

### III

#### THE CONTROVERSY ABOUT THE PASCHA

THE LATTER half of the second century was witness to a controversy in the Church of increasing intensity and bitterness over the proper date for the observance of the Christian Pascha. The chief parties in this debate were the churches of Asia Minor and of Rome. The former group observed the Pascha on the 14th of the Jewish month Nisan, irrespective of what day of the week it fell—hence their name Quartodecimans. The latter, followed by the churches in other provinces of the Roman world, always observed the Pascha on the Sunday following the 14th of Nisan. The meagreness of our sources for this “Quartodeciman” controversy is matched only by the wealth of interpretations of it by modern scholars. The most recent survey of the evidence has produced the theory that the Fourth Evangelist altered the primitive chronology of the Passion of Jesus, and that Quartodeciman practice, based upon this gospel, did not antedate its publication.<sup>1</sup> We would maintain, on the contrary, that Quartodecimanism represents the original practice of the Church, and that the change to a celebration of the Pascha on Sundays was first suggested by the Gospel of Mark. This change became the norm in all churches except those of Asia Minor when the Gospel of Matthew was widely accepted as authoritative.

We have recounted in a previous chapter how the early Jewish Christians continued to observe the round of Sabbaths and festivals prescribed in the Jewish Law, to which they added the new Christian keeping of Sunday as the day for the eucharistic celebration.<sup>2</sup> St. Paul himself was no exception to this custom, even though many Jewish Christians thought him little less than an apostate. But, as we have noted, even though St. Paul observed the Jewish festivals, he was adamant in his insistence that Gentile converts were free from any such

<sup>1</sup> A. A. McArthur, *The Evolution of the Christian Year*, 1953, pp. 77–107. See also references in note 2, p. 45 below.

<sup>2</sup> See above, p. 22.

obligation “with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” (cf. Col. 2: 16; Gal. 4: 10). Thus the Gentile Christians had no “holy day” other than Sunday.

We have also seen that the Gospel of Mark provides the first notices of an annual Pascha observed at Rome by the Gentile Christians for whom his gospel was written. At the same time the evidence of Mark is ambiguous, because of the way in which his gospel ends, respecting the day of this Paschal celebration, whether it conformed to the Jewish Passover or was always observed on Sunday. The latter seems the more likely. But his narrative could in any case be interpreted in the Jewish way.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke were published later than Mark—how much later we cannot say precisely, but they were certainly both in circulation by the end of the first century. These gospels were also written for Gentile Christians, and both of them emanate (or at least much of their traditions) from the Gentile churches of Palestine-Phoenicia-Syria.<sup>1</sup> They took over the Markan chronology of the Passion, but corrected the confused dating of Mark 14: 12, and added fuller accounts of the resurrection appearances on the Sunday after the crucifixion. Although both Matthew and Luke contain a generous amount of purely Jewish-Christian tradition, there is no mistaking their basic non-Jewish perspective. These gospels, and the Book of Acts with them, are the charter documents of the Church’s universal mission to all peoples among the Gentiles; and both Evangelists reflect in great measure the anti-Jewish temper that seems to have swept through the Church with increasing momentum towards the close of the first and the opening of the second centuries. Their publication appears to have taken place on the eve of those more extreme, heretical movements that began with Docetism and were pursued with vigor in the second century by Marcion and the Gnostics, when the whole Old Testament tradition was attacked as alien to the gospel.

The strongest ties of second generation Gentile Christianity with the old Jewish-Christian traditions of an orthodox character were maintained not in Palestine, but in Asia Minor. One needs only to recall the intimacies there of Papias and Polycarp with disciples of the Lord and with those who knew such disciples. It was in Asia Minor that Philip, one of the Seven, and his prophetess daughters settled; and there gathered the circle of associates of the ever-elusive and mysterious “John”. The conflict of Gentile Christians with Judaizing tendencies of

<sup>1</sup> This is generally admitted with regard to Matthew, less commonly so in regard to Luke. See my brief comments in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, VII, 217.

one sort or another seems to have persisted longer in Asia Minor. The Fourth Gospel, for all its "Jewishness" of style, knowledge, and content, contains the sharpest polemic of all the gospels against "the Jews". Nonetheless it preserved the original, Palestinian tradition concerning the chronology of the Passion. The strength of Judaizing tendencies in the area is also witnessed by the warnings of the letters of the Apocalypse and of Ignatius. By contrast, Roman documents of the same period, such as 1 Clement and the *Shepherd* of Hermas, appear relatively free of this obsession with Jewish influence.

We cannot determine precisely the time when the majority of the Gentile churches, outside of Asia Minor, adopted the custom of celebrating the Pascha on a Sunday. We suspect, however, that the matter became a cause of controversy mainly through the adoption of Matthew, and with it of the other Synoptic gospels, as authoritative, canonical books. In Palestine and Syria, Matthew quickly became the favored gospel for ecclesiastical discipline and teaching. This is reflected in the Epistle of James, the *Didache*, and the letters of Ignatius.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of the Roman Church, we possess at least a few hints of the development there. Though Eusebius says that the Roman Church and its allies in the controversy with the Quartodecimans followed an "apostolic tradition",<sup>2</sup> the documents he quotes make no such claim. The letter of Irenaeus to Pope Victor specifically says that Pope Anicetus, in his exchange of opinions on the subject with Polycarp, appealed to "the custom of the presbyters before him". Irenaeus himself, in reminding Victor of these presbyters, traces the names only to the time of Pope Sixtus.<sup>3</sup> The pontificate of Sixtus is associated, in a tradition preserved in a fifth-century Syriac document which many scholars consider genuine, with a council at Rome that accepted Matthew as canonical.<sup>4</sup> Professor Bacon hinted that there was possibly a connection between this acceptance at Rome of Matthew's gospel and the establishment of the Sunday Pascha in the Roman Church. The *Liber Pontificalis*, a not very trustworthy source for papal history at so early a period, ascribes the decree of Roman observance of the Pascha on a Sunday to Pope Pius I.<sup>5</sup>

In any event, there is no trace in the fragmentary documents that

<sup>1</sup> See my article, "The Epistle of James and the Gospel of Matthew", *JBL* LXXV, 1956, pp. 40-51.

<sup>2</sup> *H.E.* v, 23, 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* v, 24, 14.

<sup>4</sup> See the full discussion in B. W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew*, 1930, pp. 50-9.

<sup>5</sup> Edited by L. Duchesne, I, 132.

have survived that the Sunday Pascha at Rome was based upon an appeal to Peter or to "apostolic tradition". It is possible, even probable, that Gentile Christians in Rome observed the Sunday Pascha as early as the time of writing of Mark's gospel, or even before. But there is no evidence that this custom became *official* before the first quarter of the second century, at a time when Matthew's gospel was adopted as authoritative.

The acceptance of Matthew in Asia Minor produced controversy among the Quartodecimans themselves. So late as Papias's time—if we may take him as typical of his generation in Asia Minor—oral tradition was preferred to the authority of written gospels. Papias apparently accepted Matthew, with the allowance of some freedom in its interpretation.<sup>1</sup> He had less esteem for Mark. There is nothing in his brief *testimonia* preserved by Eusebius to indicate that he would have permitted either of these gospels to override the living voice of tradition as he had received it in his church. Again, towards the middle of the century, Polycarp and Pope Anicetus in their several positions concerning the celebration of the Pascha both appealed to traditions they had received and not to any written gospel authority. The first intimations that the gospels themselves were a factor in the dispute come from the 160's, through a citation of Eusebius from Melito of Sardis' work on the Pascha.<sup>2</sup> To this dispute belong, no doubt, the obscure fragments preserved in the *Chronicon Paschale* from writings of Claudius Apollinaris, Clement of Alexandria, and Hippolytus. Of these, the fragments of Apollinaris, a successor of Papias in the see of Hierapolis, are the most significant.

The majority of modern scholars have assumed that the dispute over the Pascha in Asia Minor in the 160's was the same as that between Polycarp and Pope Anicetus a decade earlier and between Polycrates of Ephesus and Pope Victor in the 190's, *i.e.*, between Quartodecimans and the advocates of a Sunday Pascha. This interpretation was strongly opposed by Dr. F. E. Brightman,<sup>3</sup> who considered the controversy to be one amongst the Quartodecimans themselves. The problem is further complicated by the different opinions respecting the allegiance of Claudius Apollinaris. Most critics have taken Apollinaris to have been a Quartodeciman. Professor C. C. Richardson, however, insisted that he was not a Quartodeciman—principally on the grounds that Poly-

<sup>1</sup> Eusebius *H.E.* iii, 39, 16. Possibly Papias's remark that "each one interpreted them as he was able" included variant positions on the Paschal chronology.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, iv, 26, 3.

<sup>3</sup> "The Quartodeciman Question", *JTS* XXV, 1924, p. 254.

crates of Ephesus omitted his name from the list of his authorities for Quartodeciman custom.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever may be the truth in these disputed points, the fragments of Apollinaris are not obscure, so far as regards his own views. He did not believe that the Last Supper was a *typikon Pascha*; that is to say, he accepted the Johannine chronology. He was particularly grieved at the ignorance of certain persons who maintained that the Last Supper was a Passover, and who supported their position on the basis of Matthew. In his own exposition of the gospel, Apollinaris used both Matthew and John to set forth the true Pascha of the Lord, "the great sacrifice", as having taken place on the 14th of Nisan and the burial of Christ as having been on the same day. For Apollinaris, the Pascha was not the Supper, but the victory of Christ on the Cross for our redemption.

The most natural reading of these fragments suggests to us that Apollinaris was a Quartodeciman, and that to his basic Johannine chronology he had succeeded in harmonizing Matthew. His interpretation is not basically different from that of Melito of Sardis, if the *Homily on the Passion* recently discovered and edited by Professor Campbell Bonner really is a work of Melito.<sup>2</sup> The fragment from Hippolytus is more obscure, since we do not know the exact personages to whom it refers. It reads:

I see then that it is a work of strife. For he says thus: "Christ made the Passover then on the day and suffered; therefore it is necessary for me to do also just as the Lord did. For this is the Pascha fore-heralded and completed on the appointed day."

The person quoted by Hippolytus thus took the same position as the opponents of Apollinaris; namely, the Last Supper was a Passover

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Richardson's view that the Quartodecimans defended their practice on the basis of the Synoptic chronology does not seem to me convincing. It depends too much on the debatable question of the allegiance of Apollinaris, whom he takes to have been an opponent of Quartodecimanism. See his articles, "The Quartodecimans and the Synoptic Chronology", *HTR* XXXIII, 1940, pp. 177-90; "Early Patristic Evidence for the Synoptic Chronology of the Passion", *ATR* XXII, 1940, pp. 299-308. Richardson's view of Apollinaris is shared by J. Quasten, *Patrology*, I, 1950, p. 229. Of course, both sides in the controversy appealed to the gospels, and found their own respective ways of harmonizing them. But note that Polycrates of Ephesus (in Eusebius *H.E.* iv, 24, 3) distinctly appealed to the Fourth Gospel in support of Quartodecimanism.

<sup>2</sup> *Studies and Documents* XII, 1940. The authenticity of this homily has been recently questioned by P. Nautin, *Le dossier d'Hippolyte et de Méliton*, 1953, pp. 46-56.

meal, after which the Lord was crucified. But without the context we cannot tell what relation the person quoted had to the whole dispute. The fragment of Clement of Alexandria is of no help. It reveals only the skill of Clement as a harmonizer of the gospels.

The significance of these fragments lies in their revelation that, once the chronology of the Synoptics was seriously brought to bear upon the Quartodeciman practice, it was shattering to the Asian custom. The Quartodecimans put all their weight into the position that the death of Christ fulfilled the type of the slaughter of the Paschal lamb on the 14th of Nisan, that there was an exact correspondence between the Law and the gospel. The strength of their position so far as their opponents were concerned lay in the fact that it was orthodox. The early writers of the Church, with but rare exceptions, referred the Paschal lamb to Christ as a lamb slain or sacrificed, not a lamb that was eaten. The only passages in the extant writings of the second century that refer the Passover to the Supper and not to the Cross are the two "opponents" of Apollinaris and Hippolytus, respectively, and a single reference in Irenaeus.<sup>1</sup> If the Last Supper was a Passover, as the Synoptics maintained, then the whole rich theology of the Cross as the true Passover for the redemption of mankind was threatened. The Quartodecimans were not interested in a Paschal interpretation of the Eucharist, but of the Cross. In this they were at one with their Sunday-Pascha opponents. As Irenaeus noted, the controversy revolved around the nature of the fast and the dating of the Pascha, not about the character of the Paschal celebration nor its essential meaning. There is no support for the position of certain scholars that the Quartodeciman celebration of the Pascha, other than the date, was ordered in a different way from that of other churches. It consisted of a fast, night-vigil—possibly with baptismal initiation—and concluding Eucharist on the morning of the 14th of Nisan.<sup>2</sup>

The obvious way out of their dilemma was for the Quartodecimans to give up their ancient, apostolic custom and adopt the newer practice of observing the Pascha on a Sunday. For to observe the Pascha on

<sup>1</sup> Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* ii, 22, 3; but in iv, 10, 1, Irenaeus distinctly refers the Pascha to the Cross. For this reason I cannot follow Professor Richardson's attempt (see note 1, p. 45 above) to make the Fathers agree with the Synoptic chronology. Quite the opposite seems to me the case; e.g., see all the references in Justin Martyr to the Pascha: *Dial.* xl, 1-2; xlvi, 2; lxxii, 1; cxi, 35—all of which refer to the lamb *slain*.

<sup>2</sup> So Brightman, *op. cit.*; see also O. Casel, "Art und Sinn der ältesten christlichen Osterfeier", *Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft* XIV, 1934, pp. 1 ff.; J. Jeremias in *ThWb* V, 900-3.

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Sunday had two very distinct advantages: (1) It did not contradict any of the gospels, since all of them maintained that Christ had died on Friday and had risen on Sunday; and (2) there was no longer any possibility of inverting the true order of the Law and the gospel as they had received them—that is, the sacrifice must precede the feast. The true character of the Last Supper on Thursday evening would no longer be momentous in its consequences, whether it were a Passover or not. So long as the Quartodecimans clung to their celebration of the 14th of Nisan as the festival of Redemption, they were in danger of having it undercut by those who insisted that the Lord had already accomplished the Passover the preceding evening.

Our last glimpse of the controversy is the picture of Polycrates of Ephesus and his Asian colleagues stubbornly holding to their tradition. But one senses in his weary reply to Pope Victor the last stand of a lost cause. The future lay with Gentiles, for whom, as Hippolytus said, the Pascha “is understood by faith, not kept strictly in the letter”.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Philosophumena* viii, 18. See above, p. 14.