

Further Light on the Quartodeciman Pascha and the Date of the Annunciation

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Most scholarly inquiry, although pursued in solitude, is also a communal enterprise. To this end, scholarly societies foster the exchange of information among workers in a given field through conferences and periodical publications. However, if any such society is devoted to the study of ancient calendar systems, it has escaped my notice. Therefore, it seemed to be a pure accident that put me in touch with Dr Leofranc Holford-Strevens, an Oxford classicist who has devoted a great deal of study to this rather arcane subject. In an act of gracious generosity he has brought to my attention material that I believe to be highly relevant to the early history of the liturgical year and specifically to Quartodecimanism. Having had occasion in the past to write about this topic, I am reminded again that any work of scholarship, even (or especially) if published, must continue to be regarded as a "work in progress," liable to revision, amplification, and correction as new information comes to light.

I. Quartodeciman Calendars

The Christian observance of Pascha represents both the continuation of the Jewish festival of Passover and a modification of that festival to mark the day of the Lord's crucifixion, a celebration of the paschal mystery that includes Christ's resurrection and glorification. Although the Christian observance came to be adjusted to the structure of the week during the second century, a fast on Sabbath (or Friday and Sabbath) and a vigil through the night from Sabbath to Sunday, I have argued elsewhere that this was a modification of the original practice, which was to keep the fast on the fourteenth day of the first spring month, Nisan in the Jewish lunar calendar,

and the vigil through the night from the fourteenth to the fifteenth, without regard to the days of the week.¹ Even after that adjustment to

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the structure of the week, many early communities, most notably in the province of Asia, continued to observe only the days of the month, a deviation from the more widespread termination of the fast only on Sunday that earned them the title, "Quartodecimans," those who observe the fourteenth.

The Jewish calendar consisted of twelve lunar months (lunations) of 29.5 days each for a total of 354 days. Since this year was eleven and a fraction days short of the solar cycle, the great spring festival of Passover eventually found itself falling in late winter. When this became painfully obvious, the sages in Palestine would order the repetition of Adar, the month preceding Nisan, to bring the festival back into spring. This correction was made irregularly on empirical grounds and announced in advance to all the synagogues in the diaspora.

While there is every reason to believe that Christians dispersed from Jerusalem would continue to follow the Jewish calendar, this would become increasingly difficult after the separation of Christians from the synagogue at the end of the first century. Then, no longer certain of which month was the "first month" commanded in scripture, some dispersed Christian communities seem to have adopted their local calendars to resolve the ambi-

¹ Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*; Second, emended edition (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo Books, The Liturgical Press 1991) 5-27.

guity of the Jewish calendar, observing their paschal fast, commemorating the Lord's crucifixion, on the fourteenth day of the first spring month in the local calendar, although this would disrupt the coincidence with the full moon in a purely solar calendar.

Sozomen pointed to such a disjunction between the paschal date and the lunar cycle in the paschal computations of the Montanists, who set their Pascha in relation to April 6. That Roman calendar date seems to have no special significance, but in the calendar of Asia, in which each month began on the ninth day before its Roman equivalent, this day was the fourteenth day of the first spring month, Artemisios. The Asian calendar, a variant of the Julian, was adopted in 9 B.C. and took the birthday of Augustus, September 23 (the ninth day before the kalends of October) as the beginning of the year and of its first month, Kaisar (sometimes Kaisarios). The designations of dates in that calendar were translated to Roman dates in the fourth century of our era after the founding of Constantinople in A.D. 330. As 14 Artemisios the date represented the expression in a solar calendar of the lunar 14 Nisan, the Preparation of the Passover on which, according to the Fourth Gospel, Jesus was crucified

II. The Date of the Annunciation

A close reading of the *Peri Pascha* of Melito of Sardis, a homily preached at a Quartodeciman paschal vigil around 165; reveals that, beyond its primary concern

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with the death of the Lord, the festival, the sole annual festival of Christ, celebrated the entire mystery of redemption, including the resurrection and glorification, but also the incarnation in the womb of the virgin.

He came on earth from heaven for suffering man, becoming incarnate in a virgin's womb from which he came forth as man, he took on himself the sufferings of suffering man through a body capable of suffering, and put an end to the sufferings of the flesh, and through his spirit incapable of death he became the death of death which is destructive of man This is he who in the virgin was made incarnate, on the cross was suspended, in the earth was buried, from the dead was resurrected, to the heights of heaven was lifted up.²

Although Melito does not assert that all these occurred on the same date, all were themes of a unitive Pascha. Such an association of the conception of the Lord with

² A. Hamman, *The Paschal Mystery* (Alba Patristic Library 3; Staten Island, NY: Alba House 1969) 33.

the date of his death would provide a basis for the later claims that the conception and death fell on the same date, and from that dating of the conception, the computation of the nativity date nine months later.

Clement of Alexandria seems to be aware of such a dating of the nativity to January 6 (11 Tybi in the Egyptian calendar), nine months after the Asian date for observing the Preparation of the Passover. Roland Bainton demonstrated that this is the correct reading of *Stromateis* 1.21.145,³ although he was unaware of the Asian calendar and supposed the April 6 date to be that of the conception, computed as nine months before January 6 (which he took to be taken over from a pagan festival). On the basis of the coincidence of the conception and death, Bainton argued that April 6 could be the paschal date as well. This is profoundly unsatisfying, but his recognition that *Stromateis* 1.21.145 points to a nativity date of January 6 suggests an early computation from the Asian paschal date and its rapid dissemination.

Later centuries would show further evidence of this association of the conception with the paschal date, April 6, but much more common in the Latin sources of the fourth and following centuries is the identification of March 25 as date of both the conception and the death of the Lord. As the date of the crucifixion, March 25 is found as early as the third century. These references, however, are concerned to establish the historically correct Julian date for the passion, based on the chronology of the Fourth Gospel, i.e., 14 Nisan. To find the Julian equivalent to that date required establishing the year of the crucifixion, and appeal to *Adversus Iudaeos*

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(8.18), commonly but questionably attributed to Tertullian, indicated that this was the year in which the two Gemini were consuls, A.D. 29. In that year the fourteenth day of the appropriate "moon" fell, or so it was reckoned, on Friday, March 25. The third-century sources that so identify the date of the passion make no reference to the conception in the womb of the virgin on that same date, nor do they suggest the continuing celebration of the Christian Pascha on that date, being committed to the Dominical Pascha, the termination of the one or two-day fast only on Sunday.

Nonetheless, in the fourth and following centuries we do encounter the assertion that the conception occurred on the same date as the crucifixion. One of the earlier of these, perhaps from the first half of the fourth century, is

³ Roland Bainton, "The Origins of Epiphany," *Early and Medieval Christianity. The Collected Papers in Church History, Series I* (Boston: Beacon Press 1962) 22-38.

a Latin tractate long circulated in a collection ascribed to John Chrysostom. This work, probably from North Africa, assigns the conceptions and births of John the Baptist and Jesus to the quarter-tense days, the solstices and equinoxes, or at least to the dates traditionally assigned to them, no longer astronomically correct in the fourth century. Of the conception and death of Jesus the text says: "Therefore, our Lord was conceived on the eighth of the kalends of April in the month of March, which is the day of the passion of the Lord and of his conception. For on the day that he was conceived on the same he suffered."⁴

One might argue that the association of March 25 with both the conception and the death of the Lord was arrived at by analogy to the presence of both events as themes of the Quartodeciman Pascha on April 6 in Asia. Such an appeal to analogy, however, would strike many as hardly more compelling than the original suggestion of Louis Duchesne, that the life of the Lord must have been supposed to embrace an integral number of years because symbolic number systems are impatient of fractions. That seminal suggestion still needs further confirmatory evidence, as Duchesne himself recognized.

In fact, Epiphanius reported late in the fourth century that there were Quartodecimans who observed the Pascha on March 25. In the secondary literature, this practice is usually assigned to Asia Minor, but Epiphanius is more specific, and says of the Quartodecimans: "They keep the Passover on whichever day it is that the fourteenth of the month falls, but the ones in Cappadocia keep the same one day on the eighth before the Kalends of April [March 25]. And there is no little dissension in their ranks, since some say the fourteenth day of the month, but some, the eighth before the Kalends of April" (*Haer.* 50.1.6).

III. The Cappadocian Calendar

It was at this point that Dr Holford-Strevens offered the suggestion that prompted this article. He suggested that I consider the calendar of Cappadocia, for details of which he referred me to a work of Alan Samuel with which I was previously (and embarrassingly) unfamiliar.⁵ While one is tempted to summarize Samuel's accounts of the many eastern provincial calendars, we must confine ourselves to Cappadocia.

⁴ The standard edition is that appended to Bernard Botte, *Les origines de la Noël et de l'Épiphanie. Textes et études liturgiques* 1 (Louvain 1932) 88-105. The passage cited here is lines 230-33 in that edition.

⁵ Alan E. Samuel, *Greek and Roman Chronology: Calendars and Years in Classical Antiquity. Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft. Erste Abteilung; Siebenter Teil* (Munich 1972), especially 171-77.

Cappadocia had a calendar that, like that of Egypt, consisted of twelve months of thirty days each, plus a period of five *epagomenal* days. In Egypt, these *epagomenoi* fall between the twelfth month and the first, i.e., at the turning of the year. In Cappadocia, they seem to have fallen between the eleventh and the twelfth months. It is unclear how or from what time this year of 365 days was accommodated to the Julian year of 365 1/4 days. It is probable that in Cappadocia, as in Egypt, the correction involved the addition of a sixth epagomenal day every fourth year, but both that and the date from which the correction became effective remain uncertain. In Egypt, that correction of the ancient calendar came with the Roman conquest. Cappadocia seems to have become a Roman province in the second decade of our era. Even after that correction, however, Egypt continued to use its own system of dates. In Asia, the dates based on the local calendar gave way to Roman dates at a point after the founding of Constantinople planted the notion of "New Rome," capital of the Byzantine Empire, the citizens of which called themselves "Romans." It is clear that Epiphanius thinks of Cappadocian dates as "Roman." He speaks of March 25 in the Roman manner, as "the eighth before the Kalends of April." So it would seem reasonable to suppose that, at least in some social strata, the Cappadocian calendar had given way to the Julian calendar of Rome by the late fourth century.

More important than such questions of the use of the Cappadocian versus the Julian calendar is the equivalence between the two systems. On the basis of the studies of *Hemel'Ologia* (medieval comparative tables of calendars) by Kubitschek,⁶ confirmed by other inscriptions, Alan Samuel reconstructs the Cappadocian calendar and the Roman equivalents to the first days of its months as follows:

1 Artaesti	(11 January)
1 Araiotata	(10 February)
1 Teireix	(12 March)
1 Armotata	(11 April)
1 Xantheris	(11 May)
1 Mithri	(10 June)
1 Apomenama	(10 July)
1 Arthra	(9 August)

⁶ W. Kubitschek, *Die Kalenderbücher von Florenz, Rom, und Leyden. Denkschriften der Kaiserl. Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien. Philologisch-historische Klasse*, 57, Abhandlung 3, Vienna 1915.

1 Dathusa	(8 September)
1 Osmana	(8 October)
1 Sondara	(7 November)
1 Epagomenal	(7 December)
1 Artana	(12 December)

Here it is easy to see that the third month, Teireix, running from the Roman March 12 through April 10, is the first month of spring, and, like Artemisios in the very different calendar structure of Asia, a solar calendar equivalent to Nisan in the Jewish lunar calendar. Further, the fourteenth day of Teireix would be the Roman March 25. Thus, both April 6 and March 25 represent, in the quite different calendars of Asia and Cappadocia, attempts to express in solar calendars the date of the Preparation of the Passover, the fourteenth day of the first month, as commanded in scripture (Exod 12:2-15).

IV. The Emergence of the Festivals

It seems impossible to know just when a given locale found it necessary to abandon the Jewish lunar calendar in favor of a solar alternative. Polycrates of Ephesus, writing late in the second century, insists that he and all his forbears kept the fast "on the day when the people put away the leaven."⁷ This could mean that Ephesus had found a way to keep abreast of the *ad hoc* repetitions of Adar, but that need not apply to all the cities of Asia. Again, Polycrates' statement could reflect only his conviction that his practice was in accord with scripture. Exodus 12 says nothing of a lunar calendar.

However long those in the Christian diaspora managed to keep their liturgical practice in strict conformity with the Jewish calendar, it is far easier to imagine their observance of Passover as a continuity from their life in Jerusalem than as an innovation added to their Christian life only in the second century. The opening

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greeting of 1 Peter is addressed to the brethren of the dispersion in the provinces of what would come to be known as Asia Minor. In two of the named provinces, Asia and Cappadocia, we have seen evidence best explained as the translation, after the separation from the synagogue, of the Passover date in the lunar calendar into the equivalent dates, the fourteenth day of the first month of spring, in the solar calendars of Asia (14 Artemisios = 6 April) and Cappadocia (14 Teireix = 25 March). In the case of Asia, we have suggested that, as the first and only annual feast of Christ, Pascha celebrat-

⁷ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.24.

ed the incarnation as well as the Lord's death and resurrection, as shown in the paschal homily of Melito of Sardis. If the same breadth of theme characterized Pascha in Cappadocia, then March 25 could come to be recognized as the day of the conception of the Lord, as well as that of his death and resurrection. As the association of April 6 with the conception would lead to the dating of the nativity on January 6, so such an association of the conception with March 25 would lead to dating the nativity to December 25.

In both Asia and Cappadocia the concern was not to observe a given Julian date, April 6 or March 25, but to observe the fourteenth day of the first month of spring, Artemisios in Asia's variant of the Julian calendar and Teireix in Cappadocia's very different Egyptian-style calendar. In either case, an added day in leap years would have been irrelevant to the original concern. By the time of Epiphanius, the fourteenth day of Teireix was known as the twenty-fifth day of March, and the dissension he mentions among the Cappadocian Quartodecimans would seem to have been only semantic, or it could reflect a conflict over the importance of retaining the scriptural language in the face of the partial or general adoption of the Roman calendar.

If one assumes that in Cappadocia as in Sardis the Pascha, as the only annual festival of Christ, celebrated the entire mystery of redemption, the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection but also the incarnation, one would have a more satisfying rationale for the assertion that the conception and the passion occurred on the same date than the more general postulation by Duchesne of the ways of symbolic number systems, brilliant as that suggestion was and remains. And from such dates for the death and conception, one could compute the date of the nativity.

These computations from the paschal date would provide us with only dates for the nativity, not with evidence of a festival of the nativity. As Duchesne said, it is quite possible that the festive climate attending the *sol novus* contributed materially to the establishment of Christmas. The whole range of our studies suggests that this would have been before the accession of Constantine, and on a date known by implication, if not overtly recognized, since the second century, whether that festival appeared first at Rome (as is most commonly supposed) or in North Africa

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(which remains an interesting, if unproven, possibility). That, however, would be something quite different from the supposition, so frequently urged, that Christmas is but the Christian adoption of the festival of the birth of

the invincible sun, established by the emperor Aurelian on December 25 in A.D. 274. Indeed, this new evidence for a Quartodeciman Pascha on 14 Teireix (March 25) in the second century, with its possible implication of such a date for the conception of Christ, might further strengthen the bold suggestion of Anselme Davril, that Aurelian, seeking to unify Rome's competing religions, might have taken a cue from the growing Christian sect's celebration on December 25 of the birth of one whom they, following Mal 4:2, already called "the Sun of Righteousness."⁸

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⁸ Anselme Davril, "L'origine de la fête de Noël," *Renaissance de Fleury: La revue des moines de Saint-Benoît* 160 (1991) 9-14. See also J. Neil Alexander, *Waiting for the Coming: The Liturgical Meaning of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany*, Washington, DC: Pastoral Press 1993. The relevant section is on page 57.