

One Christian Faith, Two Easter Dates



Easter is the most important Christian feast. It is not only the greatest Christian feast; it is the fulfilment of their faith. Through His death, Christ destroyed the bondage to sin; through His resurrection, He realized the new covenant the new Christian Pasha or Passover separating it from the Old Testament Jewish one.

Christ with his disciples observed the prescriptions of the Old Testament for the celebration of the Jews' Passover which was done in commemoration of the Jews liberation from the slavery of Egypt. Although Christ observed the Jewish Passover, by instituting the Eucharist on Holy Thursday before His death, He replaced the Paschal lamb and the unleavened bread by His body and blood, and changed the Sabbath to Sunday, by rising from the dead on the first day of the week. During the life of the apostles, Christians celebrated the Passover of the Jews and side by side the resurrection of Jesus Christ which kept the date of Easter connected with Passover of the Jews.

Since the resurrection of Jesus Christ took place after paschal full moon and the Jewish Passover of Holy Thursday on Sunday, Easter should be on Sundays. This in turn does not allow a fixed date for Easter, because if a date is fixed like that of Christmas, that date can fall on any day other than Sunday.

In times past, Christians depended on the date of Jews' Passover that was computed on the full moon of Nisan (moon calendar) and the vernal equinox.

As time went on, Christians were dissatisfied with the moon calendar of the Jews and the way the Jewish Passover was observed on different days by the Jews.

The Council of Nicaea in 325 following the Julian calendar set the date of Easter on the **Sunday following the paschal full moon, which is the full moon that falls on or after the vernal (spring) equinox.** This decision gave the Christian community to fix their Easter without asking when will be their Passover.

However, because the paschal full moon can fall on different days in different time zones, which would mean that the date for Easter would be different, depending on which time zone one lives in, still some Christians were not satisfied. Another reason for the dissatisfaction was that the date of full moon was not easily predictable.

Furthermore, with the Julian calendar some Christians were not content for they observed that it assumes that the time between the vernal equinoxes is 365.25 day, when it is in fact 11 minutes shorter. The discrepancy results in a drift of about three days every 400 years and this can drag the vernal equinox back by some days instead in takes place in March 21.

To address these issues, Pope Gregory XIII in February 24, 1582 introduced the Gregorian calendar followed by the Western Churches and the civil society, while the Eastern Churches continued to follow the Julian calendar for the computation of Easter date.

Here the Gregorian calendar fixed the vernal equinox on March 21, though it can occur even on 20 March; by approximation not necessarily correct astronomical fact. The vernal full moon also calculated by ecclesiastical tables, not by astronomical observation. According to the Gregorian calendar the date of Easter usually falls between 22 March and 3 April. In Julian calendar terms this is between 4 April and 8 May. This Julian calendar in terms of Ethiopic calendar is between Megabit 25 (25 መጋቢት) Miazia 27 (27 ሚያዝያ).

Though sometimes the Western and Eastern Church's Easter Sunday is on one Sunday, other times, the difference ranges between one week and five weeks, i.e, seven days, 28 days and sometimes as this year 35 days. This year 2013 the western Churches are celebration Easter on 31 March or 22 Megabit while the Eastern Churches are to celebrate Easter on 5 May (27 Miazia ሚያዝያ) with the difference of five weeks. The reason for this range of difference is that the Western Churches are following the Gregorian calendar with a fixed day 21 March for vernal equinox full moon by approximation, and the Eastern Churches follow the vernal equinox full moon by astronomical observation through the Jerusalem meridian.

Thus, the vernal full moon fixed on 21 March in the Gregorian calendar does not necessarily be the actual astronomical full moon within the Jerusalem meridian. For example, the fixed vernal full moon according to the Gregorian calendar 2005 was 25 March while in Jerusalem was 24 April, similarly, in 2008 March 21, in Jerusalem was 20 April. However, the Western Churches (followers of Gregorian calendar) always celebrate Easter on Sunday following the vernal full month day without considering the current Jewish Passover. For example, in 2007 the Western Churches celebrated Easter on March 27, before the day of Jewish Passover that was celebrated on April 24.

The Jews celebrate the Passover sometimes after the vernal full moon according to the Gregorian calendar. For example, while the vernal full moon was on March 24, 2005, and March 21, 2008, according to the Gregorian calendar, the Jews celebrated the Passover on April 24, and April 20 respectively.

The Eastern Churches followers of the Julian calendar are found to celebrate Easter always after vernal full moon and the Jewish Passover feast.

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