

# The Early History of Lent

BY NICHOLAS V. RUSSO

The season of Lent appears after the Council of Nicea. With so many biblical precedents, did it really take the Church more than 300 years to seize upon the idea of fasting for forty days? The early history of Lent is interesting and complex; it is something of a “choose your own adventure.”

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U ntil relatively recently, the origins of Lent—known as *Tessarakosti* in Greek and *Quadragesima* in Latin, for “the Forty”—were believed to be self-evident. Many of the theology handbooks of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century confidently claimed that Lent was established by the apostles themselves or in the immediate post-apostolic period at the latest. They assumed this season of fasting was closely connected with preparation for Easter baptisms—a practice likewise considered to be of apostolic foundation (cf. Romans 6) and observed everywhere throughout the Church since its earliest days.<sup>1</sup>

Closer examination of the ancient sources, however, reveals a more gradual historical development. While fasting before Easter seems to have been ancient and widespread, the length of that fast varied significantly from place to place and across generations. In the latter half of the second century, for instance, Irenaeus of Lyons (in Gaul) and Tertullian (in North Africa) tell us that the preparatory fast lasted one or two days, or forty hours—commemorating what was believed to be the exact duration of Christ’s time in the tomb. By the mid-third century, Dionysius of Alexandria speaks of a fast of up to six days practiced by the devout in his see; and the Byzantine historian Socrates relates that the Christians of Rome at some point kept a fast of three weeks.<sup>2</sup> Only following the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. did the length of Lent become fixed at forty days, and then only nomi-

nally. Accordingly, it was assumed that the forty-day Lent that we encounter almost everywhere by the mid-fourth century must have been the result of a gradual lengthening of the pre-Easter fast by adding days and weeks to the original one- or two-day observance.<sup>3</sup> This lengthening, in turn, was thought necessary to make up for the waning zeal of the post-apostolic church and to provide a longer period of instruction for the increasing numbers of former pagans thronging to the font for Easter baptism. Such remained the standard theory for most of the twentieth century.



Today, the history of Lent's origins is far less certain because many of the suppositions upon which the standard theory rested have been cast into doubt. First, scholars no longer take for granted the antiquity and ubiquity of Paschal baptism. Tertullian, admittedly, indicates that Easter was a "most solemn day for baptism," but he is only one of a handful of writers in the pre-Nicene period (that is, before 325 A.D.) who indicates this preference and even he says that Easter was by no means the only favored day for baptisms in his locale. Easter baptism does not become widespread until the mid-fourth century, and when it does, it appears to be nothing more than an idealized norm alongside which other equally acceptable occasions continue to exist.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the fasts observed before baptism described in many pre-Nicene sources are no longer presumed to be pre-paschal or related in any way to Lent. The second-century Syrian church order known as the *Didache*, for example, commends "the baptizer, the one to be baptized, and any others that are able" to fast to prepare for the sacrament (7:4). At around the same time, Justin Martyr tells us that fasting was also enjoined on baptismal candidates in his community, and that existing members likewise prayed and fasted with them (*First Apology*, 61). Previously, scholars assumed these and other pre-baptismal fasts were pre-paschal and related to, if not identical, with the early Lent.<sup>5</sup> With Easter baptism no longer the ancient and widespread custom once thought, these baptismal fasts too were reexamined. Rather than being part of a proto-Lent, they are now interpreted simply as free-floating periods of fasting undertaken whenever baptisms were administered.<sup>6</sup>

Third, developing research on Holy Week and the Triduum<sup>7</sup> has shown that these periods are not the cores of a gradually lengthening pre-Easter fast, but are actually separate periods to which the forty-day Lent has been joined or overlaps. We find this distinction first in Athanasius of Alexandria's *Festal Letters* sent annually to communicate, among other things, the date of Easter and its fast.<sup>8</sup> In his first five letters (329-333 A.D.), Athanasius indicates that the "holy fast" spans only the six days before Pascha, perhaps revealing that Lent had not yet been observed in Egypt. When he introduces the forty-day Lent in his sixth letter (334 A.D.), Athanasius continues to note the beginning of the more ancient six-day fast of "the holy days of Pascha," even though it is now part of the new six-week fast.

This distinction becomes more pronounced as the six days before Easter develop liturgically into Holy Week and push Lent back so that it no longer overlaps. In the Byzantine vesper (evening prayer) hymns for the Friday *before* Holy Week, for example, when the cantor proclaims, “Having completed the forty days that bring profit to our soul...,” it is clear that Lent has ended by this point. On the following two days – Lazarus Saturday and

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Palm Sunday – the fasting rules are relaxed in this tradition and a new more rigorous fast is begun with Holy Week (known as “Great Week” in the Byzantine and other Eastern traditions). We encounter the same phenomenon in Antioch where the late-fourth century church order *Apostolic Constitutions* (V.13.3-4) informs us that the more rigorous fast “of the

Holy Week of Pascha” *follows* the fast of the forty days and its observance is given a different rationale (V.14.20). At around the same time John Chrysostom (*Homilies on Genesis*, 30.1-3) and Egeria (*Itinerarium* 30.1) also distinguish “Great Week” from the rest of Lent and indicate that its liturgical character changes with respect to the preceding weeks.

In the West, on the other hand, the distinction between Lent and the Triduum is admittedly not as evident. It is now recognized that, as a *liturgical* entity, the Triduum is a much later development than previously assumed.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, the ritual markers that would come to distinguish it from the rest of Lent – e.g., the unveiling of the statues and the singing of the *Gloria* on Maundy Thursday – emerge too late to tell us anything about the relationship between the two periods earlier in history. Nonetheless, the Triduum as a *theological* concept can be seen as early as the third century (Origen, *Homilies on Exodus* 5.2) and it gains wide currency in the West with writers such as Ambrose and Augustine. Whatever the state of its liturgical development, by the fifth century Pope Leo I considers the forty days of Lent to conclude with Maundy Thursday (Tractate 39), and he conceives of the Good Friday-Holy Saturday fast as a separate entity. It seems, therefore, that the forty days are not prolongations of the ancient Easter fasts (whether one, two, or six days long), but that they constitute a conceptually distinct unit that has been *added* to or *overlaid* on these early fasts.

These new developments in scholarship have led some to conclude that the early history of Lent is simply impossible to reconstruct. The first clear and indisputable evidence for the forty-day Lent does not appear until after the Council of Nicea, and when it does, it looks to be unrelated to the earlier

short pre-Easter fasts. As a result, some have suggested that Lent is best understood as an entirely new phenomenon that emerges rather suddenly after Nicea and that any organic or genetic relationship it may have to pre-Nicene fasting practices cannot be proved.

Other scholars have been less willing to abandon the effort to reconstruct the pre-history of Lent by focusing attention on a unique, and hotly contested Egyptian fasting tradition. According to several, admittedly late sources, Christians in pre-Nicene Egypt observed a forty-day fast that began after the Feast of Theophany (i.e., Epiphany) on January 6 (11 Tybi on the Egyptian calendar). In strict imitation of the gospel narrative, this community would have commemorated the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan on January 6 and on the following day begun a forty-day fast just as Jesus had. Some sources claim further that this community baptized its catechumens at the end of the post-Theophany fast and not at Easter. After the Council of Nicea, the theory speculates, this fast would have been moved from its original position after Theophany and joined to Easter creating the Lent we know and with it bringing Egypt's baptismal practice in line with the rest of the Church. The question is why and how did this shift occur?



The answer, at least according to one scholar, is to be found in another hotly contested tradition: the so-called "Secret Gospel of Mark." In 1958, an American biblical scholar discovered a letter by Clement of Alexandria (late-second and early-third centuries) that quotes a scriptural passage which Clement claims belongs to a secret gospel of Mark – an expansion of the original, canonical account that Mark compiled for those undertaking more advanced spiritual instruction. In the passage quoted, Jesus raises a young man in Bethany and invites him to an evening encounter where Jesus teaches him "the mystery of the kingdom of God."<sup>10</sup> Thomas Talley, a historian of Christian and Jewish worship, believed this newfound fragment provided the key to explain the shift of Egypt's post-Theophany fast and the birth of Lent. Talley theorized that Egyptian Christians read the Gospel of Mark chapter by chapter and modeled their liturgical practices on the unfolding narrative. Beginning on January 6, this community read Mark 1 and commemorated the Baptism in the Jordan. Then continuing their course reading of Mark, they fasted for forty days, just as Jesus had. Six weeks later, they would arrive at the point in canonical Mark (after Mark 10:34) where the secret passage was inserted. Once again, in strict imitation of the narrative, they would baptize their catechumens teaching them "the mystery of the kingdom" just as Jesus had done with the young man in Secret Mark. Then, following the Council of Nicea, the church of Egypt adopted Easter baptism and transferred its fast, giving rise to Lent as we know it.

The evidence for this hypothesis, Talley claimed, could be found in the Lenten lectionary of the Byzantine Church. On the Saturdays and Sundays of

Lent in this tradition, the Gospel of Mark is read almost in order until the Saturday before Palm Sunday. At this point, instead of reading Secret Mark, the Byzantine Church selected the nearest canonical equivalent: the raising of Lazarus from John 11. And this Saturday, known as Lazarus Saturday, was one of the favored days for baptism in the Byzantine tradition. According to Talley, these striking similarities were not merely coincidental. Here in the Byzantine

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tradition, we find evidence of Egypt's post-Theophany fast now transferred to Easter and adopted by other Christian communities.

Aside from being highly speculative, there are several problems with this theory. First, some have alleged that the "Secret Gospel of Mark" and the letter of Clement of Alexandria in which it is contained is a modern forgery

concocted in the twentieth century by its purported discoverer. Second, even if Secret Mark is authentic and ancient, it is not at all clear that the strange story it relates about Jesus and the Lazarus-like figure is baptismal. Third, there is no evidence that the early Egyptian church had any special preference for the Gospel of Mark for course reading. What little is presently known about the lectionary in Egypt reveals a penchant for drawing eclectically from all four Gospels and without necessarily following the evangelists' ordering of events. Fourth, there is nothing to indicate that Constantinople inherited the cycle of its Lenten gospel readings from Egypt. Influence on the early Byzantine liturgy seems to come from Syria, particularly Antioch, and not from Egypt. Finally, and perhaps most damning, Mark's Gospel makes no mention of Jesus fasting in the wilderness; only Matthew and Luke relate the tradition of Jesus having fasted. If the post-Theophany fast developed out of a slavish and literal imitation of the Gospel narrative, it would seem that that Gospel could not have been Mark's.

Another significant weakness in this theory has to do with the evidence that Egyptian Christians fasted for forty days after the Feast of Theophany. As mentioned above, the references to this unique Egyptian custom are all very late: the earliest witness to mention it explicitly dates to the ninth-tenth century and it comes from Syria, not Egypt; the earliest clear Egyptian reference is from the following century. In addition, the other bits of evidence which may allude to the post-Theophany fast are vague and mutually contradictory. As a result, some scholars conclude that these sources simply cannot be relied upon for an accurate picture of ancient Egyptian practice. On their basis alone, the historicity of the post-Theophany fast cannot be established.



Despite this justified suspicion, there are other indicators revealing that the post-Theophany fast may be something more than a late fabricated legend. As early as the mid-third century, we begin to find references to a forty-day fasting period that is not specifically connected to Easter. The earliest of these is found in a series of *Homilies on Leviticus* composed by Origen, a third-century theologian from Alexandria, Egypt. To dissuade Christians from observing the Jewish Day of Atonement, Origen argues that “we [Christians] have forty days dedicated to fasting; we have the fourth [Wednesday] and sixth day [Friday] of the week on which we regularly fast.”<sup>11</sup> A little more than a half-century later, the Egyptian collection of church laws (or, canons) known as the *Canons of Hippolytus* similarly indicates that Christians fast on “Wednesday, Friday, and the Forty,” and that anyone who fails to observe them “disobeys God who fasted on our behalf” (Canon 20).<sup>12</sup> The same document describes the fast before Easter in another section (Canon 22), and it is only a week in length. It seems, at the very least then, that “the Forty” does not refer to a pre-Easter Lent. While it is admittedly not certain that Origen and the *Canons of Hippolytus* are referring to the supposed post-Theophany fast, it is surely suggestive especially when the *Canons* invoke the “God who fasted on our behalf” in support of the custom.

In addition to these possible allusions to Egypt’s post-Theophany fast, there are several examples of forty-day fasts of other types during this period. In his *Canonical Epistle*, Peter, bishop of Alexandria in the early fourth century, legislates a fast of forty days for lapsed Christians to be readmitted from their term of excommunication (Canon 1). The same *Canons of Hippolytus* stipulates that catechumens who earn their living by “impure occupations” – for example, by wrestling, running, acting, hairdressing, and so on – must undergo a forty-day period of purification before they can be baptized. Another mid-fourth century collection of church legislation, the *Canons of Athanasius*, prescribes forty days of fasting as penance for adulteresses and executioners who wish to be readmitted to the Eucharist. Fasting for forty-days, for whatever purpose or occasion, seems to have been a rather common phenomenon in the pre-Nicene and Nicene period, especially in Egypt.



The ubiquity of forty-day fasts should perhaps not surprise us given the prevalence and significance of the number forty in biblical literature. The flood lasts forty days and nights (Genesis 7:4, 12, 17); the ceremonies surrounding the embalming of Jacob last forty days (Genesis 50:3); and the Israelites wander in the wilderness for forty years during which they receive miraculous sustenance (Exodus 16:35) before entering the “land flowing with milk and honey.” Wandering-entrance becomes a primary typology for catechesis-baptism in the early Church, and milk and honey were sometimes administered along with the Eucharist to the newly baptized.

Forty days as a period of fasting is equally common in Scripture. Moses fasts twice for forty days and nights on Mt. Sinai: once after receiving the Law (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9), and again when he discovers the infidelity of the Israelites in fashioning the Golden Calf (Deuteronomy 9:18). Elijah travels for forty days and nights without food after slaying the prophets of Baal and fleeing the wrath of Jezebel (1 Kings 19:7-8). The Ninevites fast

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for forty days to stave off the wrath of God (Jonah 3:4).

And forty-day fasts show up in many deuterocanonical texts such as 3 Baruch, *Apocalypse of Sedrach*, and the many versions of the so-called *Life of Adam and Eve*.

If forty-day fasts were commonplace, and the typological foundations many, some may wonder why the evidence for a post-Theophany

fast is so circumstantial. Especially if it could find solid biblical justification in Jesus' own fast in the wilderness, why are there no sources that tell us clearly of the custom? Did it really take the Church more than 300 years to seize upon the idea of fasting for forty days? The answer may be found in the origins of Theophany itself. When the feast appears, it seems to be observed first among the heterodox. Clement of Alexandria, a second-century theologian, tells us that "the followers of Basilides hold the day of [Christ's] baptism as a festival" (*Stromateis* 1.21). According to orthodox critics, the Basilidians were a group that held, like some other Gnostics, that the Divinity joined itself to Jesus at the moment of his baptism. This belief that Jesus was somehow adopted to divine Sonship at his baptism, or at some other point in his life, is known as "adoptionism" or "adoptionistic Christology," and it enjoyed fairly wide currency in the second and third centuries. There is no evidence that the Basilidians fasted after their Theophany feast, but based on a description of heretical practices by a twelfth-century Armenian prelate, one scholar has argued that the post-Theophany fast was practiced by certain adoptionistic groups. If that was indeed the case—that the custom was common among the heterodox—it would go a long way to explaining why we hear nothing about it in the early period and why Lent emerges suddenly after the Council of Nicea.

In addition to addressing the Arian crisis, the Council of Nicea issued canons intended to bring general alignment on matters of liturgical practice and church organization. Among these was the establishment of a common date for the Easter feast that, up until that time, had been commemorated on different days in a given year depending on the method of calculation. While

there is no evidence that the Council also dealt with Lent, one may surmise that its establishment prior to Easter, drawn from among the various and sundry fasting customs already being observed (including, perhaps, an Egyptian post-Theophany fast), was part of a broader movement toward alignment and standardization begun at Nicea and continued throughout the fourth century. And, if a post-Theophany fast was a hallmark of groups deemed heretical, the establishment of a forty-day Lent prior to Easter would stand in contradistinction as a touchstone of liturgical and theological allegiance.



At this point, the early history of Lent becomes something of a “choose your own adventure.” The current state of research points to three possible conclusions. Because the evidence is slim and admitting of any number of plausible interpretations, one position has been to view Lent as a *sui generis* phenomenon – completely new and unique – that simply appears after the Council of Nicea. In this view, any attempt to hazard connections or lines of evolution from pre-Nicene fasting practices is too speculative to be of any value. Another, rather opposite, position has been to accept as historical the alleged Egyptian post-Theophany fast, to identify it as the dominant antecedent to Lent, and that Lent’s rapid dissemination throughout the Christian world is best explained in relation to the program of liturgical and theological alignment begun at Nicea. A final position, a sort of *via media* or middle road, acknowledges the incomplete and sometimes-contradictory nature of the evidence, but asserts nonetheless that Lent develops as an amalgamation of several early fasting customs and typologies of which the post-Theophany fast (if it existed) may have been but one of many. As with most issues in the study of the early history of the liturgy, certainty is elusive and we must be satisfied with possibilities. *Judicet lector*: let the reader decide.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

1 See, for example, Alban Butler, *The Moveable Feasts, Fasts, and Other Annual Observances of the Catholic Church* (New York: John Doyle, 1836), 135-243, especially 141; and Peter Gunning, *The Paschal or Lent Fast: Apostolic and Perpetual* (Oxford, UK: John Henry Parker, 1845), 82-85.

2 Rome observed the forty-day Lent by the time Socrates wrote in the mid-fifth century. It is presumed, therefore, that he is misinformed for his own day, but that the three weeks he reports may have indeed been accurate at earlier period in the Roman church. Sozomen, another fifth-century Byzantine historian, also claims to know of some locales where three weeks are fasted within a six- or seven-week Lent and others where three consecutive weeks of fasting are kept before Easter (*Historia Ecclesiastica* VII.19).

3 See, for example, Vernon Staley, *The Liturgical Year: An Explanation of the Origin, History and Significance of the Festival Days and Fasting Days of The English Church* (London, UK: A. R. Mowbray and Co., 1907), 190-200; especially 191.

4 Paul F. Bradshaw, “‘*Diem baptismo sollemniorem*’: Initiation and Easter in Christian Antiquity” in E. Carr, S. Parenti, and A.-A. Thiermeyer, and E. Velkovska, eds., *EULOGHMA: Studies in Honor of Robert Taft, S.J.*, *Studia Anselmiana* 110, *Analecta liturgica* 17 (Rome, IT: 1993) 41-51; reprinted in Maxwell E. Johnson, ed., *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on*

*Christian Initiation*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 137-147.

5 W. K. Lowther Clarke, ed., *Lent: A Manual for the Clergy* (London, UK: SPCK, 1933), 1.

6 Maxwell E. Johnson, "From Three Weeks to Forty Days: Baptismal Preparation and the Origins of Lent," *Studia Liturgica* 20.2 (1990), 185-200; reprinted in Johnson, ed., *Living Water*, 118-136.

7 On the Triduum, see footnote 9 below.

8 The traditional ordering and dating of the festal letters has been corrected by Alberto Camplani, *Atanasio di Alessandria: Lettere Festali; Anonimo: Indice delle Lettere Festali* (Milan, IT: Paoline, 2003).

9 See Harald Buchinger, "Was There Ever a Liturgical Triduum in Antiquity? Theological Idea and Liturgical Reality," *Ecclesia Orans* 27 (2010), 257-270. When the Triduum emerges as an identifiable *liturgical* unit in the medieval period, it comprises Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. As a *theological* concept, however, it is much older, and it encompasses Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter—the days on which Christ "suffered, rested, and rose again;" cf. Ambrose of Milan, *Letter to the Bishops of Aemilia* (386), 13; English translation in J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 286.

10 See Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 447 and 452.

11 *Homilies on Leviticus* 10.2:5-6; English translation in Gary Wayne Barkley, *Origen: Homilies on Leviticus: 1-16*, Fathers of the Church 83 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 206-207.

12 The *Canons of Basil*, a later canonical collection dependent on the *Canons of Hippolytus*, orders the faithful to "observe *the fast of the Lord* in their churches" (emphasis added).

13 I wish to thank the Rev. Dr. Maxwell E. Johnson for reading a draft of this article and for his helpful suggestions. Any errors that remain are the author's alone.

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