

Easter, Passover and an Early Christian Leader

By Dianne D. McDonnell

Does the example of Jesus matter? If you are a Christian, then the answer should be a wholehearted "Yes"! It is the example of Jesus and his teachings that we must base our lives upon. Does the example of the earliest followers of Christianity matter? That answer should also be a resounding "Yes"! Surely the earliest Christians were closer to the true tenets of our faith and the eye witnesses who knew Jesus.

Nearing the end of the second century, the Christian church was in a major controversy. The disagreement was about whether to celebrate Easter on the "Lord's Day" as the Roman church called Sunday, or whether to celebrate Passover on the 14th which was now being called "the old custom". Jesus died on Passover, the 14th of the first month, corresponding to our March/April, and early Christians continued to honor that evening with bread and wine symbols representing Christ.

But now Passover observance was being belittled and distained as "Jewish". Although Eusebius, called "the church historian,"¹ was on the side of changing to Easter, he recopied for history a very **important letter written in about 195 AD by Polycrates**, an early Christian bishop in Asia who presented the other side. Thus the letter of Polycrates to Victor at the church in Rome, was preserved for over eighteen hundred years, and stands today as **an amazing link to the earliest leaders and martyrs of Christianity**. Here is his full letter:

"We observe the exact day; neither adding, nor taking away. For in Asia also great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again on the day of the Lord's coming, when he shall come with glory from heaven, and shall seek out all the saints. Among these are **Philip, one of the twelve apostles**, who fell asleep in Hierapolis; and his two aged virgin daughters, and another daughter, who lived in the Holy Spirit and now rests at Ephesus; and, moreover, **John**, who was both a witness and a teacher, who reclined upon the bosom of the Lord, and, being a priest, wore the sacerdotal plate. He fell asleep at Ephesus. And **Polycarp** in Smyrna, who was a bishop and martyr; and **Thraseas**, bishop and martyr from Eumenia, who fell asleep in Smyrna. Why need I mention the bishop and martyr **Sagaris** who fell asleep in Laodicea, or the blessed **Papirius**, or **Melito**, the Eunuch who lived altogether in the Holy Spirit, and who lies in Sardis, awaiting the episcopate from heaven, when he shall rise from the dead?"

All these observed the fourteenth day of the passover according to the Gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith. And **I** also, **Polycrates**, the least of you all, do according to the tradition of my relatives, some of whom I have closely followed. For seven of my relatives were bishops; and I am the eighth. And my relatives always observed the day **when the people put away the leaven**. I, therefore, brethren, who have lived sixty-five years in the Lord, and have met with the **brethren throughout the world**, and have gone through every Holy Scripture, am not affrighted by terrifying words. For those greater than I have said 'We ought to obey God rather than man.' I could mention the bishops who were present, whom I summoned at your desire; whose names, should I write them, would constitute a great multitude. And they, beholding my littleness, gave their consent to the letter, knowing that I did not bear my gray hairs in vain, but had always **governed my life by the Lord Jesus.**"

The author added the bold emphasis and selected only the letter itself from the account of Eusebius.²

Does the Letter of Polycrates match NT Statements?

How does this letter compare with other writings in the New Testament? Polycrates states "great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again on the day of the Lord's coming" and also believes that the Lord will return to the earth at a future time saying "he shall come with glory from heaven, and shall seek out all the saints".

Throughout the letter he refers to death as "sleep", following the same symbolism used by Jesus and the apostle Paul. Paul spoke of the "saints who have fallen asleep in Christ..." and of the coming resurrection of the saints at the return of Jesus when the saints will rise from the dead and be made immortal. See 1 Cor. 15:20, 23, 51-54, and also Acts 1:9-11.

Did John die in Ephesus?

Polycrates lists the final resting place of many early Christians, and lists Ephesus as where John "fell asleep." Many Christians know that John was banished to the island of Patmos, but do not realize that he later lived in Ephesus. S. F. Hunter wrote in his article on John, the Apostle, "The consentient testimony of the church of the 2nd century is that **the later years of John were spent at Ephesus**, where he wrote his Gospel, and gathered round him many disciples."³

Who is Polycarp?

One of these disciples was "**Polycarp**... who was a bishop and martyr". We have many historical records of this beloved man who became bishop of Ephesus, and was personally **taught by the apostle John**. Polycarp (69-155 AD) went to Rome about 150 AD to discuss the **Quartodeciman controversy** with Anicetus the bishop of Rome. Polycarp testified that the apostle John instructed him to observe the Passover in honor of Jesus, but Anicetus refused his testimony. About five years later, Polycarp, now a frail and gentle elderly man, was forced into hiding and finally captured. He saw that his captors were fed a good meal, then went calmly with them. Before a screaming mob, a Roman official urged him to deny Christ or face death:

The proconsul again urged him, "Swear by Caesar's fortune, and I will release thee. Revile Christ." "Eighty and six years have I served him," was the reply, "and he never did me wrong: how then can I revile my King and my Savior?"⁴

The Steadfast Example of Polycrates

We see from his letter that the beleaguered Polycrates faces a fierce opponent in Victor of Rome, and he knows it. Victor has sent threats of "terrifying words", yet Polycrates witnesses that he is not "affrighted" or frightened by these threats because "we ought to obey God rather than man" quoting Peter from Acts 4:19. But we notice that Polycrates lists only those martyred believers that "sleep" and does not mention the names of the many bishops in Asia that have assembled to back his stand for Passover. He obviously feels that Victor might martyr any opposing leaders that he can identify.

Not naming the Names of Living Believers

He protects them by not naming their names just as the apostle John did in 1 John 1:12 when he calls believers only "children". In 2 John, John refers to himself merely as "the elder" as he protects a woman leader by calling her only "chosen lady" and her converts as "your children walking in the truth". John adds that he looks forward to talking to this female leader "face to face" and giving her the information he dares not write down. All three of John's letters were composed during times of harsh persecution, just as the letter written by Polycrates was. Both men knew it was now dangerous to name names.

Safely Asleep

It was safe for Polycrates to name the martyrs that had gone before him for they were safely "asleep". Yet for Polycrates, following Jesus' example and teachings accurately, and the example of the leaders that

had gone before him-- was more important than even his own life! And one senses in the letter that has come down to us that he perceives his sixty-five years are about to be concluded. Victor did excommunicate Polycrates, but the bishops of Asia ignored the order, and continued to regard him as the bishop of Ephesus and as their leader. The veil of history hides the fate of Polycrates, but many believe he died in 196 AD, at 66 years old—a year after he wrote his letter.

Did Jesus Keep the Passover?

Polycrates said "I...**governed my life by the Lord Jesus.**" So are there records of Jesus observing the Passover throughout his entire life?⁵ John 6:4 reveals that it was Passover time when Jesus first showed that the bread symbol of Passover symbolizes himself!

"For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" ...Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life..."
John 6:33, 35.

Later, on the last night of his life, as the 14th day began at sunset, Jesus celebrated the Passover, and again revealed that the traditional Passover bread and wine symbolize his own body and blood!

And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this **Passover** with you before I suffer." Luke 22:15

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."
Matthew 26:26

Then he took the cup, ..."This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. Mark 14:23-24

Words of Jesus

On that Passover evening, Jesus knew he would be dead when sunset ended that day.⁶ Then other Jews would start eating what they termed a Passover meal on the 15th day⁷, but Jesus would be in Joseph's tomb. Before Jesus suffered for you and for me, on the evening of the 14th, he gave us these important instructions:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you **keep my commandments**, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. John 15:9-11. RSV

“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love”

Polycrates ended his letter by saying that he had always “governed” his “life by the Lord Jesus”. Do you do the same-- really and truly? If you do, resolve to find out how a Christian observes Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread in honor of Jesus. You can start with [“Easter, Passover and the Crucifixion”](#), the March, 2009, monthly article on this website. Then observe these days! Many brave men and women have witnessed and died for your right to honor Jesus on the exact anniversary of his death on Passover day, and to celebrate his resurrection during the Days of Unleavened Bread a full three days and three nights later. Follow the example of Jesus and the earliest Christians such as Philip and his three daughters, faithful John, brave Polycarp, steadfast Polycrates and others taught by the apostles, and in this loving obedience, truly “abide” in the love of Jesus and the Father!

“Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”
John 13:17

¹ Ben Witherington III, *What Have They Done with Jesus?* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006) p. 30.

² Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 5,24. The Passover Controversy, The Disagreement in Asia.

³ S. F. Hunter, in “John, the Apostle” also writes, “...we read of his banishment to Patmos, and meet with those references to the old man at Ephesus, which occur in the Christian literature of the 2nd century...After due consideration, we lean to the conclusion that there was only one John at Ephesus, and he (was) the son of Zebedee.” (from *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Electronic Database Copyright © 1996 by Biblesoft)

⁴ Brave Polycarp was then burned at the stake just as he had been warned in a dream. Article on Polycarp, *McClintock and Strong Encyclopedia*, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 2000 by Biblesoft.

⁵ Jesus observing the Passover: As a child, Luke 2:41-50; During his early ministry, John 2:23; Jesus shows that Passover symbols refer to himself in John, chapters 6 and 13. Mark 14, Luke 22, and Matthew 26.

⁶ 14th—the day Jesus called Passover and kept as commanded by Lev 23:5, was also known as “Preparation Day” in preparing for the annual Sabbath the next day. John 19:14, 31, 42. Jesus died on this day.

⁷ 15th—the day that many Jews now called “Passover” it was a yearly Sabbath or “high day” John 18:28. This Feast could fall on a week day. Each day started at sunset.