

The Christian and not-so Christian Calendar from Christmas to Pentecost

A Bible Study

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Understanding Celebrations from Christmas to Pentecost

- Epiphany
- Carnival
- Fat Tuesday
- Ash Wednesday
- Lent
- Palm Sunday
- Passover
- Maundy Thursday
- Good Friday
- Resurrection Sunday
- Ascension Day
- Pentecost

Epiphany

- Epiphany, January 6, is the official end of the Christmas season, but it also kicks off Carnival season.
- Epiphany day is 12 days after Christmas.
- Some people fast during the 12 days and then celebrate the Epiphany feast on January 6th.

January 6 until Fat Tuesday

Carnival

- Carnival is a festival held in many, predominately Roman Catholic, countries in the days leading up to Lent.
- In contrast to the Lenten season's forty-day focus on fasting and self-denial, Carnival is a time of excess and self-indulgence—a time to “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we diet.”
- Carnival is the indulgence before the fast, one last binge before having to give something up for forty days.
- The most famous Carnival is held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, every year. Other Carnivals are held in Italy, Venice, Uruguay, and Spain, as well as in other parts of Brazil. In the United States, the events leading to Mardi Gras are the equivalent of Carnival.

Fat Tuesday/Mardi Gras

- Mardi Gras, which is French for “Fat Tuesday,” is the last day of a season called “Carnival.” The Carnival season is characterized by merrymaking, feasting, and dancing.
- Mardi Gras is the culmination of festivities and features parades, masquerades, and, unfortunately, often drunkenness and shameless debauchery.

Ash Wednesday

- The day after Fat Tuesday/Mardi Gras is Ash Wednesday; therefore, the end of Carnival is followed immediately by the beginning of Lent. Lent is a time of fasting and penance in preparation for Easter/Resurrection Sunday.
- Carnival, then, can rightly be seen as the indulgence before the fast. It is one last “binge” before having to give something up for 40 days.

Lent

- Lent is a period of fasting, moderation, and self-denial traditionally observed by Catholics and some Protestant denominations.
- It begins with Ash Wednesday and ends with Easter/Resurrection Sunday.
- The length of the Lenten fast was established in the 4th century as 46 days (40 days, not counting Sundays). During Lent, participants eat sparingly or give up a particular food or habit. It's not uncommon for people to give up smoking during Lent, or watching television or eating candy or telling lies. It's six weeks of self-discipline.

Saturnalia

Saturnalia, held in mid-December, is an ancient Roman pagan festival honoring the agricultural god Saturn. Saturnalia celebrations are the source of many of the traditions we now associate with Christmas.

During Saturnalia, work and business came to a halt. Schools and courts of law closed, and the normal social patterns were suspended.

People decorated their homes with wreaths and other greenery, and shed their traditional togas in favor of colorful clothes known as *stolas*. Even slaves did not have to work during Saturnalia, but were allowed to participate in the festivities; in some cases, they sat at the head of the table while their masters served them.

Instead of working, Romans spent Saturnalia gambling, singing, playing music, feasting, socializing and giving each other gifts. Wax taper candles called *cerei* were common gifts during Saturnalia, to signify light returning after the solstice.

The Christian holiday of Christmas, especially, owes many of its traditions to the ancient Roman festival, including the time of year Christmas is celebrated. The Bible does not give a date for Jesus' birth; in fact, some theologians have concluded he was probably born in spring, as suggested by references to shepherds and sheep in the Nativity story.

By the fourth century A.D., Western Christian churches settled on celebrating Christmas on December 25, which allowed them to incorporate the holiday with Saturnalia and other popular pagan midwinter traditions.

Before the end of the fourth century, many of the traditions of Saturnalia—including giving gifts, singing, lighting candles, feasting and merrymaking—had become absorbed by the traditions of Christmas as many of us know them today.

Sol Invictus

There is another Roman holiday, Sol Invictus, that seems to have been gradually absorbed by Christmas, too. Sol Invictus (“Invincible Sun”) celebrated, on December 25, the renewing of the Sun King and was linked to the winter solstice

Constantine, the first Christian emperor, was raised in this cult of the Unconquered Sun God, and he had a hand in turning Roman culture toward Christ and away from paganism. The first reliable historical evidence of Christmas being observed on December 25 dates from his reign.

Ishtar, Astarte, Ashtar

- Historically, Easter is the celebration of the ancient queen of heaven, Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of fertility, love, war, and sex. Her male counterpart was the Babylonian Tammuz (Greek Adonis). She is the same goddess worshiped throughout the Near East and Mediterranean worlds almost from the beginning of recorded history. She was variously known as Inanna, Innin, Astarte, Ashtar, the Greek Aphrodite, and the Roman Venus.

Surprisingly, Christian history is very candid about the origin of Easter. The ancient records clearly show that it originated from paganism and that it was substituted for the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread observances.

- Nelson's Bible Dictionary explains, "Easter was originally a pagan festival honoring Eostre, a Teutonic (Germanic) goddess of light and spring. At the time of the vernal equinox (the day in the spring when the sun crosses the equator and day and night are of equal length), sacrifices were offered in her honor. As early as the eighth century, the name was used to designate the annual Christian celebration of the resurrection of Christ. The only appearance of the word Easter (KJV) is a mistranslation of pascha, the ordinary Greek word for 'Passover' (Acts 12:4)."

The Quartodeciman Controversy

This occurred in about 190, when Pope Victor I (ruled 189–199), the first Latin-speaking bishop of Rome, attempted to excommunicate the Christians in Asia Minor who were celebrating Pascha on the 14th of the Jewish month of Nisan, no matter what day of the week it fell on. Hence these Christians came to be known as Quartodecimans (i.e., the “Fourteeners”).

- Read Exodus 12:6-18
- Leviticus 23:5
- 1 Cor. 11:23-26

Jesus was crucified on Passover (14th of Nisan)

By the Eastern Church, it was not called Easter....Good Friday....or none of those modern names. The Western Church had adopted pagan practices and were already referring to it as Easter.

Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea (d. c. 340), the first great Church historian, in his History of the Church, reports that a number of bishops, including Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, “very sternly rebuked Victor” for this action, even though they agreed with him that Pascha should always be celebrated on a Sunday.

- There is no indication of the observance of the Easter festival in the New Testament, or in the writings of the apostolic Fathers.

- Although the observance of Easter was at a very early period the practice of the Christian church, a serious difference as to the day for its observance soon arose between the Christians of Jewish and those of Gentile descent, which led to a long and bitter controversy.
- The point at issue was when the Paschal fast was to be reckoned as ending. With the Jewish Christians, whose leading thought was the death of Christ as the Paschal Lamb, the fast ended at the same time as that of the Jews, on the fourteenth day of the moon at evening, and the Easter festival immediately followed, without regard to the day of the week.
- The Gentile Christians, on the other hand, unfettered by Jewish traditions, identified the first day of the week with the Resurrection, and kept the preceding Friday as the commemoration of the crucifixion, irrespective of the day of the month.

The Western churches kept Easter on the first day of the week, while the Eastern churches followed the Jewish rule, and kept Passover on the fourteenth day.

St Polycarp, the disciple of St John the Evangelist and bishop of Smyrna, visited Rome in 159 to confer with Anicetus, the bishop of that see, on the subject; and urged the tradition, which he had received from the apostle, of observing the fourteenth day. Anicetus, however, declined to admit the Jewish custom in the churches under his jurisdiction, but readily communicated with Polycarp and those who followed it.

- About forty years later (197) the question was discussed in a very different spirit between Victor, bishop of Rome, and Polycrates, metropolitan of proconsular Asia. That province was the only portion of Christendom which still adhered to the Jewish usage, and Victor demanded that all should adopt the usage prevailing at Rome.
- This Polycrates firmly refused to agree to, and urged many weighty reasons to the contrary, whereupon Victor proceeded to excommunicate Polycrates and the Christians who continued the Eastern usage. He was, however, restrained from actually proceeding to enforce the decree of excommunication, owing to the remonstrance of Irenaeus and the bishops of Gaul. Peace was thus maintained, and the Asiatic churches retained their usage unmolested (Euseb. H.E. v. 23-25). We find the Jewish usage from time to time reasserting itself after this, but it never prevailed to any large extent.

- A final settlement of the dispute was one among the other reasons which led Constantine to summon the council of Nicaea in 325. At that time the Syrians and Antiochenes were the solitary champions of the observance of the fourteenth day. The decision of the council was unanimous that Easter was to be kept on Sunday, and on the same Sunday throughout the world, and “that none should hereafter follow the blindness of the Jews” (Socrates, H.E. i. 9).
- The correct date of the Easter festival was to be calculated at Alexandria, the home of astronomical science, and the bishop of that see was to announce it yearly to the churches under his jurisdiction, and also to the occupant of the Roman see, by whom it was to be communicated to the Western churches.
- The few who afterwards separated themselves from the unity of the church, and continued to keep the fourteenth day, were named Quartodecimani, and the dispute itself is known as the Quarto-deciman controversy.