

All About Easter

During Easter Season, the theme of worship is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Throughout this discussion, please note that Easter and Passover are the same thing. They fall on different dates, for reasons you will shortly learn, and they have different names only because this article is in English.

According to scripture, Jesus rose from the dead on the first Sunday following Passover. See Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:1-3, Luke 23:56-24:3, and John 20:1. For this reason, ancient Christians celebrated Easter (which they called Passover) on the first Sunday after the Jewish Passover, which is 14 Nisan on the Jewish calendar. The only exceptions were in Syria and Mesopotamia, where ancient Christians celebrated Easter on 14 Nisan, no matter which day of the week it happened to be.

No one in ancient times denied that the Resurrection took place on a Sunday.

According to scripture, the month of Nisan—and therefore the date of Passover—is linked to the spring harvest in Palestine. (See Exodus 12:1-3, Leviticus 23:9-14, and Numbers 28:16.) However, the Romans banished all Jews from Palestine after the rebellion of Simon Bar Kochba in AD 135, making it difficult for the rabbis to determine the proper date for Passover. So sometime around AD 200, the rabbis reformed the Jewish calendar. Relative to the Julian calendar, which was the Roman civil calendar, the new Jewish calendar allowed Passover to precede the spring equinox and it allowed two Passovers in the same twelve-month period. Obviously, the spring harvest cannot precede the spring equinox! Shortly after AD 300, the rabbis revised the Jewish calendar again, but it was still possible to have two Passovers in one twelve-month period, as defined by the Julian calendar.

By this time, the vast majority of Christians had long since given up using the Jewish calendar to determine the date of Easter. Instead, they figured it independently. They reasoned that at the time of the Last Supper, Nisan began with the new moon after the spring equinox. The full moon occurs on the fourteenth day, which would have been the Jewish Passover. According to Scripture, Jesus rose from the grave on the Sunday that immediately followed. So they celebrated the Resurrection on the first Sunday after the first full moon that followed the spring equinox. However, since there was no standard way to calculate the spring equinox, it was still possible for different regions to celebrate Easter on different Sundays. This was a problem, because Christians who lived on the edges of these regions got into unseemly disputes, and intellectual pagans derided Christians for not being able to figure out their own holy days. In those days, of course, Christianity was a minority religion for which the public did not have much respect and disputes about Easter weren't helping evangelism.

Meanwhile, the churches in Syria and Mesopotamia were still celebrating Easter on 14 Nisan as

determined by the current Jewish calendar, regardless of the day of the week. They believed they had apostolic direction to celebrate Easter on the same day that the Jews celebrate Passover, even if the Jews calculated the date incorrectly.

In AD 325, the Council of Nicea was convened to deal with [Arianism](#) and to standardize the date of Easter. The Council of Nicea, noting that Syria and Mesopotamia represented a small minority, required them to conform to the practice of the majority. The bishops from Syria and Mesopotamia readily agreed to this ruling and their churches complied with it. The Council of Nicea also ruled that all churches must celebrate Easter on the same day. This clearly implies that they instituted a standard method for calculating the date of the full moon after the spring equinox, but the documentary evidence for it has not survived. Some ancient writers, notably Ambrose, felt that the Council of Nicea prescribed the mathematical formula that we presently use to fix the date of Easter, but we can no longer prove it.

The Western Church applies the Nicene formula to the calendar as reformed by Pope Gregory in 1582. (This calendar reform resulted in the [Gregorian calendar](#) that we use today for secular purposes.) The Eastern Church applies the Nicene formula to the old [Julian Calendar](#), which was instituted by Julius Caesar and served as the civil calendar of the Roman Empire before the birth of Christ. The Eastern Church also applies the formula in such a way that Easter always falls after the Jewish Passover.

There are at least two serious proposals to standardize the date of Easter. One is to institute a new method of calculating the lunar cycle, based on the moon as it appears over Jerusalem, so that eastern and western Easter would always fall on the same date. The other proposal is to fix Easter as the second Sunday in April.

The important holy days during Easter are as follows:

- Easter Day
See [Easter as it Wasn't](#) and [What Happened to the Body?](#)
- [Ascension Day](#), the fortieth day of Easter (Acts 1:11)
- Pentecost, the fiftieth day of Easter. For the eastern Church, Pentecost Sunday and Trinity Sunday are the same day.

Roughly speaking, the western Church consists of Protestants, Catholics, and Anglicans. The eastern Church consists of the Eastern Orthodox churches, the Oriental Orthodox churches, and the eastern-rite churches affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church.