

What Are the Real Origins of Easter?

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Millions assume that Easter, one of the world's major religious holidays, is found in the Bible. But is it? Have you ever looked into Easter's origins and customs and compared them with the Bible?



Human beings replaced the symbolism of the biblical Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread with Easter eggs and Easter rabbits, pagan symbols of fertility.

Easter is one of the most popular religious celebrations in the world. But is it biblical? The word *Easter* appears only once in the King James Version of the Bible (and not at all in most others). In the one place it does appear, the King James translators mistranslated the Greek word for *Passover* as "Easter."

If Easter doesn't come from the Bible, and wasn't practiced by the apostles and early Church, where did it come from?

Notice it in **Acts 12:4**: "And when he [King Herod Agrippa I] had apprehended him [the apostle Peter], 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."

The Greek word translated *Easter* here is *pascha*, properly translated everywhere else in the Bible as "Passover." Referring to this mistranslation, *Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible* says that "perhaps there never was a more unhappy, not to say absurd, translation than that in our text."

Think about these facts for a minute. Easter is such a major religious holiday. Yet nowhere in the Bible—not in the book of Acts, which covers several decades of the history of the early Church, nor in any of the epistles of the New Testament, written over a span of 30 to 40 years after Jesus Christ's death and resurrection—do we find the apostles or early Christians celebrating anything like Easter.

The Gospels themselves appear to have been written from about a decade after Christ's death and resurrection to perhaps as much as 60 years later (in the case of John's Gospel). Yet nowhere do we find a hint

of anything remotely resembling an Easter celebration.

If Easter doesn't come from the Bible, and wasn't practiced by the apostles and early Church, where *did* it come from?

Easter's surprising origins

Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, in its entry "Easter," states:

"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. The festival of *Pasch* [Passover] held by Christians in post-apostolic times was a continuation of the Jewish feast . . . From this *Pasch* the pagan festival of 'Easter' was quite distinct and was introduced into the apostate Western religion, *as part of the attempt to adapt pagan festivals to Christianity*" (W.E. Vine, 1985, emphasis added throughout).

That's a lot of information packed into one paragraph. Notice what the author, W.E. Vine—a trained classical scholar, theologian, expert in ancient languages and author of several classic Bible helps—tells us:

Easter isn't a Christian or directly biblical term, but comes from a form of the name *Astarte*, a Chaldean (Babylonian) goddess known as "the queen of heaven." (She is mentioned by that title in the Bible in **Jeremiah 7:18** and Jeremiah 44:17-19; **Jeremiah 44:25** and referred to in **1 Kings**

11:5; 1 Kings 5:33 and 2 Kings 23:13 by the Hebrew form of her name, *Ashtoreth*. So "Easter" is found in the Bible—as part of the pagan religion God condemns!)

Further, early Christians, even after the times of the apostles, continued to observe a variation of the biblical Passover feast (it differed because Jesus introduced new symbolism, as the Bible notes in **Matthew 26:26-28** and **1 Corinthians 11:23-28**).

And again, Easter was a pagan festival, originating in the worship of other gods, and was introduced much later into an apostate Christianity in a deliberate attempt to make such festivals acceptable. Moreover, Easter was very different from the Old Testament Passover or the Passover of the New Testament as understood and practiced by the early Church based on the teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostles.

Easter symbols predate Christ

How does *The Catholic Encyclopedia* define Easter? "Easter: The English term, according to the [eighth-century monk] Bede, relates to Eostre, a Teutonic goddess of the rising light of day and spring, which deity, however, is otherwise unknown . . ." (1909, Vol. 5, p. 224). *Eostre* is the ancient European name for the same goddess worshipped by the Babylonians as *Astarte* or *Ishtar*, goddess of fertility, whose major celebration was in the spring of the year.

Many credible sources substantiate the fact that Easter became a substitute festival for the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread.

The subtopic "Easter Eggs" tells us that "the custom [of Easter eggs] may have its origin in paganism, for *a great many pagan customs*, celebrating the return of spring, *gravitated to Easter*" (ibid., p. 227).

The subtopic "Easter Rabbit" states that "the rabbit is a pagan symbol and has always been an emblem of fertility" (ibid.).

Author Greg Dues, in his book *Catholic Customs and Traditions*, elaborates on the symbolism of eggs in ancient pre-Christian cultures: "The egg has become a popular Easter symbol. Creation myths of many ancient peoples center in a cosmogenic egg from which the universe is born.

"In ancient Egypt and Persia friends exchanged decorated eggs at the spring equinox, the beginning of their New Year. These eggs were a symbol of fertility for them because the coming forth of a live creature from an egg was so surprising to people of ancient times. Christians of the Near East adopted this tradition, and the Easter egg became a religious symbol. It represented the tomb from which Jesus came forth to new life" (1992, p. 101).

The same author also explains that, like eggs, rabbits became associated with Easter because they were powerful symbols of fertility: "Little children are usually told that the Easter eggs are brought by the Easter Bunny. Rabbits are part of pre-Christian fertility symbolism because of their reputation to reproduce rapidly" (p. 102).

What these sources tell us is that human beings replaced the symbolism of the biblical Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread with Easter eggs and Easter rabbits, pagan symbols of fertility. These symbols demean the truth of Christ's death and resurrection.

Easter substituted for Passover season

But that's not the entire story. In fact, many credible sources substantiate the fact that Easter became a substitute festival for the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Notice what *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* says about this transition: "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 [Sunday] with the Resurrection, and kept the preceding Friday as the commemoration of the crucifixion, irrespective of the day of the month" (11th edition, p. 828, "Easter").

Easter, a pagan festival with its pagan fertility symbols, replaced the God-ordained festivals that Jesus Christ, the apostles and the early Church observed. But this didn't happen immediately. Not until A.D. 325—almost three centuries after Jesus Christ was crucified and resurrected—was the matter settled. Regrettably, it wasn't settled on the basis of biblical truth, but on the basis of anti-Semitism and raw ecclesiastical and imperial power.

As *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* further explains: "A final settlement of the dispute [over whether and when to keep Easter or Passover] was one among the other reasons which led [the Roman emperor] Constantine to summon the council of Nicaea in 325 . . . The decision of the council was unanimous that Easter was to be kept on Sunday, and on the same Sunday throughout the world, and 'that none should hereafter follow the blindness of the Jews'" (ibid., pp. 828-829).

Those who did choose to "follow the blindness of the Jews"—that is, who continued to keep the biblical festivals kept by Jesus Christ and the apostles rather than the newly "Christianized" pagan Easter festival—

were systematically persecuted by the powerful church-state alliance of Constantine 's Roman Empire .

With the power of the empire behind it, Easter soon became entrenched as one of traditional Christianity's most popular sacred celebrations.

(You can read more of the details in our free booklet *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?* (</bible-study-tools/booklets/holidays-or-holy-days-does-it-matter-which-days-we-observe>))

Christianity compromised by paganism

British historian Sir James Frazer notes how Easter symbolism and rites, along with other pagan customs and celebrations, entered into the established Roman church:

"Taken altogether, the coincidences of the Christian with the heathen festivals are too close and too numerous to be accidental. *They mark the compromise which the Church* in the hour of its triumph was compelled to make with its vanquished yet still dangerous rivals [the empire's competing pagan religions].

"The inflexible Protestantism of the primitive missionaries, with their fiery denunciation of heathendom, had been exchanged for the supple policy, the easy tolerance, the comprehensive charity of shrewd ecclesiastics, who clearly perceived that if Christianity was to conquer

the world it could do so only by relaxing the too rigid principles of its Founder, by widening a little the narrow gate which leads to salvation" (*The Golden Bough*, 1993, p. 361).

In short, to broaden the appeal of the new religion of Christianity in those early centuries, the powerful Roman religious authorities, with the backing of the Roman Empire, simply co-opted the rites and practices of pagan religions, relabeled them as "Christian" and created a new brand of Christianity with customs and teachings far removed from the Church Jesus founded.

The authentic Christianity of the Bible largely disappeared, forced underground by persecution because its followers refused to compromise.

Easter does not accurately represent Jesus Christ's suffering, death and resurrection, though it appears to do so to those who blindly accept religious tradition. In fact, it distorts the truth of the matter. Easter correctly belongs to the Babylonian goddess it is named after—Astarte, also known as Ashtoreth or Ishtar, whose worship is directly and explicitly condemned in the Bible.

The ancient religious practices and fertility symbols associated with her cult existed long before Christ, and regrettably they have largely replaced and obscured the truth of His death and resurrection.

When confronted with these facts about Easter, many professing Christians might raise this question to justify its continuance: *With hundreds of millions of well-meaning Christians observing Easter, doesn't this please Jesus Christ?* Yet He has already answered this question in **Matthew 15:9**: *"In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."* How will you choose to worship Him—in spirit and in truth, or in fraud and in fable?



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