

# Should Christians Celebrate Easter?

**Egg-laying bunnies, sunrise services, Lent—such strange customs.**

**What do they have to do with Jesus' resurrection, anyway?**

**Maybe there's something you haven't been told.**

by Philip Neal

Millions of professing Christians will rise a little early come Easter Sunday—just so they can participate in a local “sunrise service” ostensibly honoring Jesus' resurrection. Later that day, little children will hunt for beautifully-decorated Easter eggs, supposedly laid by the Easter bunny. Catholics, of course, weeks earlier began the season with Lent, a forty-day period of abstinence and “mourning” leading up to Easter.

What does it all mean? Where's the *biblical* connection of Easter to Jesus' resurrection? And why didn't Jesus teach His disciples to observe Easter?

Ask the average Christian *why* he or she holds to a particular belief or practice and you'll probably get a blank stare. “It's a tradition,” some might answer. Or, “The church teaches it.” But the fact is, most people don't have a clue as to the origin of much of what they embrace as truth. Typically, people tend to just accept what they are told—without *thinking*.

The result is that many “Christians” unknowingly find themselves participating in what are actually ancient traditions founded in pagan mystery religions that flourishing thousands of years before Christ!

## The Amazing Historical Origin of Easter

It comes as a surprise to many to learn that the *only* place in the King James Version of the Bible that even mentions “Easter”—Acts 12:4—is a gross mistranslation. Here, the Greek word *Pascha* (translated *Easter*) always means “Passover.” The widely acknowledged error has been corrected in all modern translations. Referring to the passage, *Barnes' Notes* comments that there “was never a more absurd ... translation than this.”

So, if there is no *biblical* basis for Easter, where and how did it originate?

Astonishingly, Easter has its roots in ancient, polytheistic pagan religions. Countless scholarly books and reference materials document the historical development of Easter—clearly demonstrating that it is fully pagan in origin.

In *Come Out of Her My People*, Dr. C. J. Koster, writes: “The whole subject of Easter, its Sunday-emphasizing date, and its pagan emblems and rites, such as Easter sunrise services, is crowned by the general admission that the word ‘Easter’ is derived from the name of a goddess, the dawn-goddess, the spring-deity, the goddess of fertility.

“Easter had a **pre-Christian origin**, namely [involving] a festival [held] in honor of Eostre, the Teutonic dawn-goddess.... This Eostre was also known to be the spring goddess of fertility. [As] **another form of sun-worship** ... Eostre, also called Eastre, Eostra or Ostara, was **adopted by or merged with Christianity**. This same dawn-goddess was also well known ... [as] the Assyrian Ishtar, goddess of the morning” (emphasis added).<sup>1</sup>

In the ancient Middle East, people were deeply connected to the land and to the naturally-occurring agricultural cycle. The land's fertility was the key to survival. The spring of the year

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was highly anticipated—when productivity and fertility returned after a long desolate winter. Many cultures celebrated the coming of spring as an integral part of the worship of their gods or goddesses, particularly those associated with fertility. Koster adds that eggs and rabbits were common symbols of fertility, and that the Easter goddess was “not only goddess of dawn but also goddess of spring with all its fertility symbols and fertility rites.”<sup>2</sup>

*The Encyclopedia Americana* states that the word Easter is “derived from the Norse Ostara or Eostre, meaning the festival of spring ... when nature is in resurrection after winter. Hence, the rabbits, notable for their fecundity, and the eggs, colored like rays of the returning sun....”<sup>3</sup> According to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, “a great **many pagan customs celebrating the return of spring gravitated to Easter**.... The rabbit is a pagan symbol and has always been an emblem of fertility” (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

Alexander Hislop, in *The Two Babylons*, writes that Easter “is not a Christian name. It bears its Chaldean origin on its very forehead. Easter is nothing [more] than Astarte ... the queen of heaven, whose name, as pronounced by the people of Nineveh, was evidently identical with that now in common use in this country [England]. That name, as found ... on the Assyrian monuments, is Ishtar.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the ancient Assyrians pronounced *Ishtar* the same way we pronounce Easter today!

The origin of Easter, however, is actually quite ancient—going all the way back to the post-flood biblical Tower of Babel. Nimrod—who stood in opposition to the true God of heaven (Gen. 10:8-9)—was the key founder of the ancient Babylonian “mystery religion.” After his death, his wife, Queen Semiramis, was determined to maintain their “religion” by deifying him as the sun-god. Later, Semiramis gave birth an illegitimate son, Tammuz (also known in Greek culture as Adonis), who she claimed was actually Nimrod *reborn*. Semiramis herself was deified as the “queen of heaven.” Fred Coulter, in *Occult Holidays or God’s Holy Days—Which?*, writes that Easter is in part a tradition that “celebrates the return of Semiramis into her reincarnated form as the Spring Goddess.... The Babylonian goddess, Ishtar ... is another pseudonym for Semiramis, the wife of Nimrod, and the real founder of the Babylonian cult.”<sup>6</sup>

Tammuz is central as well to the Easter amalgamate. Following his untimely death at age forty, a tradition began in which he *both* died and was resurrected each spring. Coulter says “the Easter bunny and Easter egg symbolize the sexual union that produced Tammuz, the son and false messiah of Semiramis, the queen of heaven.... The son of Nimrod, Tammuz was the ancient false messiah who allegedly died and was resurrected each year.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, an obvious death and resurrection drama-theme reappears in many pagan religions. It seems that anciently Ishtar and Tammuz were *both* involved in a mythological death and resurrection cycle—one as the moon-goddess of spring and fertility, the other as the sun-god messiah figure—making them perfect forerunners of the modern Easter tradition. According to Coulter, sunrise services originated with the Babylonian priesthood to symbolically hasten the resurrection of both.<sup>8</sup>

Historically, laments were held for the departed Tammuz for forty days—a day for each year of his life. The period ended, of course, in the early spring at his “resurrection.” Hislop writes: “The forty days [of] abstinence of Lent was directly borrowed from the worshippers of the Babylonian goddess [Ishtar].”<sup>9</sup> Is it a mere coincidence that Orthodox Christendom today practices a peculiarly similar custom—Lent’s forty days of mourning and abstinence leading up to Easter?

Sir James Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough*, adds this: “The sorrow of the worshippers was turned to joy.... The resurrection of the god [Tammuz] was hailed by his disciples as a promise that they too would issue triumphant from the corruption of the grave.”<sup>10</sup> Note the uncanny parallel between the so-called “resurrection” of Tammuz and the biblical teaching on the resurrection of the saints (Rom. 6:5; I Cor. 15:12; etc.).

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### How Easter Crept Into the Orthodox Church

Considering its clearly pagan origin, just how did Easter find its way into Christianity? The answer has to do with *syncretism*—the reconciliation or fusion of differing systems of belief. After the death of the apostles, the Church began to grow rapidly among Gentiles, particularly in the West. After several decades, the church at Rome—now apostate but possessing considerable political and financial clout—became dominant. Determined to bring the masses of pagans into the church, Orthodox leaders in Rome were careful *not* to force them to abandon their idolatrous celebrations. Craftily, church leaders found a way to blend various ancient customs and pagan practices—and then *apply* them to Christian doctrine. Easter itself is largely a convergence of various heathen traditions applied to Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Koster, for example, writes that “festivals were celebrated [by pagans], with the rites of Adonis or of Tammuz ... [and with Christianity’s] dead and risen Messiah being **assimilated to the pagan celebration** of the dead and risen Adonis (Tammuz)” (emphasis added).<sup>11</sup>

Referring to the *fusion* of the Passover with pagan spring celebrations, Hislop writes: “To conciliate the pagans to nominal Christianity, Rome, pursuing its usual policy [of *syncretism*], took measures to get Christian and pagan festivals amalgamated, and, by a complicated but skillful adjustment of the calendar, it was found no difficult matter, in general, to get paganism and Christianity—now far sunk into idolatry—in this as in so many other things, to shake hands.”<sup>12</sup>

Concerning the syncretism of Easter, Frazer says: “When we reflect on how often the Church has skillfully contrived to plant the seeds of the new [Christian] faith on the old stock of paganism, we may surmise that the Easter celebration of the dead and risen Messiah was **grafted upon a similar celebration** of the dead and risen Adonis.... 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 ... was compelled to make...” (emphasis added).<sup>13</sup> Frazer adds that “the Church may have consciously adapted the new festival [of Easter] to its heathen predecessor for the sake of winning souls for Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

The Catholic Church also uses the term *Christianization* to describe this mixing of pagan rites with Christian practice.

### Easter Becomes an “Official” Church Holiday

As Easter gained in popularity—and the Roman church grew in influence—a long and bitter controversy developed between those faithful in the East who adhered to the Passover and those in the West who preferred Easter. The issue came to a head around AD 197, when Polycrates of Asia Minor paid the Roman church leadership a formal visit. In *Ecclesiastical History*, the well-known church historian Eusebius writes: “A question of no small importance arose at that time. For the parishes of all Asia, as from an older tradition, held that the fourteenth day of the [new] moon ... should be observed as the feast of the Savior’s Passover.... [The] bishops of Asia, led by Polycrates, decided to hold to the old custom handed down to them. He himself, in a letter which he addressed to Victor [bishop of Rome] and the church of Rome, set forth in the following words the tradition which had come down to him: ‘We observe the exact day [commanded in Scripture]; neither adding, nor taking away. For in Asia also great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again on the day of the Lord’s coming, when he shall come with glory from heaven, and shall seek out all the saints. Among these are Philip, one of the twelve apostles ... and, moreover, John, who was both a witness and a teacher, who reclined upon the bosom of the Lord ... and Polycarp in Smyrna, who was a bishop and martyr.... All these observed the fourteenth day of the Passover according to the Gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith.’ ”<sup>15</sup>

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But Roman efforts to induce those from the East to abandon Passover observance were unsuccessful. As *The Encyclopedia Americana* brings out, the “early Christians were Jews and the Hebrew [Passover] tradition was powerful in their minds. A party of such conservatives [led by Polycrates] known as the Quartodecimans thus pressed for a continuance of the Jewish Passover ... even to the point of schism, but they were overruled by the [Roman] Church as a whole....”<sup>16</sup> (*Quartodeciman* comes from the Latin word for “14th”—and was a label given to those who followed the Scriptural command to observe the Passover on the evening of the 14th.)

In *From Sabbath to Sunday*, Samuele Bacchiocchi writes of this time: “On the one side, bishop Victor of Rome championed the Easter Sunday custom ... and threatened to excommunicate the recalcitrant Christian communities of the province of Asia which refused to follow his instruction. On the other side, Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus and representative of the Asian churches, strongly advocated the traditional Passover date of Nisan 14. Polycrates ... refused to be frightened into submission by the threats of Victor of Rome.”<sup>17</sup>

When Polycrates firmly refused to agree to the demands of the Roman church, Victor proceeded to excommunicate him—as well as all Christians who continued to observe Passover. The excommunication, as it turned out, lacked authority; nothing really changed except East and West drifted further apart on numerous issues.

In time, however, the Passover versus Easter controversy became pivotal; the church at Rome ultimately saw it as a test of their authority. Koster continues the story: “The Passover dispute between the Western Church and the more Scripture-adhering believers of the Near East was finally settled by Constantine’s Council of Nicaea in the year [AD] 325, where it was decided that Easter was to be kept on Sun-day.... [With] Constantine taking the lead, the Council of Nicaea decided to reject [the Passover] ... in favor of Easter Sun-day.... Constantine exhorted all bishops to embrace [Easter Sunday observance].”<sup>18</sup>

With the authority of imperial Rome finally behind it, Easter soon came to replace the Passover within visible, organized “Christianity.” True, faithful Christians were forced underground in order to continue their observance of the biblical Passover.

## Are the Scriptures Silent on Easter?

While there is clearly no biblical support for Easter, the Scriptures actually do have much to say *against* Easter—both directly and indirectly. Interestingly, the Babylonian Astarte—and the Assyrian Ishtar—are referred to dozens of times in the Old Testament using the Hebrew word *Ashtaroth* (*Ashtoreth*, *Asherah*), typically translated as *groves* in the KJV. Such groves were used in idolatrous ritual celebrations. For example, “And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and forgot the LORD their God, and served Baalim and the Asherahs” (Judges 3:7, New King James Version). This verse could just as well be translated, “and served Baalim and Easter”!

Virtually all scholars agree that Asherah is none other than Astarte—also known as the “queen of heaven.” Notice Jeremiah 7:18: “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 to **other gods**, that they may provoke Me to anger.” Verse 10 calls the practice an “abomination.” The *Jamieson Fausset & Brown Bible Commentary* has this to say about Jeremiah 7:18: “Cakes were made of honey, fine flour, etc., in a round flat shape to resemble the disc of the moon, to which they were offered.... The Phoenicians called the moon *Ashtoreth* or *Astarte*: the wife of Baal or Moloch, the king of heaven. The male and female pair of deities symbolized the generative powers of nature....”

The cakes offered to the queen of heaven—Astarte/Ishtar—are the “hot cross buns” of today’s Catholic “Christianity”! Koster adds, “The ‘buns,’ known by the identical name *boun*,

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were used of the queen of heaven already 1500 years before the Christian era.... Even the round shape ... with the cross on top exactly represents the very ancient symbol of the sun, namely the cross with a circled around it. This was especially known to be the symbol of the Babylonian Sun-deity.”<sup>19</sup>

Surprisingly, “sunrise services” are mentioned in the Bible as well—but only in a *negative* way. The prophet Ezekiel was shown, in vision, an important prophecy concerning the sins of God’s people—then *and* today. “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**”—*the false messianic figure who dies and is resurrected every spring!*—“Then He said to me, ‘Have you seen this, O son of man? Turn again, you will see greater **abominations** than these.’ So He brought me into the inner court of the LORD’S house; and there, at the door of the temple of the LORD, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men with their backs toward the temple of the LORD and their faces toward the east, and they were **worshipping the [rising] sun** toward the east. And He said to me, ‘Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it a trivial thing to the house of Judah to commit the **abominations** which they commit here?’ ” (Ezek. 8:13-17).

Can we begin to put the pieces of the puzzle together—Asherahs, the “queen of heaven” with her cakes, worship of the sun, Tammuz—and see that the “Christian” Easter has been contrived of ancient myths, and is itself nothing but a pagan abomination?

Consider God’s warning to Israel as they possessed the land He had promised to them: “Observe and obey all these words which I command you.... [And when you] dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are **not ensnared to follow them** ... and that you **do not inquire after their gods**, saying, ‘**How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.**’ You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way; for every abomination to the Lord which He hates they have done to their gods.... Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall **not add to it nor take away from it**” (Deut. 12:28-32).

God tells Christians: “Do not learn the way of the Gentiles....” (Jer. 10:2)—do not even mention the *name* of their gods! (see Ex. 23:13). The apostle Paul wrote: “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and lawlessness *have* in common? And what fellowship *does* light *have* with darkness? And what union *does* Christ *have* with Belial? Or what part *does* a believer *have* with an unbeliever? And what agreement *is there between* a temple of God and idols? For you are a temple of *the* living God, exactly as God said: ‘I will dwell in them and walk in *them*; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’ Therefore, ‘Come out from the midst of them and be separate,’ says *the* Lord, ‘and touch not *the* unclean, and I will receive you’ ” (II Cor. 6:14-17).

Do we really believe these *plain* scriptures? Clearly, a true Christian can never mix what is godly with what is pagan—or the true with the false! For God can *only* be worshipped in a *spirit of truth* (John 4:24).

## Jesus Only Gave One Sign That He Was Messiah

Today’s Easter tradition is developed around a “Good Friday” afternoon crucifixion and an “Easter Sunday” sunrise resurrection. What most Christians fail to realize is that this scenario threatens to annul the *only sign* Jesus gave as *proof* that He was the Messiah—that He would be in the grave *exactly* three days and three nights. “For just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, in like manner the Son of man shall be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights” (Matt. 12:40).

You don’t have to be a math genius to see that from Friday afternoon to Sunday morning is not three days and three nights. Thus, on this count alone, Easter is shown to be fraudulent.<sup>20</sup>

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What's more, Scripture nowhere instructs Christians to honor Jesus' resurrection. Rather, we are commanded to *commemorate His death* through the Passover (see Luke 22:19-20; I Cor. 11:23-26; etc.). Again, Easter—which focuses on Christ's *resurrection*—is proven false.

This all begs the question: What god is really being honored by Easter? Who is the real savior central to the Easter Sunday tradition? Is it the Jesus Christ of the Bible? Or, could it be that traditional Christianity is unknowingly worshipping a false savior—another “Jesus”?

It's been said that “the most dangerous counterfeit is the one that most closely resembles the truth.” The master counterfeiter is Satan the devil, the “god of this world” (II Cor. 4:4)—and he is actively deceiving the whole world (Rev. 12:9).

Could you *too* be deceived?

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20. For a detailed account of Jesus' death and resurrection, see *The Day Jesus the Christ Died* by Fred Coulter.

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