

THE ORIGINS OF EASTER

Once again, the churches of mainstream Christianity will be celebrating Holy Week, starting with Palm Sunday and culminating with the observance of the resurrection from the death of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday.

As a young boy with a devoutly Catholic upbringing, I grew up in the Easter tradition and celebration. The whole family marched off to the neighborhood church, all of us smartly dressed up in our new clothes.

We left home a little earlier than usual because Mom and Dad wanted to make sure we would have seats in the crowded church for the Easter High Mass.

I noticed that Easter Sunday was the only time Dad went to confession and received holy communion. It was only in catechism class I learned that the Catholic Church commanded all adults under penalty of condemnation to everlasting fire, to go to Mass, confession and holy communion on Easter Sunday.

The Mass was incredibly long and boring. The communion line wound its way around, inside the church and outside to the crowded plaza.

I was growing impatient in the hot, stuffy building and couldn't wait to get to Grandma's house for the egg-hunting and the sumptuous Easter meal. After all, whoever got the most eggs — all of them brightly colored — received a prize. And then there was the prestige and honor of finding the highly-coveted golden egg.

The Origins of Easter

Does Easter celebrate the resurrection of Christ? Does the Bible command true Christians to keep Easter? Did the Apostles observe Easter? Did the first century Christians dye eggs? Did Peter, Paul and the other apostles conduct an Easter sunrise service? Is Easter even

mentioned in the Bible? Where did it come from and how did it make it into Christianity?

The name “Easter,” its traditional practices and observances are pagan in origin but disguised in Christian dress. In *The Two Babylons*, author Alexander Hislop states that “basically every pagan, vile, idolatrous practice we have today traces its origins to ancient Babel, the city founded by Nimrod and his mother-wife Semiramis.”

In *Babylon Mystery Religion*, Ralph Woodrow quotes this statement from the historian Herodotus: “Babylon was the primeval source from which ALL systems of idolatry flowed.”

The name “Easter” is the English name of the ancient Assyrian goddess Ishtar (from the Babylonian goddess Astarte). Ishtar was the goddess of fertility and immoral sexual activity. Hislop describes Easter as being of “Chaldean origin...nothing else than Astarte, one of the titles of Beltis, the queen of heaven...”

Most dictionaries clearly reveal the pagan origins of Easter. *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* says: “The word Easter is of Saxon origin, Eastr, the goddess of spring, in whose honor sacrifices were offered about Passover time each year. By the eight century Anglo-Saxons had adopted the name to designate the celebration of Christ’s resurrection.”

The Easter Story

As the Babylonian mystery religion spread throughout the world, so did its pagan beliefs and practices. Supposedly, the earliest Easter story comes from the Sumerian legend of Tammuz and his wife Ishtar.

When Tammuz dies, Ishtar is grief-stricken and follows him to the underworld. During her absence, the earth loses its fertility, crops cease to grow and animals stop mating. All life is threatened.

Then the god of water and wisdom dispatches a messenger who sprinkles the water of life on Tammuz and Ishtar, giving them power to

return to the earth as the light of the sun for six months. After the six months are up, Tammuz returns to the underworld of the dead, remaining there for another six months, and Ishtar pursues him, prompting the water god to rescue them both. Thus were the cycles of winter death and spring life.

While the traditions and symbols have varied from culture to culture the presiding themes are fertility, conception, renewal, descent into hell or the underworld for three days, and the triumph of light over darkness or good over evil.

The legend found its way to most of the ancient world — Egypt, Phoenicia, Syria, Greece. Along the way, Tammuz and Ishtar became Adon and Astarte, Osiris and Isis, Adonis and Aphrodite.

What about the more popular and common traditions associated with Easter — dyed Easter eggs, the Easter bunny, cross buns and the Easter sunrise service? These are pagan, too.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* clearly explains the pagan traditions associated with the egg: “The egg as a symbol of fertility and of renewed life goes back to the ancient Egyptians and Persians, who had also the custom of colouring and eating eggs during their spring festival.”

The egg was a sacred symbol to Babylonians. In *Egyptian Belief and Modern Thought*, author James Bonwick writes “The mystic egg of Babylon, hatching the Venus Ishtar, fell from heaven to the Euphrates.”

Easter Symbols, Pagan Origins

None can dispute the fact that the egg as a sacred symbol has been a part of pagan festivities from ancient times. The greatly-prized golden egg of today’s Easter egg hunts draws its origins from Egypt where it symbolized the sun.

Ralph Woodrow explains it was then suggested by the religious scholars of the church of Rome that as the chick comes out of the egg, so does Christ come out of the tomb. The egg then became a symbol of Christ's resurrection.

Hislop quotes a prayer appointed by Pope Paul V in connection with the egg: "Bless, O Lord, we beseech Thee this thy creature of eggs, that it may become wholesome substance unto thy servants, eating it in remembrance of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (p. 109).

According to Woodrow, the Easter Rabbit from ancient times was a symbol of new life. The Egyptian word for hare is "un," meaning "to open." Thus, the hare was associated with the opening of a new season. The hare and eggs were mutually symbolic in Egypt of the opening of their new year, at which time eggs were ceremoniously broken.

Also, this rapidly breeding and multiplying animal was an ancient symbol of fertility and the renewal of life. Therefore, hunting for Easter eggs supposedly hidden by a rabbit, is actually following an ancient fertility rite!

What about the hot cross buns we see so many of at stores during the Easter season? Did the early Christians and the apostles bake and eat them?

Absolutely not! The practice of baking and eating these cross buns is pagan and goes back to the offering of these bread cakes to Astarte, whom the pagans worshipped as the Queen of Heaven.

In Jeremiah 7:18-20, God rebukes the Israelites for this idolatrous practice: "The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead their dough, to make cakes to the queen of heaven, and to pour out drink offerings unto other gods, that they may provoke me to anger. Do they provoke me to anger? saith the Lord: do they not provoke themselves to the confusion of their own faces? Therefore thus saith the Lord God; Behold, mine anger and my fury shall be poured out upon this place, upon man, and upon beast, and

upon the trees of the field, and upon the fruit of the ground; and it shall burn, and shall not be quenched.”

For its visual grandeur, pomp and pageantry, the Easter Sunday sunrise service is truly a breathtaking and impressive experience. Sunrise services are jampacked with people who sincerely think they are paying homage to the Risen Christ.

But, for all its stunning beauty, God says it is an abomination to Him: “Then said he unto me, ‘Hast thou seen this, O son of man? turn thee yet again, and thou shalt see greater abominations than these.’ And he brought me into the inner court of the Lord’s house, and, behold, at the door of the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, were about five and twenty men, with their backs toward the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east; and they worshipped the sun toward the east. Then he said unto me, ‘Hast thou seen this, O son of man? Is it a light thing to the house of Judah that they commit the abominations which they commit here? for they have filled the land with violence and have returned to provoke me to anger: and, lo, they put the branch to their nose. Therefore will I also deal in fury: mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity: and though they cry in mine ears with a loud voice, yet will I not hear them’” (Ezekiel 8:15-18).

Such is the origin and early history of Easter. How then did this pagan celebration of Easter Sunday enter the Church?

Fourth Century Catholic historian Socrates Scholasticus, directly addressed the entry of Easter celebration into church practice in his work *Ecclesiastical History* in Book V, Chapter 22: “Neither the apostles, therefore, nor the Gospels, have anywhere imposed Easter. The Savior and His apostles have enjoined us by no law to keep this feast...so also the feast of Easter came to be observed in each place according to the individual peculiarities of the peoples inasmuch as none of the apostles legislated on the matter.”

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* has this to say under the subject “Easter”: “There is no indication of the observance of the Easter festival in the New Testament, or in the writings of the apostolic

Fathers...The first Christians continued to observe the Jewish festivals, though in a new spirit, as commemorations of events which those festivals foreshadowed...The Gentile Christians, on the other hand, unfettered by Jewish traditions, identified the first day of the week with the Resurrection, and kept the preceding Friday as the commemoration of the crucifixion, irrespective of the day of the month.”

As a result of these disparate practices, a major controversy arose referred to in history as the Quartodeciman controversy. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* states: “Quartodeciman, a term used to describe the practice in the early Church of celebrating Easter on the 14th of Nisan (die quarta decimal), the day of the Jewish Passover (Exodus 12:6)...while Roman practice emphasized Sunday as the day of the Resurrection.”

To settle once and for all the brewing controversy between Easter observance and what they referred to as the Jewish Passover, Emperor Constantine summoned the council at Nicea in 325 AD. *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* records that the unanimous decision of the Council was that Easter was to be kept on Sunday and that “none hereafter should follow the blindness of the Jews.”

But the New Testament reveals that Jesus Christ, the Apostles and the New Testament Church kept the Passover instead of Easter: “And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.) And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people” (Acts 12:3-4).

The word “Easter” here is a mistranslation of the Greek word *pascha* and is more accurately correctly rendered in many other Bible translations as “Passover.”

The respected Protestant Bible commentator Adam Clarke has this to say about this inaccuracy: “Perhaps there never was a more unhappy, not to say absurd, translation than that in our text.”

Christians Called to Act on Truth, Not Tradition

And so, even after Christ's death, the Passover was still being kept by the New Testament Church. Yet, many professing Christians today celebrate Easter Sunday, thinking it is in honor of Christ, Who did not rise from the dead on Sunday at all!

God warns us to avoid these pagan practices: "Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou enquire not after their gods, saying How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise" (Deuteronomy 12:30).

The Easter traditions the world blindly celebrates are all based on ancient pagan customs and rituals. These pagan practices and traditions of Easter were incorporated into religious worship and dressed up and labeled as Christian!

Now that we know the pagan origins of the Easter celebration, let us be reminded of Paul's admonition to the church of God in Corinth: "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you. And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:17-18).