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## **[The Pre-Constantinian Origins of the Church Year]**

Introduction to Liturgical Theology (St. Vladimir's  
Seminary Press, 2d ed. 1975), pp. 123-125.  
(Title and paragraph divisions have been added.)

Finally we know that the Church Year, in its general structure, undoubtedly originated in the pre-Constantine Ordo, in the annual cycle of Easter and Pentecost. We have spoken of the relationship of these festivals to the Hebrew year on the one hand, and to the eschatological theology of time on the other. Recent studies seem to indicate a remote Judeo-Christian foundation for the Feast of Epiphany also, and therefore for the liturgical cycle of the Nativity which is connected with it and which later developed out of it. This thesis cannot yet be considered as proved, and so we shall limit ourselves here to a general outline of its main features.[33]

It begins with the question why, having kept the Passover and Pentecost in her liturgical tradition, the early Judeo-Christian Church did not keep the third great messianic and eschatological feast of late Judaism—the Feast of Tabernacles. What led scholars to this question was the undoubted presence of the symbolism and ceremonies of the Feast of Tabernacles in the New Testament, especially in the Johannine literature, where the Feast of Tabernacles is connected with the messianic vocation of the Saviour and also with the theme of the water of life, i.e. with Baptism (cf. John 7: 10, 37-8). In his analysis of these texts and the symbolism of the Apocalypse, P. Carrington writes: 'It is clear from the Gospel of John and from the Revelation that the Feast of Tabernacles was a living tradition in Johannine circles.'[34] In the Synoptics the symbolism of the Feast of Tabernacles is evident in the description of our Lord's entrance into Jerusalem. 'Everything here,' writes Fr. Danielou, 'reminds us of the Feast of Tabernacles—the branches from palm trees, the singing of Hosanna (Psalm 118, which was prescribed for use at this festival and mentioned also in the Apocalypse), the procession itself. . . .' [35] Thus the theme and symbolism of the Feast of Tabernacles in the New Testament literature is connected with the theme of Baptism on the one hand and with the messianic entrance of the Saviour into Jerusalem on the other.

Carrington has proposed that the Gospel of Mark is constructed as a series of liturgical readings for the year beginning with the Baptism in Jordan and ending with the entrance into Jerusalem (the chapters on the Passion forming a separate cycle, in his opinion).[36] But Mark's calendar— as A. Jaubert has recently shown[37]— is an ancient sacerdotal calendar according to which (in contrast to the official Jewish calendar) the year was counted from the month Tishri, i.e. September. In this calendar the Feast of Tabernacles coincided, therefore, with the end and the beginning of the year. Thus it may be supposed, and Danielou defends this thesis, that the earliest Judeo-Christian tradition did include a Christian 'transposition' of the third great messianic festival. On the one hand the final feast day of the Saviour's earthly ministry— His entrance into Jerusalem (the end of the year)— and on the other hand the theme of Epiphany or Baptism (the beginning of the year) were, in this theory, the main themes of this transposition. What happened then?

In Danielou's opinion there was a branching out or separation of the traditions, related to the difference in the calendar. The first stage was the adoption by the Judeo-Christian communities outside Palestine, especially in Asia Minor, of the official Jewish calendar as opposed to the ancient one still retained by the Essenes. This change is reflected in the Johannine literature, as A. Jaubert has demonstrated brilliantly in her work on the Lord's Supper.[38] In the official calendar the year began with, the month Nisan (April), in the period of the Passover. Thus also the Christian year was reconstructed, extending from the theme of Baptism-Manifestation (*epiphaneia*) to that of the messianic Entrance into Jerusalem.

Our contemporary Ordo preserves traces of the calculation of the Church year from Passover to Passover: Quasimodo Sunday is called the 'New Week' and marks the beginning of the counting of weeks. Moreover— and this tends to support Danielou's hypothesis— immediately after Easter we begin the reading of the Gospel of John, and in fact with the chapter on the Baptism. Thus also here— as in the conjectured original structure of Mark— the Gospel corresponds to the Church Year, which opens with the theme of the Baptism and ends with the theme of the Entrance into Jerusalem. [It should be noted also that this is the week which commences the cycle of readings: The Gospel of John is read, beginning with John 1; and also Acts is read, and then Romans and so forth, with the Catholic Epistles coming at the end of the cycle, just as in our printed bibles.] In this— shift from one reckoning of time (that of the Judeo-Christians in Palestine) to another, the Feast of Tabernacles was as it were dissolved in the Feast of Easter— which became also the festival of the transition from the old into the new year.

'We can then begin to understand,' writes Danielou, 'the significance attached in Asia to the date of Easter, as evidenced in the controversies on this subject. It was the key to the liturgical year, the beginning and the end, the transition from the old into the new year as a figure of the transition from the old into the new life. It combined all the Hebrew festivals into one Christian festival.'[39] But if one part of the symbolism of the Feast of Tabernacles— embodied in the narrative of the Entrance into Jerusalem— retained its relationship to Easter, then the other— connected with the

Lord's Baptism and His *epiphaneia*— was developed as a special feast. For the Gentile Church neither of these Jewish calendars could have any real significance; since this Church was already living by the official calendar of the Empire, beginning in January.[40]

But even here the tradition of the general order of the Christian Year remained in force, as the cycle of our Lord's messianic ministry with its beginning in the Epiphany and its ending in the messianic entry into Jerusalem. The January Feast of the Epiphany, as a festival of beginning and renewal, grew out of this tradition, as well as being influenced by other and external factors. Perhaps it is not accidental that in the course of the Gospel readings at the end of the year, in December (both in the East and in the West [and when something appears in both East and West it was either borrowed, or is very primitive]), Christ's eschatological sermon is read, a sermon that followed His entry into Jerusalem and was connected with it by a common messianic theme.

No matter what the ultimate fate of these hypotheses may be, what has been said points to the major place of the idea of the Church (or Liturgical) Year in the early, pre-Constantine Ordo, and to the undoubted origin of this idea in that eschatological and ecclesiological theology of time which was the basis of the early Christian *lex orandi* and the first stratum in the Church's liturgical tradition.

33 Cf. J. Danielou, 'Les Quatre-Temps de Septembre et la fete des Tabernacles' in *Maison-Dieu*, 46, 1956, pp. 114-36; criticism in A. Jaubert, *op. cit.*, P. X14

34 P. Carrington, *The Primitive Christian Calendar*, Cambridge, 1940, P, 44; E. C. Selwyn, 'The Feast of Tabernacles, Epiphany and Baptism' in *Journal of Theology*, 1911, Pp. 225-36.

35 Danielou, 'Les Quatre-Temps,' P. 117.

36 Carrington, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-31; cf. criticism of this theory by W. D. Davies, 'Reflections on Archbp. Carrington's *The Primitive Christian Calendar* in *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, Cambridge, 1956, pp. 124-53.

37 Jaubert, *La Date de la Cene*, Paris, Garibalda, 1957, pp, 92ff,

38 *ibid.*, PP. 105ff.

39 Danielou, 'Les Quatre-Temps,' p. 124.

40 *ibid.*, p. 127.