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.

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; Athenasius, Syn. 2; Epiphanius, Pan. 70.9.8-9; 10.3–5; Theodoret, Haer. Fab. Comp. 3.4). 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 . . .

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).

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”).


4 See Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 4.5–6.