

משיח

MASHIACH

Apostolic
Writings
Messiah
Hebrew Bible
Second Temple
Judaism



David Rudolph, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of Bible and Theology at Messianic Jewish Theological Institute, and Chair of the Theology Committee of the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations.

The Scriptures seem to indicate that Messianic Jews have a covenantal responsibility to observe Passover but that Gentile Christians do not (Exod 12:43–49; Matt 26:17–19; Acts 15; 21:17–26; 1 Cor 7:17–20). This said, the Gentile wing of the *ekklesia* early on saw value in celebrating a Gentile form of Passover that centuries later became known as Easter.¹

I would like to make several comments about this early Christian tradition, which for lack of a better term I will call “Gentile Passover.”

Second-century Gentile churches followed two calendar traditions concerning Gentile Passover. It appears that almost all of the churches in Asia (where Paul devoted much of his ministry [1 Cor 16:8, 19; Acts 19:10, 26]), as well as churches in Asia Minor, Cilicia, Syria, and Mesopotamia, observed Gentile Passover in accordance with the Jewish festival calendar, on the fourteenth day of the first month, the month of Nissan (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).² Far from being a minor schismatic group, Christians who celebrated Gentile Passover on Nissan 14 stretched across a vast geographic region. Many of these Gentile Christians celebrated with Jews, and the similarity of their observance to Jewish Passover probably varied from community to community.

By contrast, the churches in the West—in Italy, Greece (including Corinth), Spain, Britain, Gaul (which included the present-day area of France, Belgium, the south Netherlands, south-west Germany)—observed Gentile Passover on the Sunday following Nissan 14 (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.23.1; *Vit. Const.* 3.18). These churches retained the name *Pascha* (Passover), but they moved away from celebrating Passover on the same day as Jews, with Jews, and in the manner of Jews.

When did the split between East and West over the dating of Gentile Passover occur? According to Epiphanius (*Pan.* 70.9.2),

a fourth-century bishop who sought to answer this question, most of the churches in the East and West until *c.* 135 followed a common tradition of observing Gentile Passover when the Jerusalem congregation celebrated a more Jewish form of Passover, on Nissan 14. Notably, the Jewish leaders of the Jerusalem congregation contributed to unity in the *ekklesia* by determining the proper date of Passover:

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 (*episkopon*) from the circumcision [Jews], and it was necessary at that time, when the bishops from the circumcision were being ordained in 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).³

Epiphanius comments that the unifying influence of Messianic Jewish leaders determining the date of Passover for the whole *ekklesia* ceased during the reign of the emperor Hadrian when all Jews, including Messianic Jews, were expelled from Jerusalem (*c.* 135).⁴

1 The term “Easter,” with reference to the Gentile Christian festival, is first attested in the writings of Bede (eighth century C.E.). Many scholars today anachronistically use the term “Easter” instead of “Passover” when rendering the Greek word *pascha* (or its equivalent) in English translations of the New Testament and patristic texts (even Acts 12:4 in the King James Version refers to “Easter”).
2 See Raniero Cantalamessa, *Easter in the Early Church: An Anthology of Jewish and Early Christian Texts* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 128b.
3 Philip R. Amidon, trans., *The Panarion of St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 274; critical edition: GCS (Holl/Dummer) 3.243. Epiphanius quotes the Regulation of the Apostles, which he considers to be a reliable source, “You shall not calculate, but celebrate the feast whenever your brethren from the Circumcision [Jews] do. Keep it together with them . . . Even if they err, do not be concerned” (Epiphanius, *Pan.* 70.10.2, 6; trans. Cantalamessa, 73–74).
4 See Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.5–6.