

Article

The Struggle for Apostolic Authority: The Easter Controversy in the Late Second Century

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Abstract: The Easter controversy of the late second century unveiled a profound theological and cultural debate within early Christianity. Originating from differing practices regarding the calculation of Easter dates, the dispute pitted the churches of Asia Minor against the Roman Church. This paper primarily employs a method of documentary analysis. It analyzes the accounts provided by the fourth-century historian Eusebius of Caesarea in his work *The History of the Church*. It is also cross-referenced with the works of second-century Christian writers. Through this process, this paper seeks to reconstruct the situation of this Easter controversy. Furthermore, it aims to uncover the struggle for apostolic authority concealed beneath the surface of this debate over dates. Central figures like Victor I and Polycrates engaged in this struggle for Apostolic authority, responding to challenges posed by heresies. Victor I leveraged his position to convene religious conferences and issue excommunication decrees against dissenting churches, laying claim to the papal primacy. However, Polycrates invoked the apostolic succession and heritage from John the Apostle to assert the legitimacy of the churches in Asia Minor, challenging Victor I's attempts at centralizing power within the Roman see. The controversy reflected broader debates over apostolic succession and ecclesiastical power structures. The Easter controversy serves as a case study of the Early Church's engagement with practical theology and the integration of religious festival culture with social backgrounds, highlighting the significance of Easter as a symbol of Christian unity and collective memory. This debate highlighted theological nuances and underscored broader issues of communal identity and the power struggle within early Christian communities.

Keywords: Easter controversy; papal primacy; apostolic succession; Victor I; Polycrates



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1. Introduction

The formation of a holiday is not an instantaneous process. Rather, it often evolves over several generations through commemorations, celebrations, and adaptations until it becomes a collective memory of a community. The festival is a symbolic system that is shared by a group of people and is unique to them. On one hand, in accentuating the similitude among group members vis-à-vis others, the calendar helps to solidify in-group sentiments and thus constitutes a powerful basis for mechanical solidarity within the group. On the other hand, it also contributes to the establishment of intergroup boundaries that distinguish (Eviatar [Zerubavel 1982](#), pp. 284–89). Some scholars argue that of all the elements of the liturgy, the feasts are perhaps the most permanent. They think it is virtually impossible to change the date or form of the old feasts, and the creation of a new religious festival is almost inconceivable. However, Clemens Leonhard refutes this view and gives evidence of the creation and emergence of Christian Easter (Clemens [Leonhard 2006](#), pp. 1–4). In the late second century, a heated debate erupted within Christianity over the date of Easter. This debate indicated that the date currently used by modern society to commemorate Easter is a religious construct created by humans. Moreover, the crux of this debate is not merely a matter of the date. It also reflects the theological development of Christianity during this period, which is evident in the arguments presented by both

sides of the debate. It illustrates the nascent formation of the papacy and also reflects the development process of apostolic succession.

2. The Content of the Debate

The groups involved in this debate were the churches of Asia Minor from the eastern part of the Roman Empire and the Roman Church located at the center of the empire. Eusebius documented the main reasons for this debate in *History of the Church*:

At the time when these men were governing the churches in the provinces of Asia, a serious issue arose that sprang from an ancient practice, as it were: they thought that the paschal feast should at all events be held on the fourteenth of the moon, when the Jews, that is, are bidden to sacrifice the lamb, and they maintained that the fast should be broken on whatever day of the week the fourteenth of the moon fell, when that custom had never been observed in any other churches at all. As a result, assemblies of bishops and councils were summoned in each province, and when letters had been sent from each place to the others, they all confirmed the one doctrine of the church: that it was never permitted to celebrate the mystery of the Lord's Passover except on Sunday, when the Lord rose from the dead, and that on this day only should the paschal fast be broken. (Eusebius of Caesarea 2016, 5.23.1–2, p. 223)¹

In the conception of scholars in the middle of the last century, the tradition of the churches in Asia Minor was judged to be a second-century local aberration from the norm, brought about by a common tendency among some early Christians to Judaize. This practice was already criticized by the Apostle Paul in the first century (A. Allan McArthur 1953, pp. 98–107). Paul F. Bradshaw believes that the practice of the churches of Asia Minor is the oldest form of the Easter celebration (Bradshaw and Hoffman 1999, pp. 81–82). This means that the second-century Church coexisted with two different calculations of dates and connotations for the commemoration of the Easter season. On one hand, Easter symbolizes the 'Lord's Passover' for the churches of Asia Minor. Jesus Christ, as the Lord of the Passover, symbolically represents the sacrifice on the Passover day, as declared by the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 5:7). Easter represents a renewal of the meaning of Passover, encompassing the entire redemptive events, which were Christ's temptation, passion, resurrection, and ascension. Therefore, it was rational for Christianity to adopt the Passover date set by God for the Jews when commemorating Easter. The Hebrew Bible records the date of the Passover: "The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, 'This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb. . . and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight (Exodus 12:1–3, 6)". Due to the use of the lunisolar calendar that Jewish people used, the date of Passover in the week was not fixed. Furthermore, due to the Jewish insistence on observing the ordinances of the law, the "four-door" (Sacha Stern 2001, pp. 192–93) method of observing the festival was proposed, and the Passover on the 14th of Nisan gave rise to four possibilities: Saturday, Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday.

On the other hand, for the Roman Church and other Western churches, known as "any other churches" in Eusebius's writings, the time of celebrating Easter significantly differed from that of the churches in Asia Minor. They insisted that this date must be fixed on a Sunday because Sunday was recorded in the Gospels as the "day of the Lord's resurrection". This day was also adopted by churches everywhere at that time as a day for gathering in worship and commemorating the resurrection of Jesus. At the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century, many Christian documents explicitly expressed their rejection of Jewish Christians gathering on the Sabbath. For example, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, mentioned in his letter to the Church of Magnesia: "They no longer observe the Jewish Sabbaths, but keep holy the Lord's day, on which, through Him and through His death, our life arose; and by this mystery—though some deny Him—we have received

our faith, and therefore we persevere in the hope of being found to be the disciples of Jesus Christ, our only Master; and because of this mystery He whom the prophets rightly waited for came and raised them from the dead. . . It is out of place to preach Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism” (Ignatius 1947, 9–10, p. 99). It could be seen that many churches in various regions no longer gathered according to the ancient customs and regulations of the Jews but chose a new day, which was the day when Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

The adoption of different dates to commemorate Easter in various regions seemed inconsequential. However, the practices of this festival contained fasting, which exacerbated deeper conflicts within different churches. The Roman Church chose to end fasting on Sunday because it was the day of celebrating the resurrection. For the churches of Asia Minor, only when the Passover of that year fell on a Sunday could they simultaneously commemorate Easter with the Roman Church; otherwise, the churches of Asia Minor often entered into the Easter season earlier.

Fasting and prayer before Easter were primarily intended to provide sufficient time for those preparing for baptism at Easter to repent of their past sins. The *Didache* mentions related practices: “Before the baptism, let the one who baptizes and the one to be baptized fast, and any others who are able to do so. And you shall require the person being baptized to fast for one or two” (Didache 1947, 7.4, p. 177). Justin Martyr also mentioned: “Those who are convinced and believe what we say and teach is the truth, and pledge themselves to be able to live accordingly, are taught in prayer and fasting to ask God to forgive their past sins, while we pray and fast with them. Then we lead them to a place where there is water, and they are regenerated in the same manner in which we ourselves were regenerated” (Justin Martyr 1948, 61, p. 99). It can be seen that fasting before baptism was a common practice in the churches of the second century.

Irenaeus, in his letter advising Victor I of Rome, also pointed out that the Easter date controversy was not only related to dates but also to fasting. However, he did not elaborate on the relationship between the two, only mentioning that some churches fasted for one day, some for two days, and some even longer (Eusebius of Caesarea 2016, 5.24.12–13, p. 226). Eusebius’s account mentioned earlier did not explicitly state why the churches of the late second century fasted before Easter. His focus was on how the churches of Asia Minor and other churches stopped fasting at different times due to the difference in the date of Easter. In addition, he was concerned about the consequences of this difference. It is possible that the believers of the Roman Church were still in a somber and mournful atmosphere of fasting, while the churches of Asia Minor on the other side of the empire had already begun to joyously celebrate the miracle of Jesus’s resurrection. This situation persisted until the seventh century, as mentioned by historian Bede the Venerable in the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*: “It is said that there was a time when Easter was kept twice in one year. While the king and the people had ceased from fasting and were keeping Easter, the queen and her attendants were still fasting and keeping Palm Sunday”. Such chaotic situations even occurred within the same city. For example, in the second century in the city of Rome, there were immigrant communities from Asia Minor who might have observed the tradition of celebrating Easter on the 14th of Nisan. When they extended greetings to surrounding Christians, the followers of the Roman Church could only interrupt them with a troubled expression. Such scenes were not the imaginative constructs of later researchers. Piana speculated that the recipients of the communion mentioned by Irenaeus in his letter to Victor I were likely the Asia Minor immigrants adhering to the Jewish calendar in the city of Rome (George La Piana 1925, pp. 215–17). Irenaeus’s meticulous observation of the duration of fasting was likely a reflection of the actual situation in second-century Rome. The divergence in dates originally only reflected the choices made by different churches according to traditional customs, but the emotional conflicts caused by this divergence could potentially affect the faithful’s perception of the church.

3. The Process of the Debate

The central figure in this debate was Victor I, the bishop of the Roman Church at that time. He demanded that the universal Church commemorate Easter according to the date prescribed by the Roman Church. In this controversy, Victor I took a strong stance and wielded the power of the Roman Church with extreme determination, laying the foundation for the papal primacy. The papal primacy refers to the leadership of the Roman Church established by Apostle Peter. Peter was picked out for the unique role of leadership and to serve as the source of unity among the apostolic group. The bishop of this Church, as the successor of Apostle Peter, held the highest authority among the bishops of the universal Church. This ecclesiological doctrine in the Catholic Church became the foundation for the development of the papacy.

Firstly, Victor I used his primacy to convene a series of religious conferences aimed at unifying the date of Easter. Before the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, there had been no formal ecumenical councils involving churches from the various regions of Christianity. In this great controversy of the late second century, various churches convened meetings to establish the date of Easter. These meetings included regions such as Palestine, Pontus, Rome, Gaul, Achaia, and the Corinthian Church in Asia Minor. In addition, bishops Narcissus of Jerusalem and Theophilus of Caesarea wrote lengthy letters discussing the matter with the churches in Alexandria (Eusebius of Caesarea 2016, 5.22–5.23, pp. 222–24). Eusebius provided comprehensive records of these meetings. The regions where these meetings were held spanned the Roman Empire and the convener of this series of meetings was Victor I, the bishop of the Roman Church. A hint of this can be seen in a letter from Polycrates, the leader of the churches in Asia Minor, to Victor I: “I could also have mentioned the bishops who are present and whom you requested me to summon, as I did” (Eusebius of Caesarea 2016, 5.24.8, p. 225). The churches in Asia Minor directed their letters to Victor I and the Roman Church, which proves that the series of meetings convened to discuss the date of Easter was in response to Victor I’s call. Even though they all held councils, it seems to Kenneth A. Strand that people were divided in every place concerning the two practices and the controversy continued to be equally balanced between both parties (Kenneth A. Strand 1990, pp. 127–36; 1965, pp. 251–58).

Secondly, Victor I used his primacy to issue excommunication decrees against the churches in Asia Minor that opposed the unified date of Easter: “To this, however, Victor, the bishop of Rome, responded quite unyieldingly, trying to sever from communion the churches of all of Asia and of the neighboring provinces indiscriminately, on the grounds that they were declining into heresy, and he sent letters in which he separated everyone at once without distinction from the bond of the church” (Eusebius of Caesarea 2016, 5.24.9, pp. 225–26). William L. Petersen has an accurate understanding of this material. He mentions that “The action of Victor is significant on two grounds. First, it is the earliest known incidence of excommunication on the grounds of heteropraxis; second, it is the earliest recorded attempt by the Roman see to impose its standards beyond its boundaries” (William L. Peterson 2012, p. 211). Despite numerous bishops, including Irenaeus, writing letters to Victor I expressing their opposition to this directive, Eusebius’s recorded letters do not show Irenaeus directly condemning Victor I’s behavior of issuing excommunication decrees. In other words, the attitude of the bishops may suggest that the papal primacy of the Roman bishop was gradually established during the time of Victor I. The opposition of the churches in Asia Minor to the unified date of Easter threatened the authority of the papal primacy, so Victor I issued an excommunication decree to maintain his apostolic authority.

However, the papal primacy was not fully substantiated at the time, nor were there clear arguments to demonstrate that the Roman bishop held a higher position than other bishops. Therefore, Polycrates, the bishop of the Ephesian Church in Asia Minor, resisted the orders of the Roman Church based on apostolic succession doctrine. Apostolic succession mainly refers to the passing of Jesus’s teachings and the authority to govern the Church from the apostles to the bishops, who then transmitted this authority through visible ordination to future bishops. Polycrates mainly used apostolic succession as the

basis for resisting Victor I. This controversy over the date of Easter at the end of the second century thus evolved into a struggle for apostolic authority.

Polycrates first emphasized his inheritance of the apostolic tradition from John: “We, then, keep inviolate the day of the paschal feast, neither adding nor removing anything. For there are great luminaries who have slept in Asia, chosen men of the highest quality, whom the Lord will raise up at his advent. . . There is also John, who reclined upon the Lord’s chest, was high priest and wore the high-priestly plate” (Eusebius of Caesarea 2016, 5.24.2, p. 224). The John who reclined upon the Lord’s chest refers to the disciple mentioned in the Gospel, who leaned close to Jesus when he announced that someone would betray him. Before Polycrates, many bishops in Asia Minor emphasized their association with the apostle John. For instance, in the mid-second century, Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, also used the authority of the apostle John to refute the Roman bishop’s position on the date of Easter. Irenaeus, in his account of Polycarp’s life, emphasized Polycarp’s relationship with the apostle John: “Which our Lord was of when He taught, as the Gospel and all the Elders witness, who in Asia conferred with John the Lord’s disciple, to the effect that John had delivered these things unto them: for he abode with them until the times of Trajan. . . And Polycarp too, who had not only been trained by the Apostles, and had conversed with many of those who had seen Christ, but also had been constituted by the Apostles, Bishop over Asia, in the Church of Smyrna. . . Yes, and the Church in Ephesus, having had both Paul for its founder, and John to abide among them until the times of Trajan, is a true witness of the Apostles’ tradition” (Irenaeus 1872, 2.22.5, 3.3.4, pp. 160, 208–9).

In addition to the apostles, Polycrates also listed several esteemed predecessors from Asia Minor as witnesses to his inheritance of apostolic authority and teaching:

There is also Polycarp in Smyrna, bishop and martyr, and Thraseas likewise, bishop in Eumeneia, who completed his life, however, with martyrdom in Smyrna. And what need is there to speak of Sagaris as well, who was likewise a priest and martyr and who rests in peace in Laodicea, to say nothing of Papyrus, Macarius, and Melito, the last of whom was a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of God and filled with the Holy Spirit; he lies in the city of Sardis awaiting the advent of Lord from heaven, that he may rise from the dead. All of them kept the day of paschal feast on the fourteenth day of the month, according to the gospel, introducing nothing extraneous at all, but preserving the rule of the faith throughout. (Eusebius of Caesarea 2016, 5.24.3–6, pp. 224–25)

Apollonius, in his refutation of the Montanist heresy, mentioned the martyrdom of Thraseas, so Polycrates’s account of him should be accurate. Similarly, figures like Sagaris and Melito, whose works are documented by Eusebius in *history of the church* attest to their stature in the churches of Asia Minor. The discovery of Melito’s lengthy poem *On the Pascha* (Melito of Sardis 1979) in the latter half of the 20th century further confirmed his significance among the churches of Asia Minor. Polycrates’s references to these figures illustrate their esteemed positions within the churches of Asia Minor. He explicitly stated that all these individuals taught the doctrine of celebrating Easter on the fourteenth day, thereby accurately and faithfully inheriting apostolic teaching.

To demonstrate his inheritance of apostolic authority, Polycrates also clarified the apostolic succession in Asia Minor: “And I, Polycrates, the least among all of you, keep the tradition of my ancestors, those at least whom I have followed from the beginning. For seven of my ancestors were bishops in succession, and I am the eighth; all of them observed the day so that it coincided with the one in which the Jewish people removed the leaven” (Eusebius of Caesarea 2016, 5.24.6, p. 225). Polycrates testified to his position within the legitimate succession of bishops, asserting himself as the eighth bishop of Smyrna. He also emphasized that he maintained the traditions of his predecessors, thereby adhering to the commemoration of the Jewish Passover. Moreover, he stressed that his views were not unique as other bishops in Asia Minor held similar beliefs. Thus, the authority and teachings of the apostles had a widespread influence on the Easter date controversy. Polycrates attempted to clarify that churches in various regions inherited

the authority and teachings of the apostles, suggesting that the perspectives of different churches should be equally considered. However, the divergent teachings of the apostles on matters not explicitly stated in the Bible led to irreconcilable differences between Polycrates and Victor I regarding the date of Easter. This controversy shows that the open egalitarian apostolic succession upheld by the churches in Asia Minor clashed with Victor I's attempt to establish a hierarchy of papal primacy, ultimately leading to a rupture between them.

4. The Essence of the Debate

In the Easter controversy of the late second century, the disputing parties argued the authority and legitimacy of their viewpoints using different theological perspectives. These theological developments emerged as responses to heresies challenging the Church's orthodoxy but were appropriated in the Easter date dispute to assert dominance. During the second century, especially in its latter half, the spread of heretical doctrines was so widespread that it provoked strong and widespread reactions within the Church. Regarding the heresies in the city of Rome at the time of the Easter controversy, Charles L. Souvay made a compendium in the 1920s (Charles L. Souvay 1929, pp. 43–62). He mentioned Marcionite, Valentinian, Montanism, and so on. Therefore, this dispute over the festival contained the essence of establishing new theology and the power struggle within Christianity.

The greatest challenge Christianity faced in the second century was Gnosticism. Gnosticism presented a comprehensive worldview characterized by extreme disdain for the material world. In the second century, Christianity created Easter, partly to reflect Christian theology through this festival, indicating that matter was not meaningless for adherents of the incarnate Christ. With the Easter date controversy, bishops of various dioceses grounded their authority in apostolic succession, aiming to combat Gnosticism and its teachings.

One of the most notable features of Gnosticism is its dualism of spirit and matter, with the spirit being the original creation and the body being evil, imprisoning the human spirit. Hence, most Gnostic Christians leaned towards some form of Docetism, a concept almost opposite to the Ebionite view. Gnostics believed Christ was purely spiritual, coming to bestow esoteric knowledge to help humanity to return to the spiritual realm. Christ did not take on material flesh, as he was not subject to evil. Such beliefs led Gnosticism to deny some fundamental Christian doctrines, including creation, incarnation, Jesus's crucifixion, and resurrection (Justo L. González 2010, pp. 70–73). To substantiate their views, many Gnostic teachers claimed that agents of heaven imparted their mystical knowledge to specific disciples. The discovery of numerous Gnostic writings in Egypt in the 1940s indicated that these Gnostic teachers chose certain works, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* or *Gospel of Truth* written by Valentinus, as canonical texts documenting the true teachings of Jesus.

In response to Gnosticism, Early Church Fathers introduced the concept of 'apostolic succession' into Christian theology. This concept served to refute Gnosticism from the perspective of Church authority. While Gnosticism posited that Christian teachings in the world were transmitted secretly by teachers, Early Church Fathers argued that the teachings of Jesus were recorded in the works left by the apostles. Whether or not a volume is included in the canon needs to be examined to see if it is a publicly published work by an apostle, rather than secretly conveying Christian convictions. As Eamon Duffy mentions: "This development was at least in part a response to the wildfire spread of false teaching—heresy. As conflicting teachers arose, each claiming to speak for 'true' Christianity, a tighter and more hierarchic structure developed, and came to seem essential to the preservation of unity and truth. The succession of a single line of bishops, handing on the teaching of the Apostles like a baton in a relay race, provided a pedigree for authentic Christian truth, and a concrete focus for unity" (Eamon Duffy 2015, p. 10). Therefore, apostolic succession emerged largely to counter the secret teacher succession of Gnosticism. In summary, the distinction between apostolic succession and teacher succession mainly lies in two points: on one hand, apostolic succession holds that Jesus's teachings were conveyed to all apostles and the Church's teachings are the collective testimony of all apostles, whereas teacher

succession only accepts the teaching of a certain apostle or teacher; on the other hand, apostolic succession views the establishment of the Church as open and inclusive, while teacher succession is closed and secretive.

In Eusebius's narration, the controversy over the Easter date in the second century recorded numerous debaters invoking apostolic succession to establish the legitimacy of their viewpoints. The Roman Church's argument was based on conclusions from synods of various local churches, while the bishops of Asia Minor listed the names of apostles and bishops who had established churches in Asia Minor, emphasizing that they adhered to the traditions of these individuals. Thus, the concept of apostolic succession became an important tool for the Church in the second century to establish its authority. Although the origin of this concept was likely only to refute the Gnostic heresy, it later became an important basis for various churches to prove their authority.

González suggests: "When first developed, late in the second century, the principle of apostolic succession was inclusive rather than exclusive: over against the closed and secret tradition of the Gnostic teachers, it offered an open and shared tradition that based its claim, not on a single favorite disciple of Jesus, but on the witness of all the apostles and of the churches founded by them. This common witness was further strengthened by the network connecting bishops and resulting in a high degree of collegiality" (Justo L. González 2010, pp. 80–81). This highly decentralized structure might have led to differences in the Easter date. Thus, apostolic succession also became a significant factor in the Easter date controversy because different churches followed different apostolic teachings, which might have diverged on matters such as festivals or rituals. Numerous pieces of evidence in the New Testament demonstrate the disagreement between apostles Peter and Paul on specific issues. For the Church of the first and second centuries, protecting the fragile life of this newly established religion was far more important than other issues. After the task of refuting heresy gradually diminished, the Church began to engage in more detailed discussions on internal issues such as the date of Easter.

Apart from Gnosticism, the Roman Church, situated at the center of the empire, faced numerous heretical challenges. In George La Piana's view, the first-century Church believed that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent, hence the believers placed little emphasis on Church structure, doctrinal formulation, or social or political issues. By the end of the second and beginning of the third centuries, however, the Church began to adopt uniform creeds, governance, and liturgies to ensure the consistency of faith and practice. The emergence of papal primacy was a response to the needs of the Roman Church at this time. Victor I, the Bishop of Rome, asserted his primacy by establishing a universal date for Easter, declaring his primatial authority, and attempting to resist the onslaught of various heresies that were prevalent in the city of Rome. Nevertheless, the papal primacy dealt a blow to the open-ended principle of apostolic succession, demanding that local churches adhere to the ways of the Roman Church. The local churches, which had just established their apostolic succession, were now required to submit to the authority of the Bishop of Rome. The controversy over the date of Easter at the end of the second century arose from the collision of these two theological perspectives.

The legitimacy of the papal primacy derived from the ancient fathers' interpretation of a passage in the *Gospel of Matthew*. When Peter confessed Jesus to be the Son of God, Jesus immediately said to him: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:17–19). The bishops of the Roman Church claimed to be the successors of Peter, thus inheriting the primacy of the apostolic succession. In the latter part of the second century, the prevailing view among most Western Christian writers was that Peter and Paul together established the Roman Church, hence the Roman Church possessed greater authority than other churches. For example, Irenaeus stated in *Against Heresies* that "There is one, very great, and most ancient and known to all, the Church founded and established at Rome by two most glorious

Apostles, Peter and Paul, whose Tradition which it hath from the Apostles, and her faith proclaimed unto men by succession of Bishops coming down even unto us, we point to, thereby confounding all those, who in any way form undue assemblies. . . For with this Church, on account of its higher original, the whole Church (I mean the faithful on all sides) must needs agree; wherein the Tradition which is of the Apostles hath ever been preserved by them of all countries" (Irenaeus 1872, 3.3.2, p. 206). The Apostles Peter and Paul were symbols of authority in the Early Church, so Irenaeus's narrative not only indicates that the teaching of the Bishop of Rome inherited the faith of the apostles but also underscores the exalted status of the Roman Church.

Firstly, the establishment of papal primacy in the Roman Church was related to the multitude of heresies in the city of Rome. As the capital of the empire, Rome attracted people from all over the world. Within Christianity, believers from Asia Minor, bishops and Church leaders from various cities, and even leaders of heresies all sought to visit Rome. Here were buried not only the bodies of the saints but also intellectuals of the highest caliber. Therefore, although there were many Christians in Rome during the first two centuries, the heterogeneous population made the Roman Church far inferior in terms of influence compared with Eastern churches. La Piana believed that the heterogeneity and inclusivity of the city of Rome led to weaker unity and assimilation capabilities of the Roman Church compared with churches in Asia Minor and other regions, which is one of the major reasons why the Roman Church attempted to unify thought at the end of the second century (George La Piana 1925, pp. 206–13). Moreover, due to the congregation of numerous Christian heretics in Rome, leaders of heresies such as Marcionism, Gnosticism, and Montanism sought to establish independent ecclesiastical systems and rituals in Rome. In such circumstances, the Roman Church needed to establish Church authority and legitimacy to combat heretical attacks.

In the writings of Eusebius, Victor I not only participated in the Easter controversy but also refuted the heretic Theodotus (Eusebius of Caesarea 2016, 5.27.6, p. 230). However, in the narratives of later scholars, it seems that they overlooked his great achievements in refuting heresies and criticized him only for his severe punishment measures in the Easter controversy. Many of Victor I's actions were likely related to the purpose of refuting heresies.

Secondly, the establishment of the papal primacy stemmed from its attempt to promote Latinized rituals and practices in churches across different regions. Victor I faced significant opposition and rebuke from numerous bishops, including even Irenaeus, for his severe measures against churches in Asia Minor and neighboring regions. I think Victor I's refutation was influenced by the theological perspectives prevalent in the Eastern Church at the time. During the first two centuries, churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire were imbued with Hellenistic elements. The Roman Church was no exception as most Christians in second-century Rome were immigrants from the Eastern Church. In the salutations of his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul mentions Aquila, who was among those in Asia who believed in Christ. La Piana even suggests that Victor I's election as Bishop of Rome was due to the Greek influence in the Church (George La Piana 1925, pp. 204–5, 221–23). As non-Jewish Christians became the mainstream of Christianity, it was inevitable that early Christian theology took on Hellenistic characteristics.

However, as the number of native Roman Christians gradually increased, the bishops of the Roman Church began to attempt to propagate Latinized rituals and practices in churches across different regions, such as selecting a new Easter date based on the Julian calendar. Charles L. Souvay implied that Victor I's style of reaction was related to the fact that he was Latin and that it was Victor's race that made him turn his mind to law, administration, and order (Charles L. Souvay 1929, pp. 52–57). However, I feel more that the development of Latin theology and Latinized rituals in the Roman Church seems to be directly related to resistance against Marcionism. Marcion, active in the mid-second century AD, was the first to translate the Bible into Latin. However, his teachings contained numerous fallacies. Justin Martyr mentioned in the *First Apology*: "Then there is a certain Marcion of Pontus, who even now still teaches his disciples to believe in another and

greater god than the Creator. Assisted by the demons, he has caused many men of every country to blaspheme, and to deny that God is the Creator of the universe, and to proclaim another god to be greater and to have done greater deeds than He" (Justin Martyr 1948, 26, pp. 62–63). Justin's views were also acknowledged by Irenaeus (Irenaeus 1872, 5.26.2, p. 523). Marcion was the first to attempt to teach the people of Rome in Latin while other theologians in the Western churches were still writing in Greek. These Greek texts could not meet the needs of the impoverished people of Rome. Therefore, although Marcion's views were rejected by the Roman Church, he still received a warm response in the city of Rome at the time, likely because the people were able to read his works written in Latin. Amid the onslaught of Marcionism, the Roman Church needed to accelerate the promotion of orthodox Latin theological concepts and rituals within the Church.

When the Easter controversy erupted at the end of the second century, the first theologian to write a Christian work in Latin appeared in Carthage, North Africa; he was known as the father of Latin theology, Tertullian. Steven Mason's assessment of Tertullian is quite apt: "Tertullian's writings were crucial to Christian self-definition and in creating a Latin theological vocabulary" (Steven Mason 2007, p. 471). Tertullian's most unique contribution was to detach Christianity from its heavily Hellenistic environment. Unlike the second-century apologists who actively embraced Greek philosophy, Tertullian vehemently criticized the significance of Greek philosophy: "What then hath Athens in common with Jerusalem? What hath the Academy in common with the Church? What have heretics in common with Christians? Our principles are from the 'Porch' of Solomon, who himself handed down that the Lord must be sought in simplicity of heart. Away with those who bring forward a Stoic or Platonic or dialectic Christianity" (Tertullian 1914, pp. 45–46). Both Victor I and Tertullian hailed from North Africa and were active from the end of the second century to the beginning of the third century. Therefore, Victor I likely adopted a somewhat consistent approach with Tertullian in theology. Faced with the Judaizing practices in the churches of Asia Minor and some theological arguments imbued with Greek philosophy, Victor I was committed to eradicating this trend and was willing to break away from it.

For Victor I, the Roman Church of the first and second centuries was permeated with Eastern influences, making it difficult to address the genuine needs of the faithful in the city of Rome. Additionally, various heretical groups further fragmented the Roman Church. In such an environment, Victor I struggled to establish his authority and lacked the power to stop the spread of heresies. To achieve theological unity, he had to exert dominance over the Eastern Church. He ultimately chose the issue of the Easter date as a means to assert the authority of the Roman Church. By promoting the liturgy and traditions of the churches from the Western part of the empire, Victor I brought the Latin Church and its theology to the forefront of history.

5. Conclusions

In the second century AD, Christian churches across the Roman Empire celebrated Easter on different dates. The differences in the chosen dates influenced the timing of fasting, baptism, and the Eucharist in various churches. As a result, numerous controversies erupted within Christianity in the mid to late second century regarding the date of Easter, with the dispute between Victor I and Polycrates being particularly notable. Festivals, as cultural traditions, should gradually form over the long-term development of people and society. However, the Early Church, for various reasons, completely transformed the sacred status of Passover in the eyes of Jewish Christians and ultimately created a brand-new festival.

Churches in different regions sought to propagate their theological views in the controversy. The Easter date controversy was not just a matter of time but also a struggle for apostolic authority within the Early Church. In resisting heresies, churches across different regions appealed to apostolic succession as the basis for their authority. However, the Roman Church faced the dilemma of rampant heresies and could only stand firm by establishing a unified theological and doctrinal framework. Therefore, in this controversy,

the Roman Church attempted to establish primacy above other churches, demanding that churches across different regions commemorate Easter according to the time set by the Roman Church. Victor I's efforts to centralize authority and promote Latinized rituals were responses to the heterogeneity of the Roman Church and the influence of heretical teachings. From this, the formation of the papacy may not necessarily have had a clear biblical or traditional basis. Rather, it represented a theological concept that emerged within the specific cultural and religious context of the Roman Church. This autocratic theological idea clashed with the open apostolic succession theology and eventually led the Church from peaceful development in the mid-second century to intense debate by the end of the second century. These new theological ideas were the tip of the iceberg hidden beneath the controversy over the festival. On the surface, the Eastern and Western churches were merely discussing the date of Easter, but in reality, various churches were using the establishment of Easter to create a new theology and struggle for the apostolic authority.

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Notes

- ¹ The primary sources used in this paper include the *History of the Church* written by Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century, in which he provides a detailed account of the Easter controversy in the second century. To ensure the reliability of the argumentation, I sought works by second-century Christian writers that were contemporaneous with the Easter controversy, including those of Irenaeus, the martyr Justin, and Tertullian. The texts utilized are English translations published by the Catholic University of America Press, which are more readily accessible and widely used in contemporary academia.

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