

Easter is Not Pagan

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There are claims that the name “Easter” is pagan, the dates are incorrect, the symbols of Easter are pagan and that even if Easter were not pagan, we have no instruction to celebrate it. I disagree.

This message is a bit technical, stay with me, it will be worth it.

Scripture Reading Acts 12:4 and John 19:4-7, 30; 20:16 (NIV)

Acts 12:4

“After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.”

John 19:4-7; 30

“⁴ Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him.”

⁵ When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!”

⁶ As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, “Crucify! Crucify!” But Pilate answered, “You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.”

⁷ The Jewish leaders insisted, “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.””

³⁰ When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

^{20:16} Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”).”

Introduction

Every year, followers of some religious leaders undertake a pilgrimage to the remains of their leader/prophet/god. Christians can't do that. There are no remains, the tomb is empty. Jesus is resurrected and ascended to heaven.

Robert Butler wrote, "*The only hope we have in this life stems from what God did for us. He came for you. He suffered for you. He Died for you. He rose for you.*"

Because He died for us, the consequences of our sins have been dealt with. Because He lives, we live. This is the good news.

Body

Christ's death and resurrection are critical doctrines of the Christian faith. 1 Corinthians 15:17 reads, "*And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins*" (NIV). In other words, without Christ's death and resurrection, Christianity – in essence – is no different to any other religion.

Since His death and resurrection are true, all who have received God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ, therefore, have reason to celebrate. Biblically, God instructs His children to feast and celebrate what He has done for His people. The most prominent Old Testament festival related to the celebration of Easter is Passover. In fact, although the Bible might not specifically state, "celebrate Easter," it does not forbid it either. There is, therefore, nothing out of the "ordinary" to celebrate what God has done for His people through Jesus Christ.

Let's read Acts 12:4 from the KJV translation, "*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.*" I find it both interesting and comforting that the translators of the KJV Bible were convinced that Easter was a Christian holiday, so much so that they used the word "Easter" where other translations used the word "Passover." It is unimaginable that they would deliberately use, in Acts 12:4, the word "Easter" in reference to paganism.

Other translations as well as the KJV are correct. Let me briefly explain why the KJV uses the word "Easter." We start by comparing John 2:13 and John 11:55, where John specifically refers to "the Jew's Passover." The book of John was written between 90 and 100 A.D. – well after the events of the crucifixion and resurrection. It would therefore make little sense for

John to specifically state “Jews Passover” if the Jew’s Passover was the only Passover. On the other hand, it makes a lot of sense if there was more than one Passover, which brings us to the use of the word “Easter” in Acts 12:4.

Eusebius, a bishop, and historian of Christianity wrote, “*For the parishes of all Asia, as from an older tradition, held that the fourteenth day of the moon, on which day the Jews were commanded to sacrifice the lamb, should be observed as the feast of the Saviour’s Passover*” (refer Church History, Book V, 23:1). The literal translation reads, “*Saviour’s Pascha.*” It appears from Eusebius, other writings of the early church fathers and the KJV translation of Acts 12:4, that early Christians were celebrating a Saviour’s Passover; the celebration of the resurrection of the Saviour, which we know as the Christian celebration of Easter. For Luke, “Pascha” at Acts 12:4 meant “Easter” – a “Saviour’s Passover,” a shift in meaning, which is what the KJV reflects.

There are some queries on the exact timing of Easter. Jewish months are Lunar (they reflect the phases of the moon). The spring month of Nisan corresponds with March-April on our calendar. There is no doubt that Passover, the crucifixion, and the resurrection happened between Nisan 14 and Nisan 22. There are semantics that can be discussed later, but for now, we understand that because of the close relationship between Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the whole week was sometimes referred to as “Passover” and is still considered a single celebration. This explains how the Jewish leaders had already eaten the Passover proper, but there were also other sacrifices to be made and meals to be eaten. The probable timeline would have been:

- Thursday, Passover, Nisan 14.
- Friday, day of preparation (of Sabbath food – not for Passover) and crucifixion: day 1.
- Saturday, the weekly Sabbath: day 2.
- Sunday, the resurrection: day 3.

Easter has a date that corresponds with Jewish Passover but is not necessarily tied to its date. With this calculation, the date of Easter is a movable date that may fall between March 22 and April 25 in our (Gregorian) calendar.

Moving forward, it is often said that Ishtar was an ancient Mesopotamian goddess of war, fertility, and sex. Some people claim there exists a connection between Ishtar and Easter.

Some even add, *“After Constantine decided to Christianize the Empire, Easter was changed to represent Jesus, but at its roots, Easter is all about celebrating fertility and sex.”*

It is true that “Ishtar” (a form of Astarte) and “Easter” might sound the same but sounding the same is not evidence that the words are related to one another: it merely means that they sound the same. The word “Astarte” can be rooted in origins such as “increase” and/or “flock” which makes sense because “Ishtar/Astarte” is a Semitic word related to animal fertility.

“Easter,” however, is rooted in the German word (not a Babylonian word) “Ostern,” as in the direction from which the sun rises. “East” as a word and direction, does not relate to animal fertility and therefore, “Astarte/Ishtar.” With this in mind, let’s quickly zoom into the supposed “Easter” and “Eostre” link. This link is traced back to Bede who lived from 672 to 735. Some scholars doubt that Bede would have actually known which came first: “Eostur-monath” or the goddess “Eostre.” Having said this, the point I am making is two-fold:

1. Firstly, that since at Bede’s time, the tradition of the goddess “Eostre” had already been established, and, it might have appeared to Bede that April was named after Eostre.
2. Secondly, “Eostur-monath” comes from “*Ōstar-mānod*”, the Old Germanic name for April.

The Old Germanic Calendar named months after what characterized that month, “*Ōstar-mānod*” meaning East/Sunrise Month, when the Sun was noticeably rising earlier. We are, therefore, in agreement with the timing of Nisan 14 to Nisan 22. As “East” was a descriptive word that referred to dawn or sunrise, we can understand why pagans may use the word for their goddess of sunrise, and so they called her “Eostre.” Similarly, Christians use the word “east” in referring to a very special dawn; the Bible describes Christ’s resurrection as being discovered in the “morning” at “dawn” or at “the rising of the sun.”

The fact that a Saxon goddess went by the name “Eostre” does not mean that “Easter” is a pagan word, nor is “Easter” a pagan festival.

Many of the words we use today have a pagan origin. Mars is the ancient Roman god of war; Saturday is the day of Saturn the ancient god of agriculture: Saturn day became Saturday. But this does not stop us from using these words. The word might have originated in a pagan

context, but when we call the day after Tuesday “Wednesday,” that does not mean we are involved in paganism. It means the day before Thursday is called “Wednesday.”

A final note about rabbits and eggs. Things are steeped in a complex and often conflicting history. However, the principle of a symbol relates to its current, not its historical meaning. Therefore, the question at hand is: what do the symbols of the Easter bunny and Easter egg mean to us today? New life perhaps?

Whatever you answer, remember that our focus is important; it is on Jesus? Easter should be a time to reflect on the death and resurrection of Jesus and what this means for us.

Conclusion

Easter is the time of year when Jesus rose from the dead, and there is good ground on which to celebrate Easter.

Early Christians chose to celebrate the resurrection on a Sunday because the resurrection occurred on a Sunday at dawn. Christ’s resurrection is a “dawn” also in a spiritual sense because that is when the light of salvation rose (resurrected) from the darkness of death.

God the Son died for our salvation, and His resurrection is the guarantee that God the Father accepted the price paid by Jesus on the cross. And we need to get this message out – it’s called evangelism.

For further reading

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