

The Historical Origins of Lent

Introduction

Every year, as the season of Lent begins, a variety of essays, articles, posts, and tweets emerge discussing its observance. This season may be unfamiliar to many people, whether they are Christians or not, leading to inevitable questions about what Lent is and its purpose. If you are looking to learn more about the origins of Lent, you have come to the right place. Additionally, in the circles I inhabit, there are annual discussions about whether Lent should be practiced, given the claim that it is a Roman Catholic invention and that Reformed Protestants should not engage in Roman Catholic traditions. However, this line of thinking is flawed. Lent is not a Roman Catholic invention; rather, it is an ancient Christian practice with historical roots that trace back as far as we have records. Thus, rejecting Lent solely due to its associations with Roman Catholicism is misguided reasoning.

This article is part of these ongoing discussions. In it, I aim to provide foundational information about the origins of Lent while also making a case for its practice by exploring its historical development. Therefore, we will address one key question: **What are the historical origins of Lent? How far back does its observance go, and what can we say about ancient Lenten practices?**

Lenten Origins Found in Holy Week

The origins of Lent date back to at least the mid-second century. While the 40-day penitential season cannot be traced further than the early fourth century, it developed from earlier, shorter preparatory fasts leading up to Easter. Several sources, including the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, *The Apostolic Tradition*, and a *Festal Letter* by Dionysius of Alexandria, mention preparatory fasts lasting one, two, or six days before Easter, depending on the time and location. This places the practice of pre-Easter fasting as early as the first half of the third century (200–250 AD). If these sources describe these fasts as established traditions, then it is reasonable to assume that their origins extend even further into the latter half of the second century—or possibly earlier.

From Holy Week to Quadragesima

By the early fourth century, the six-day preparatory fast had evolved into Holy Week, and the penitential period was extended to 40 days, symbolizing the fasts of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Several key historical figures provide evidence of this development. One of the most prominent is **St. Athanasius (c. 297–373 AD)**, an early Church Father held in high regard by all Christians. There are two primary reasons for his significance:

1. **Defender of Nicene Orthodoxy:** Athanasius was a leading opponent of the early heresy of Arianism, which denied the divinity of Christ. He attended the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), where the Nicene Creed was formulated, and he continued to defend the orthodox view of the Trinity throughout his life, enduring multiple exiles for his faith.
2. **Father of the Biblical Canon:** Athanasius' 39th *Festal Letter* (367 AD) is the first recorded articulation of the complete New Testament canon as we know it today. This letter is particularly significant for Protestants because Athanasius excluded the deuterocanonical books, commonly called the Apocrypha.

Less well known, however, is Athanasius' role as an advocate for the observance of Lent. In his **2nd Festal Letter of 330 AD**, written 37 years before his famous 39th letter, he actively promoted the practice of Lent.

Lent in the Council of Nicaea

The prevalence of Lent by the mid-fourth century is further confirmed by evidence from the **Council of Nicaea (325 AD)**. This first ecumenical council of the Church, which formally established the doctrine of the Trinity, also recognized a 40-day preparatory liturgical season preceding Easter. While the Council did not mandate the observance of Lent, it acknowledged its widespread practice. **Canon 5** of the Council states that local synods should meet twice a year: "One before Lent (*Greek: tessarakosta; Latin: Quadragesima*; literally: '40 days'), so that all pettiness being set aside, the gift offered to God may be unblemished." This reference is significant because it indicates that by 325 AD, Lent was already a well-established practice in the Church. If the Nicene Fathers referred to Lent in their deliberations, it must have been widely observed.

Thus, by the fourth century, Lent was developing at the same time as the finalization of the biblical canon and the formalization of Trinitarian doctrine. Neither of these theological pillars—**the Trinity and the Canon**—are explicitly outlined in the Bible, yet they were recognized as essential doctrines derived from Scripture. Should the development of the Church calendar, including Lent, also be considered a legitimate articulation of biblical principles? I would argue so.

Creed, Canon, and Church Year

In light of this historical evidence, what conclusions can we draw?

I argue that Lent is an ancient and universal Christian practice. Evidence for its observance is as old as the earliest records of the biblical canon and the formulation of Trinitarian orthodoxy. However, I am not suggesting that observing Lent is as essential as believing in the Trinity or the authority of the New Testament. It is important to clarify that Athanasius' **39th Festal Letter** was not the origin of the biblical canon—it merely articulated what had already been widely recognized

by early Christians. Likewise, the Council of Nicaea did not invent Trinitarian belief, as the doctrine of the Trinity had been an integral part of Christian faith since the days of the apostles.

Similarly, Lent as we know it was formally established in the fourth century, yet its roots extend back to the second century. Furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere, the Church calendar itself has clear biblical justification. Thus, while Lent may not be as ancient or fundamental as the biblical canon or the doctrine of the Trinity, it is nonetheless an ancient and respectable practice. Moreover, we see in **Athanasius—one of the greatest defenders of both those theological pillars—an ardent supporter of Lent’s observance.**

The Observance of Lent in Eastern Christianity

In the **Eastern Orthodox Church**, Lent follows a slightly different structure than in the Western Church. The Sunday before Lent begins is called **Cheesefare Sunday** by the Greeks, as it marks the last day before the strict fast begins. The Monday following it is the start of **Clean Week**, which corresponds to **Sexagesima Sunday** in the Latin tradition.

The Eastern Church abstains from **meat, dairy, eggs, and even fish** throughout Lent. The only permitted foods are **bread, vegetables, honey, and, for coastal communities, shellfish**. For many centuries, even **wine was forbidden**, though it is now permitted in moderation. On **the Annunciation and Palm Sunday**, a dispensation allows for the consumption of fish. Besides the **Great Lent** leading up to Easter, the Eastern Orthodox Church observes three additional fasting periods throughout the year:

1. **The Apostles' Fast** (from the octave of Pentecost to the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul).
2. **The Dormition Fast** (from August 1 to the vigil of the Assumption).
3. **The Nativity Fast** (a 40-day preparation for Christmas).

These fasts, though slightly less severe than **Great Lent**, demonstrate the continued importance of fasting in the Christian tradition.

Conclusion

It is with some reluctance that we conclude this exploration of Lent, as many fascinating details remain untold. For example, the **Eastern Churches have preserved much of the primitive Lenten discipline**, offering further insight into early Christian practices. Nevertheless, the evidence presented here affirms that Lent is an ancient and widely observed Christian tradition. It is neither a mere Roman Catholic invention nor an arbitrary ritual. Instead, it is a meaningful period of penitence and preparation, deeply rooted in the history of the Church.