

# UNIT SEVEN:

## The Council of Nicaea, Easter, and Judaism



Evangelical  
Lutheran Church  
in America

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### QUICK CONNECT

The main purpose of the Council was to clarify the church's teaching about the relationship between the Logos and God. However, in addition to such theological matters, the council issued several regulations for the administration of the church within its newly granted imperial status. One concern was to formulate a common date for celebrating Easter – a perfectly reasonable expectation for one of Christianity's most important holidays. However, in doing so, the Council revealed anti-Jewish attitudes. These attitudes would contribute to a growing negative assessment of Judaism by Christianity for centuries to come, both causing and enabling much harm to the Jewish people.

### NARRATIVE

For several centuries, the festival of Christmas has always on a fixed date: December 25. Why does the festival of Easter change nearly every year? For instance, in 2025, Easter was April 20; in 2026, it will be April 6. The answer is complicated by several factors. The gospels tell us that the death and resurrection of Jesus occurred in the context of the Jewish festival of Passover (also known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which commemorates the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt). So, since the earliest centuries, Christians have tied their celebration of Easter to the date of Passover. According to the Torah (Leviticus 23:5 and Numbers 9:3), Passover is to be celebrated starting at dusk on the 14th day of the first month (the first month of the spring season, later known as Nissan). The Biblical/Jewish calendar is based on the cycles of the moon. (However, because this lunar calendar falls short of aligning with the solar year, the timing of Passover would gradually shift to different seasons.) In order to assure that Nissan would consistently fall in the spring (based on the cycle of the earth around the sun), Jews would add an extra month every few years. Some early Christians celebrated Easter on the first Sunday of the Passover Feast, responding to the fact that, according to all four of the canonical Gospels, the resurrection of Jesus Christ took place on the first day of the week. Others focused on Jesus' death and set Easter on the night between the 14th and 15th of Nissan, the first day of Passover. The Roman calendar followed the cycles of the sun and, from the perspective of a solar calendar, the festival of Passover is a "moveable feast" – it does not and cannot follow a comparable fixed date. The result was that each year Christians in the Roman Empire were not using the same calendar as Jews, each year the Christian date for Easter had to be "translated" from the Jewish calculation for Passover.

While all the available bishops were gathered at Nicaea, it seemed wise to determine in a clear and uniform way when this great Christian holiday would be celebrated each year, without any need to rely on the Jewish calendar. The council affirmed that Easter would be celebrated "the Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after the vernal equinox." This was an attempt to provide what they believed to be a more accurate calculation (following the vernal equinox, which is always March 20 or 21 in the northern hemisphere, using a solar calendar). Thus, the earliest date for Easter could be only March 22 (which happened in 1818 and won't occur again until 2285); the latest possible date for Easter could be only April 25.

The council's decision fixed the issue and provided a unifying date for Easter for quite a while – until the calendars were changed. At the time of the council, Romans were using the Julian calendar (which was initiated in 45 B.C.E.). However, due to improved astrological calculation of the earth's rotation around the sun, the Gregorian calendar was introduced in 1582 (and remains in use today). While more scientifically accurate,

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the new calendar was issued by papal decree; this meant that some Protestant countries were slow to accept it. Within most Orthodox churches, the Julian calendar was retained. Thus, since the 16th century, Christians have seldom celebrated the most holy day in their calendar at the same time.

However, as far back as the 1960s, reestablishing a common date for Easter has been a topic of ecumenical dialogue. In 1997, the Aleppo Statement (sponsored by the World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches) offered a study of the question and encouragement toward the goal. The 1,700th anniversary of the Nicene Council adds a fitting urgency to resolve the issue. Earlier this year, the World Council of Churches hosted a conference and issued statements from ecumenical leaders about the challenges and hopes toward finding a common date. You can read the summary report, “Toward a Common Date for Easter” (Faith and Order Paper #241, World Council of Churches), [here](#).

Aside from the technical issues of reconciling various calendars (and the hope of a common date in the future), a much deeper concern must be addressed: the shameful anti-Jewish attitudes expressed among Christians about determining the date of Easter. Alongside the desire for greater accuracy and uniformity for celebrating Easter, there is an expressly stated desire to not be subservient to Jews in the calculation of the date. St. Athanasius, in a letter to fellow bishops in north Africa, notes with disapproval that some Christians were celebrating Easter on the same day as the Jewish Passover. Emperor Constantine, reflecting on the Council of Nicaea, noted that “It is vexing to hear the Jews boast that without them, the Christians would not be able to observe Easter.” *The Apostolic Constitutions*, written soon after the Council of Nicaea, urges Christians not to celebrate Easter the same day as Passover because “now redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, . . . there is nothing in common between you and [the Jewish people]” (*Apostolic Constitutions* 5.17.1-3, referenced in pg. 5, footnote 6, in “Toward a Common Date for Easter,” cited above).

More than just reflecting the “parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity (acknowledging that the two were now separate, autonomous religious traditions), such quotations reflect “supersessionism,” an idea that Christians have not only replaced Judaism as God’s favored people but also that Jews are now punished by God. Part of the reason for this change in attitude is surely attributed to culture. By the fourth century, in contrast to the earliest generations of Christians, most people were becoming Christian with no cultural or religious connection to Judaism. The Roman Empire had a complicated and often contentious relationship with Judaism. While Jews were exempt from the Empire’s requirements for polytheistic social ceremonies, many Romans considered the absolute monotheism of Judaism as extreme and intolerant. Rome also engaged in brutal warfare to conquer and control Judea. This effort would culminate in the “Jewish-Roman Wars” (66-135), which would see the destruction of the second Temple and the ban of Jews from the city of Jerusalem. There were periodic attempts by Roman emperors (viz., Tiberius and Claudius) to expel Jews from Rome; tensions occasionally flared between Gentiles and Jews in the larger cities of the Empire. By the fourth century, Roman/Gentile Christians largely reflected such cultural and political prejudices and provided theological justifications for them. Indeed, throughout the Middle Ages and into modernity, Easter was a particularly fraught time for Jews, who were often held to be responsible for killing Christ, or accused of reenacting that event by murdering a Christian child and using the blood in the baking of matzah (unleavened bread) eaten on Passover. This became known as the “blood libel,” so well known that Jews were often afraid to leave their homes from Good Friday through Easter Sunday.

Christians today cannot ignore either the anti-Jewish sentiment reflected in the drive to find a standard date for Easter at the Council of Nicaea or the enduring brutal (and often violent) legacy of such ideas in the history of Christian interactions with Judaism. The ELCA has provided several resources for Christians to not only

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reflect and repent of past harms but also build new interactions based on a more faithful vision articulated by Scripture. See especially:

- [“Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations”](#) (1998).
- [“Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community”](#) (2013).
- [“Preaching and Teaching With Love and Respect for the Jewish People”](#) (2022).
- Additionally, discussions with the Orthodox Church in the United States produced a significant document regarding faith in the Holy Trinity, available [here](#).
- It has also developed a document known as [“The Aleppo Statement”](#), which discussed the possibilities of finding a common date for Easter.
- The Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue in the USA offered a [“Common Response to the Aleppo Statement on the Date of Easter/Pascha,”](#) along with a Table which details future dates for [Easter](#).
- The primary dialogue is international with the Lutheran World Federation – Orthodox Joint Commission, more information is available [here](#).

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What new insights did you gain from the narrative? What new understanding did you develop about Jews and Judaism through this learning experience?
2. What are some common biases, misconceptions and misinterpretations we have about Jews and Judaism, particularly regarding the beliefs and practices they hold dear? What efforts can we make to accurately represent Jews and Judaism in our discussions and portrayals?
3. How important is it to keep the date of Easter tied to Passover? Does that effort hinder or help greater appreciation for Christianity’s roots in Judaism?
4. Do you live in an area with Jewish communities (synagogues or temples)? If so, what can your congregation and synod do to ensure dialogues that lead to mutual appreciation and common witness? In what ways can you help combat the sin of supercessionism while also respecting the theological and cultural differences in how Jews and Christians interpret Scripture and understand themselves to be “the people of God”?
5. How might a shared date for Easter encourage opportunities for common worship and witness among Christians?
6. Do you live in an area with a significant population of Orthodox Christians? If so, what might you do to interact with them on this issue (along with other issues related to the 1,700th anniversary, such as the filioque)? If not, how might you learn more about their concerns on these issues?

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### FOR FURTHER READING

Carroll, James, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews, A History* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2002). ISBN: 978-0618219087.

Fredriksen, Paula, and Judith Lieu, "Christian Theology and Judaism" in *The First Christian Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Church*, ed. G.R. Evans (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 85-104. ISBN: 978-0-631-23187-5.

Carey, Holly J., *Women Who Do: Female Disciples in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023). ISBN: 978-0802879158.

Cohick, Lynn H., and Amy Brown Hughes, *Christian Women in the Patristic World: Their Influence, Authority, and Legacy in the Second Through Fifth Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017). ISBN: 978-0801039553.

Cohick, Lynn H., *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009). ISBN: 978-0801031724.

Olson, Jeannine E., *Deacons and Deaconesses Through the Centuries* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992). ISBN: 978-0758658104.

Streufert, Mary J., *Language for God: A Lutheran Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022). ISBN: 978-1506473963.