is a real gap of information between the people of Israel and the church, and we've been separated so long that we have a lot of catching up to do!

Jews and Gentiles draw together in Yeshua

However, we live in exciting days and the last century has seen some colossal steps forward in healing the terrible rift between Jew and Gentile. More Jewish people have come to believe in Yeshua as Messiah in the last 19 years than in the previous 19 centuries combined! And many Gentile believers are now taking more interest in the Jewish foundations of their faith. Many churches hold Passover seders, explaining more about the feast, and there has been considerably

more appreciation of the people of Israel since the Bible became widely translated and published in the last few centuries.

We are destined to become “One New Man” in Messiah, and this is a destiny that God will make absolutely sure we arrive at. His Son, Yeshua, will have only one bride, not two! It’s important to remember what Yeshua’s death and resurrection actually accomplished and meant. As Paul urges us in Colossians 2:14-17,

“When you were dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with Him when He pardoned us all our transgressions. He wiped out the handwritten record of debts with the decrees against us, which was hostile to us. He took it away by nailing it to the cross. After disarming the principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in the cross.

Therefore, do not let anyone pass judgment on you in matters of food or drink, or in respect to a festival or new moon or Shabbat. These are a foreshadowing of things to come, but the reality is Messiah.”