On the celebration of Easter

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. AD 260–339)

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Eusebius of Caesarea, On the Celebration of Easter; De sollemnitate Paschali (2010) Angelo Mai, Novae Patrum Bibliotheca 4 (1847), pp.209-216 (De sollemnitate paschali)

EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA — On the Celebration of the Pascha
[Translated by Andrew Eastbourne] 1. It would perhaps not be inappropriate here again to discuss the Pascha, which was handed down long ago to the children of the Hebrews as an image. Now then, when the Hebrews, performing ”shadows of things to come,” first used to celebrate the festival of Phasek, they would take for themselves a young domestic animal (this was a lamb or a sheep). Next, they would sacrifice this animal themselves; and then, with the blood, everyone would first anoint the lintels and door-posts of their own homes, bloodying the thresholds and houses to ward off the destroyer. The flesh of the lamb, on the other hand, they would use for food; and girding up their loins with a belt, partaking of the nourishment of unleavened bread, and serving themselves bitter herbs, they would ”pass over” from one place to another—[meaning,] the [journey] from the land of Egypt to the wilderness. It had been enjoined by Law that they do this, along with the slaughter and eating of the lamb. Hence, the passing over out of Egypt produced for them the name of the ”Passover.” But these things happened to them by way of a type; and they were written down for our sake. Indeed, Paul [implicitly] gives this interpretation, revealing the truth of the ancient symbols, when he says, ”For indeed, Christ our Pascha has been sacrificed.” And the reason for his being sacrificed is presented by the Baptist, when he says, ”Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” The Savior’s body, you see, was handed over to death as a sacrificial victim to ward off all evils: In the manner of a purificatory ritual, it took away the sin of the whole world. That is why Isaiah cried out clearly, ”This one bears our sins, and suffers pain on our behalf.”

2. When we are nourished by the rational flesh of this sacrificial Savior, who rescued the entire human race by his own blood—that is, when we are nourished by his teachings and discourses, which announce the kingdom of heaven—then we are rightly luxuriating with the luxury that is in accordance with God. But in ad-

dition to this, when we mark the houses of our souls, that is, our bodies, by faith in his blood, which he gave as a ransom in exchange for our salvation, we drive away from ourselves every kind of treacherous demon. And when we celebrate the ”Passover” festival, we are training ourselves to pass over to divine things, just as in ancient times they passed over out of Egypt into the desert. Indeed, in this way, we too are setting out on a kind of path that is untraversed and left deserted by the many, putting out of our souls the ancient ”leaven” of godless error; and we serve ourselves ”bitter herbs” by means of a bitter and painful way of life.

The appointed time for the festival is well-timed too: It did not come along in the midst of the winter season—for that time is gloomy—nor yet did it correspond to the middle of summer, when the sweltering solstice takes away the beauty of those who spend their time in the fields, and the length of the hours is too greedy, not balanced with equal shares. For the sight of the autumnal equinox is not pleasing, as the countryside is then bereft and deprived of its characteristic fruits, as though of its children. What is left is spring, the radiant season that takes the lead as head of the year, like the head of the body, when the sun is just now traversing the first section [of the Zodiac], and the moon likewise, with its light full, is shifting its nightly course into bright day. This season relieves the terrors of winter-storm thunders, removes the long intervals of time, adjusts the floods of water; and now, as the fresh fair weather shines forth, calmness settles the seas for the sailors and grants land-travellers a mild atmosphere; in this season, the countryside is pregnant with seeds in the fields, and the plants swelling with fruit, exulting in the gifts of God, provide to farmers the due returns for their toil, with blessings.

3. This is the appointed time for the festival. To the Egyptians, the friends of demons, it brought destruction, but to the Hebrews, who celebrate the festival in God’s honor, it brought freedom from evils. This very time was that one which was observed at the original creation of the universe, when the earth sprouted plants, when the luminaries came into existence, when heaven and earth were brought onto the scene, and all that is in them. At this time, the Savior of the whole world accomplished the mystery of his own festival, and the ”great luminary” brightened the earth with the rays of piety; indeed, this time seems to embrace the birthday of the world. At this time also, the type was celebrated—the ancient Pascha which was also called Passover. But it also bore a symbol—consisting of the slaughter of a lamb; and also obscurely presented an image—that of nourishment by unleavened bread; and all these things were fulfilled in the Savior’s festival. For he himself was the lamb, insofar as he was clothed with a body; he himself was also the sun of righteousness, when the truly divine spring and the saving equinox, the turn from worse things toward the better, took hold of human life. And god-driven scourges are sent down even to this day on the demons of the Egyptians, whereas peoples who dwell everywhere on earth are festively celebrating their freedom from long wandering in godlessness.

And as the deceitful spirits have ceased, along with the storm of evils, an abundance of new fruits garlands the church of God with various gifts of the Holy Spirit. And simply put, the whole human race has been changed to take up our side, and all the fields, having received the cultivation of the soul from the Logos who is the husbandman, have sprouted the seasonable flowers of virtue. But also, now that we have been freed from the evils of darkness, we have been deemed worthy of light, in the day of the knowledge of God.

4. Such are the new teachings which in olden days were obscured through symbols, but which have now been unveiled and brought into the light. And in particular, we rekindle the beginning of the festival every year with periods of cycles. Before the festival, for the sake of preparation, we take up the forty-day training period, in emulation of the holy Moses and Elijah. And the festival itself we keep renewing, unforgetful forever. Indeed, as we set forth on our journey toward God, we bind our loins well with the bond of self-control; we guard the steps of our soul with caution, and, as though in sandals, we prepare for the course of our heavenly calling; we use the staff of the divine word with the power of prayer to ward off the enemy, and with all eagerness we pass over to the path that leads to the heavens, hurrying from earthly affairs to heavenly things, and from mortal life to the immortal. For in this way, when we have accomplished the pass-over nobly and well, another, greater festival will greet us. The children of the Hebrews call it by the name of Pentecost; it bears the image of the kingdom of heaven. Indeed, Moses says, ”When you begin [to use] the sickle on the crop, you shall count for yourself seven sevens, and you shall present new loaves from new crops to God. Now then, he was giving indications by prophetic types: By the ”crop,” he was referring to the calling of the nations;

and by the ”new loaves,” he was referring to the souls presented to God by Christ, the churches from the nations, in which the greatest festival is celebrated in honor of the God who loves mankind. We have been harvested by the spiritual sickles of the Apostles, and have been gathered together into the churches everywhere in the world, as it were into threshing-floors; we have been made into a body by a harmonious disposition of faith, and have been prepared with the salt of teachings from the divine words; we have been reborn through the water and fire of the Holy Spirit—and we are presented to God by Christ, as nourishing, agreeable, and well-pleasing loaves.

5. In this way, as the prophetic symbols spoken by Moses give way to realities, with more solemn results, we ourselves, at all events, have learned to conduct the festival [i.e., Pentecost] with more lustre, as though we had already been assembled together with Christ and were enjoying his kingdom. For this reason, at this festival we are no longer allowed to undergo laborious toil, and we are taught to bear the image of the rest that is hoped for in heaven. Hence, we do not bend the knee as

we pray, nor do we wear ourselves out with fasting; for those who been deemed worthy of the resurrection effected by God can no longer fall down on the ground, nor can those who have been freed from the passions have the same experience as those who are enslaved. Therefore, after the Pascha we celebrate Pentecost, with seven complete sets of seven [days]—after manfully completing the previous forty-day period of training before the Pascha with six sets of seven. For the number six relates to action and accomplishment, and for this reason God is said to have made the universe in six days. The labors in that [number six] will be quite rightly succeeded by the second festival in seven sevens, when there is a multiplication of our rest, which the number seven signifies symbolically. The number of Pentecost [i.e., 50], however, is not complete with these [seven sevens]; overshooting the seven sevens, it puts a seal on the all-festive day of Christ's ascension by means of a monad, the last day after these [seven sevens]. Rightly then, as we trace out in the days of the holy Pentecost a representation of the rest that is to come, we rejoice in soul, and rest for a time in body, as though we were already with the bridegroom himself, and unable to fast.

6. But no one would dispute the fact that the sacred Gospel-writers reported that the Savior's passion took place during the days of the Jewish Pascha of the Unleavened Bread. For the reason for the law that was proclaimed regarding the Pascha by Moses was as follows: Because the Lamb of God was going to be led to the slaughter among the Jews themselves, and was going to suffer this for the sake of the common salvation of all mankind at no time other than the one now being described, God anticipated the future by means of symbolic images, and commanded that the Jews sacrifice a physical lamb at that very time that was going to be established at some point after the passage of years. And this was performed by them every year, until the truth in its full completeness put an end to the old images. Hence, from that time, the true festival of the mysteries has held sway among the nations, whereas among the Jews, not even the memory of the symbols themselves is preserved any longer, since the place in which the Law had prescribed that the festival's rituals be carried out has been taken away from them. Quite rightly then does the divine Scripture of the Gospels say that the Savior suffered at the time of the Jewish festival of Unleavened Bread, since he was indeed at that time led as a sheep to slaughter, in conformity with the words of prophecy.

7. Also, they [i.e., the Jews], following Moses, would sacrifice the sheep of the Pascha once in the whole year, on the fourteenth day of the first month, at evening. We of the new covenant, on the other hand, who celebrate our own Pascha each Lord's day, always take our fill of the Savior's body, always partake of the blood of the Lamb; we have always girded the loins of our souls with chastity and self-control, we have always prepared our feet in readiness for the Gospel; we always hold the staves in our hands, and rest on the rod that came forth from the root of Jesse; we are always being set free from Egypt, we are always going in search of the

wilderness of human life, we are always setting out on the journey toward God: We are always celebrating the Passover. For the Gospel's word [/ Word] wants us to do this, not once in the year, but always and every day. For this reason, we celebrate the festival of our Pascha every week, on the day of our Savior and Lord, carrying out the mysteries of the true Lamb, by whom we have been ransomed. And we do not circumcise our bodies with a blade—rather, we remove every evil of the soul by means of the sharp word [/Word]; nor do we make use of physical unleavened bread—but only the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. For grace, having freed us from our former habits that had grown old, bestowed on us the new man, the one created in accordance with God, and the new Law, a new circumcision, a new Pascha, and the "Jew in secret." And thus, it also left us free from the old appointed times.

8. When, however, the emperor most beloved of God was presiding in the midst of the holy Synod, and the question of the Pascha was brought forward, there was said all that was said. And three [fourths] of the bishops of the whole world had the advantage in numbers as they strove against those of the East: The peoples of the North, the South, and the Occident together, being fortified by their harmony, pulled in the opposite direction from those of the Orient, who were defending their ancient custom. But at the end of the discussion, the Orientals yielded, and thus there came to be a single festival of Christ—and thus they stood apart from the killers of the Lord, and were joined to those who hold the same doctrine. For nature draws like to like. And if someone were to say that it is written, "On the first day of [the festival] of Unleavened Bread the disciples approached the Savior and said to him, 'Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Pascha?'—and he sent them to such-and-such a man, bidding them to say, 'I am celebrating the Pascha at your house'"—I will answer that this is not a command, but a historical account of an event that took place at the time of the Savior's passion. It is one thing to recount the ancient event, and quite another to make a law and to leave behind commands for posterity.

9. But furthermore, the Savior did not celebrate the Pascha along with the Jews at the time of his passion. For when they were sacrificing the lamb, at that time he himself was conducting his own Pascha with his disciples. They [i.e., the Jews] were doing this on the Preparation day on which the Savior suffered; for this reason, they did not enter the praetorium, but instead Pilate came out to them. But he [i.e., Jesus] a full day earlier, on the fifth day of the week, was reclining at table with his disciples, and as he ate with them he said, "I have very much desired to eat this Pascha with you." Do you see how the Savior did not eat the Pascha along with the Jews? Because this was a new custom, and one foreign to the customary Jewish ways, it was necessary for him to institute it by saying, "I have very much desired to eat this Pascha with you before I suffer." The one set of practices, being now ancient and indeed antiquated—the [Pascha] which he used to eat along with the Jews—was

not desirable; but the new mystery of his new covenant, which he imparted to his disciples, was desirable to him, quite rightly so. Since many prophets and righteous ones before him desired to see the mysteries of the new covenant, and since the Word himself, who thirsted at all times for the general salvation, was passing down a mystery by which all people would celebrate the festival, he professed that this was desirable to him. The Pascha of Moses was not suitable for all the nations of all time—of course not, when the Law had stipulated that it be celebrated in a single place, namely Jerusalem. And so it was not desirable. But the Savior's mystery of the new covenant is suitable for all people, and so it was naturally desirable to him.

10. But he himself, before he suffered, ate the Pascha and celebrated the festival with his disciples, not with the Jews. But when had celebrated the festival at evening, the chief priests came upon him with the traitor and laid their hands on him; for they were not eating the Pascha [that] evening, otherwise they would not have busied themselves with him. And then, having seized him, they led him off to the house of Caiaphas, where, after spending the night, they gathered together and conducted the preliminary inquiry. Then, after that, they arose and led him, in company with the crowd, to Pilate; and at that point, the Scripture says that they did not enter the praetorium, so that they would not become defiled (so they thought) by coming in under a pagan roof, and would eat the Pascha at evening with their purity intact—those most foul ones—who strained out a gnat but swallowed a camel; those who had become defiled already in soul and body by their bloodthirstiness against the Savior feared to come in under [Pilate's] roof! They, on the one hand, on that very day of the passion, ate the Pascha that was injurious to their own souls, and asked for the Savior's blood—not on their own behalf, but to their own detriment; our Savior, on the other hand, not then, but the day before, reclined at table with his disciples and conducted the festival that was desirable to himself.

11. Do you see how from that time, he [i.e., Jesus] was separating himself from them and moving away from the Jews' bloodthirstiness, but was joining himself with his disciples, celebrating the desirable festival together with them? So then, we too ought to eat the Pascha with Christ, while purifying our minds from all leaven of evil and wickedness, and taking our fill of the unleavened bread of truth and sincerity, and having within ourselves, in our souls, the "Jew in secret" and the true circumcision, and anointing the doorposts of our minds with the blood of the Lamb who was sacrificed for us, to ward off our destroyer. And we do this not only at a single time of the whole year, but every week. Let our "Preparation" be fasting, the symbol of mourning, on behalf of our former sins, and for the sake of remembering the Savior's passion.

12. I assert that the Jews have gone astray from the truth, ever since they plotted against the Truth itself and drove away from themselves the Word of Life. And the Scriptures of the holy Gospels present this fact clearly. For they testify that the Lord ate the Pascha on the first day of Unleavened Bread; but they did not eat the Pascha that was customary for them on the day on which, as Luke says, "the Pascha had to be sacrificed," but instead on the following day, which was the second day of Unleavened Bread and the fifteenth day of the lunar month, on which, when our Savior was being judged by Pilate, they did not enter the praetorium—and consequently, they did not eat it on the first day of Unleavened Bread, on which it had to be sacrificed, in accordance with the Law. For in that case they themselves too would have been celebrating the Pascha along with the Savior; instead, they were blinded by their own wickedness from that very time, concurrently with their plot against the Savior, and they wandered from all truth. We, on the other hand, conduct the same mysteries [as Christ did] all through the year: On every day before the Sabbath we carry out a remembrance of the Savior's passion through a fast that the Apostles first engaged in at the time when the bridegroom had been taken away from them; and every Lord's day we are made alive by the consecrated body of the same Savior, and are sealed in our souls by his precious blood.

Gk. ἄνωθεν; alternatively, "from above" (i.e., by God). Col. 2.17. Gk. φασέκ. For this transliteration of the Hebrew Pesach, cf. 2 Chron. 30.1, 5, 15, 17, 18; Jer. 38.8 (LXX). Elsewhere, Pascha (Gk. πάσχα) is typically used, as also elsewhere in the present text. For the Biblical injunctions relating to the celebration of the Passover, see especially Ex. 12; Lev. 23; Deut. 16. Gk. πρόβατον; I have translated this term freely as "lamb" elsewhere in this text. Ex. 12.5, by contrast, allows for a young sheep or goat; Deut. 16.2, for sheep or cattle. Gk. εἰς ἀνατροπὴν τοῦ ὁλοθρευτοῦ; Ex. 12.23 speaks of the ὀλοθρεύων; for ὀλοθρευτής, see 1 Cor. 10.10. Euseb., Comm. on the Psalms [PG 23: 560], uses the phrase εἰς ἀποτροπὴν τοῦ ὁλοθρευτοῦ—similarly also section 11 in the present text. At this point, Euseb. is really thinking of the absolutely first "Passover," not simply the early celebration of the festival.

Gk. ἐπλήρου. This meaning is odd, but something like this is required for the sense here; corruption may have obscured the original wording. Mai translates similarly: Quamobrem illa ex Aegypto digressio, nomen fecit apud Hebraeos festo transitus. Gk. τὰ διαβατήρια, i.e., "[festival / rites] of crossing / passing over"; Philo uses this term for Passover (LSJ). Cf. 1 Cor. 10.11. 1 Cor. 5.7. Joh. 1.29. Gk. τὸ σῶμα τὸ σωρήριον, which can be translated either as "the Savior's body" or "the saving / salvific body." The adjective appears frequently in this text; I have normally translated it as "Savior's." Isa. 53.2 (LXX). Alternatively, "spiritual"; Gk. λογικός, which is of course derived from the word λόγος, and thus Euseb. is playing on the fact that Christ was identified as the Logos. The phrase could almost be translated,

”the Word’s flesh.” Gk. τὸ σωτήριον θῦμα; lit., ”sacrifice of the Savior” or ”saving / salvific sacrifice.”

Both ”luxuriating” and ”luxury” are based on a Greek root (τρύφ-) that is very similar-sounding to the one for ”nourishment” (τρέφ-/τρόφ-). I.e., when the hours of daylight are much longer than the hours of night, and thus each of the twelve daylight hours is much longer than each of the twelve nocturnal hours. (So Mai.) Gk. γάρ; the odd defective logical connection here suggests that a sentence or clause has been lost before this one. A reference to the long winter nights, according to Mai. That is, it moves away from the storms typical of winter. Gk. κοσμογονία. Gk. κόσμος. Gk. οἰκουμένη. Gk. περιέχειν; alternatively, ”seems to contain a reference to...” Gk. τροπή, which means a ”turn” and so by extension the solstice or equinox as one of the turning points of the year—I have thus had to translate it twice to capture the proper effect, first as ”equinox,” second as ”turn.”

Mai interprets this as meaning ”the day of our knowledge of God”: qua die Dei notitiam hausimus. Gk. εἰς ἄληστον αἰῶνα. Deut. 16.9, somewhat freely cited; the last part is not in that verse, however—cf. Lev. 23.16-17 for the content, although there too the phraseology is somewhat different. Gk. ἐφ’ αἷς. Gk. κατὰ Θεόν. Gk. πάσχειν - the verb is related to the noun ”passion” (πάθος) used just before. I.e., a single (50) day in addition to the 49. I.e., the ascension, 40 days after the resurrection, was followed up by the experience of Pentecost (Acts 1.3; 2.1). Cf. Deut. 16.6. Cf. Eph. 6.15. Cf. Isa. 11.1. Cf. Rom. 2.29. The phrase, ”in secret” (Gk. ἐν κρυπτῷ) is rendered by many translations as ”inwardly.” I.e., Constantine at the Council of Nicaea. I.e., fellow Christians, as opposed to Jews. Mt. 26.17-18, freely cited. I.e., celebrating their Pascha. That is, not only was the Pascha instituted by Christ different in character, but it was also not on the same day as the Jewish authorities celebrated their Pascha.

Lk. 22.15. Cf. Deut. 16.6. Cf. Jn. 18.28. Cf. Mt. 23.24. Cf. Rom. 2.29 and the end of section 7 above. Cf. the end of section 12 below. Lk. 22.7. This text was commissioned by Roger Pearse, 2010. It was translated from Angelo Mai, Novae Patrum Bibliotheca 4 (1847), pp.209-216 (De sollemnitate paschali), This file and all material on this page is in the public domain - copy freely. Greek text is rendered using unicode.

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source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.