

# Cause of God & Truth

## Should Christians Celebrate Easter?

**By Pastor Jeff Alexander**

Easter is commonly understood to be a Christian holiday celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The date for it is set as the Sunday immediately following the fourteenth day of the paschal (Passover) moon, which happens on or after the vernal equinox. However, as is explained in the *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Vol. 2, p. 682), "The present variable time [for fixing the date of Easter] was appointed by early Romanism in amalgamation with the very ancient pagan spring festival to the goddess of the spring."

The resurrection of Christ occurred the Sunday following the fourteenth of Nisan. Unlike Christmas, we can be fairly certain that we are celebrating our Lord's triumph over death on its approximate anniversary date. A complication arises when we discover that the pagan festival to the goddess of spring was also celebrated at the same time. This leads us to question whether Easter has not been corrupted by considerable pagan baggage. Abundant evidence supports the fact that the Greco-Roman church tended to amalgamate idolatrous rites into the Christianity they were introducing to heathen cultures. The philosophy was that non-Christians would be more likely to embrace Christianity if they were allowed to retain their pagan practices, especially if some Christian correspondence with their traditions could be established.

As a result, pagan symbols have been so thoroughly embedded that they are now generally thought to be Christian in origin. An example is the Easter lily. Where is there biblical authority for its prevalence at Easter? Merrill Unger (*Archeology and the Old Testament*, pp. 173, 174) describes the Canaanite goddess "as a nude woman bestride a lion with a lily in one hand and a serpent in the other." The lily "bespeaks the grace and sex appeal of the bearer" and the serpent "symbolizes her fecundity" (fertility).

If anyone thinks it is too great a leap from the pagan symbolism of the lily to its place at Easter, one need only investigate the name *Easter*. W. E. Vine writes, "The term Easter is not of Christian origin. It is another form of Astarte, one of the titles of the Chaldean goddess, the queen of heaven" (*Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, entry "Easter" loc. cit.). The Chaldean Semeramis, the wife of Nimrod, was the original impersonation of the "queen of heaven," the goddess of spring. The Babylonians called her Ishtar. To the Canaanites she was known as Astarte. She is Venus of the Greeks, Aphrodite of the Romans, and Ashtoreth of the Zidonians. These all represent fertility and were worshipped in the spring as new life burst forth after the death grip of winter. *Hastings Encyclopedia on Religious*

*Ethics* describes these ancient *Easters* as “spring feasts . . . marked with great sexual license” (p. 117).

In Anglo-Saxon culture Astarte was known as Eostre (the Saxon origin of the English word *Easter*), in whose honor the Druids held religious festivals in April, calling it Easter Month (*Eostre-monath*). This may be the reason for the careless insertion of the word *Easter* instead of *Passover* to translate pascha in Acts 12:4 in the King James Version.

Other objects associated with the modern celebration of Easter join the lily as suspect. The egg as a symbol of fertility is found universally in ancient cultures. The Egyptians, Persians, and Chinese all had customs of coloring eggs. Babylonian legend teaches that an egg of great size fell from heaven into the Euphrates River, where fishes rolled it onto the bank. There it was incubated by doves until it hatched out (who else?) the “queen of heaven.”

The Roman Church incorporated the egg as an emblem of Christ’s resurrection. Pope Paul V taught people to pray at Easter, “Bless, O Lord, we beseech thee this, thy creature of eggs, that it may become a wholesome sustenance unto thy servants, eating it in remembrance of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Again, where is the biblical authority to support such a notion?

The Easter bunny, actually a hare, was associated with the moon because of its nocturnal habits. The Egyptians called the hare, un, which means “to open”—to open spring at the vernal equinox. Un also means “period”—both lunar and human cycles, the hare having prolific fertility.

The modern Easter egg hunt can be traced back to pagan Germany. Children were told that if they were good, a white hare would steal into the house while they were asleep and put a number of beautifully colored eggs in odd corners of the house for them to find when they awoke. Again, what have hares and colored eggs to do with the risen Lord?

Lent is also of Babylonian origin. The English word Lent comes from the Saxon *Lenct*, meaning “spring.” It represents a period of mourning for Tammuz, the supposed reincarnation of Semeramis’ husband, Nimrod, whose death and reappearance was celebrated in the spring. Forty days of mourning preceded the one day of joy over the return of Tammuz. God condemned Israel’s partaking in this celebration: “*And He said to me, ‘Turn again, and you will see greater abominations that they are doing.’ So He brought me to the door of the north gate of the LORD’s house; and to my dismay, women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz*” (Ezek. 8:13-14, NKJV). How has Satan so cleverly corrupted the truth!

And what of hot cross buns? A sacrificial “cake” made with fine flour and honey was offered to the “queen of heaven” on Friday. It was called a “boun,” from which we get our word “bun.” “*The children gather wood, the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, that they may provoke Me to anger*” (Jeremiah 7:18, NKJV). “*The women also said, ‘And when we burned incense to the queen of heaven and poured out drink offerings to her, did we make cakes for her, to wor-*

*ship her, and pour out drink offerings to her without our husbands' permission?"* (Jeremiah 44:19, NKJV).

Believers need to know that the early church did not celebrate a special day either to commemorate the Lord's incarnation or His resurrection. Believers should also know that people did not widely celebrate Easter in America until after the Civil War (late 1800s) when there was a large immigration of European Catholics to this country.

There is no celebration of any Christian holidays in the New Testament. Early Jewish Christians linked the resurrection with the Passover, observed on the fourteenth day of Nisan in accord with Christ's command to "*do this in remembrance of Me*" (Luke 22:19, NKJV). Only later did Gentile churches, unfamiliar with Jewish customs, begin to celebrate the resurrection on the Lord's Day (Sunday). The Council of Nicea (A. D. 325) ruled that Easter should be celebrated on the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox. This is the system followed today.

The question before us remains. Should Christians celebrate Easter? Certainly no one, especially Christians in our day, would associate chocolate bunnies with the vile and sensual rites of ancient fertility cults. However, I believe that we must look deeper. First, do our customs distract us from the real message? It is certain that the world will use any tactic to deflect attention from Christ and His truth in order to avoid dealing with sin. Are believers not helping them by indulging in these seemingly innocent though unauthorized additions? Further, in our increasingly pagan culture, where the Lord is summarily dismissed and substituted by Santa and the Easter Bunny, are we not compromising our Lord by partaking in these inane diversions?

Second, if we were merely ignorant of the origin and meaning of these extra-biblical adornments to the seasons, we might have excuse for participation; however, since we know the truth, should we not abstain from them? Israel was continually attracted to the pagan practices of her neighbors, provoking God to anger. Are we not in danger of offending our Lord by taking part in things that are rooted in the same pagan idolatry that caused Israel's fall?

Paul warns us, "*Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them*" (Eph. 5:11, NKJV). Again he writes: "*What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. . . Therefore 'Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean'*" (2 Cor. 6:16, 17, NKJV). Jesus said, "*You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God*" (Luke 16:15, NKJV).

Of course, we must celebrate our Lord's triumph over sin and the grave. However, let us call it by a biblical designation—Resurrection Sunday—instead of a derivative of the idolatrous goddess of spring. We must also avoid the worldly and commercial baggage associated with these holidays for two reasons. (1) They are unauthorized by the Word of God. (2) They actually distract from, rather than promote, the gospel of Christ.