

## Special Edition

# Easter: Pascha or Eostre?

What does this...



have to do with this?



I'll admit right from the start that I have a problem with Easter—at least with the Easter that comes to mind to most Americans. My wife knows this. From the time I became a Christian, it was an annual battle over little baskets garnished with plastic grass and filled with chocolate animals and brightly-colored eggs. Frankly, I think the Easter Bunny is an invention of the Devil.

In this issue of *Ekklesia Then & Now*, we'll take a look at the historical development of Easter.

## Then

The New Testament is silent on the subject of a holiday celebrating the resurrection of Christ.\* The King James translation of Acts 12:4 (*"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"*) is an error (corrected in the New King James)—is **pascha**, Passover. There is no evidence that the First Century church observed the anniversary of the crucifixion.

For at least several centuries after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the early church referred to the holiday as **Pascha**, and it was one of only three church "holidays" (Pentecost being the other):

*"If it be objected to us on this subject that we ourselves are accustomed to observe certain days, as for example the Lord's day, the Preparation [Good Friday, or the day before the Sabbath], the Passover, or Pentecost, I have to answer, that to the perfect Christian, who is ever in his thoughts, words, and deeds serving his natural Lord, God the Word, all his days are the Lord's, and he is always keeping the Lord's day. He also who is unceasingly preparing himself for the true life, and abstaining from the pleasures of this life which lead astray so many,—who is not indulging the lust of the flesh, but "keeping under his body, and bringing it into subjection,"—such a one is always keeping Preparation-day. Again, he who considers that "Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us," and that it is his duty to keep the feast by eating of the flesh of the Word, never ceases to keep the paschal feast; for the pascha means a "passover," and he is ever striving in all his thoughts, words, and deeds, to pass over from the things of this life to God, and is hastening towards the city of God."* [Origen, Against Celsus 8.22, c. 248]

Note that in this passage, Origen admits that Christians observe special days, but that they ascribe no particular significance to the special days over every day.

The celebration of Christian Pascha was well-established by Origen's time, so much so that controversies had developed over the proper date. According to Irenaeus, Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, visited Rome in about 153 A.D. to meet with Anicetus, bishop of Rome. One important topic was Pascha, and the two leaders disagreed. To their credit, they did something few sectarian leaders do—they agreed to disagree: *"they parted in peace one from the other, maintaining peace with the whole Church, both those who did observe [Pascha] and those who did not."* [Irenaeus, fragments, c. 180]

The significance of this passage lies in the fact that Polycarp is reported to have been a student of the Apostle John. John is said to have lived to about 100 AD, spending his last days in Ephesus, and Polycarp was born in 69. Smyrna was just 35 miles from Ephesus, and the cities were connected by a great Roman road. Irenaeus wrote that Polycarp's Paschal customs were based on *"things [that] had been always observed by John the disciple of our Lord, and by other apostles with whom [Polycarp] had been conversant."* [Ibid.] This suggests that the celebration of Pascha was in fact taught by the Apostles.

Unfortunately, that spirit of unity displayed by Polycarp and Anicetus did not prevail and the calendar became a point of contention. Some held that Christian Pascha should be observed on the day of the Jewish Passover (Nisan 14), while others insisted that it could only fall on a Sunday:

- *As for us, then, we scrupulously observe the exact day, neither adding nor taking away. For in Asia great luminaries [Philip and his daughters, John, Polycarp, Sagaris, Papirius, Melito] have gone to their rest... These all kept the passover on the fourteenth day of the month, in accordance with the Gospel, without ever deviating from it, but keeping to the rule of faith. Moreover I also, Polycrates, who am the least of you all, in accordance with the tradition of my relatives, some of whom I have succeeded—seven of my relatives were bishops, and I am the eighth, and my relatives always observed the day when the people put away the leaven—I myself, brethren, I say, who am sixty-five years old in the Lord, and have fallen in with the brethren in all parts of the world, and have read through all Holy Scripture, am not frightened at the things which are said to terrify us. For those who are greater than I have said, "We ought to obey God rather than men."* [Polycrates, Epistle to Victor and the Roman Church Concerning the Day of Keeping the Passover, c. 190]
- *"It is therefore your duty, brethren, who are redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, to observe the days of the passover exactly, with all care, after the vernal equinox... But no longer be careful to keep the feast with the Jews, for we have now no communion with them; for they have been led astray in regard to the calculation itself, which they think they accomplish perfectly... you should through ignorance celebrate the passover twice in the year, or celebrate the day of the resurrection of our Lord on any other day than a Sunday."* [Constitutions of the Holy Apostles 5.3, compiled c. 390]

The issue was settled (at least in the western church) at the Council of Nicea in 325 when the date of Christian Pascha was established as the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the nominal date of the spring equinox (March 21), but one small exception to the general rule reveals something less than inspiring about the Council. Occasionally, the Jewish Passover falls on formula date of Christian Paschal,

but the Council decreed that in such a case, the Christian holiday would be delayed one week so that the church would have "nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd." In the year 2001, Passover fell on Sunday, April 8, which was the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox, so Easter was celebrated on April 15 that year. To have the blatantly anti-Semitic decision of the Council of Nicea influence the one day most representing love is unfortunate to say the least.

The dating controversy continues to this day, thanks to the differences between the Julian and Gregorian calendars, and the Roman Church's obsession with identifying the precise anniversary of the Resurrection may have even created April Fool's Day. The Julian calendar was created by Sosigenes and adopted by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C., but it contained an error that accumulated in a full day every 128 years, so by the late 16th century, the error reached 10 days. The solution (making most century years non-leap years) was adopted by Pope Gregory XIII, and in 1582, October 15 followed October 4. Another feature of the Gregorian calendar was switching New Year's Day from April 1 to January 1, but not everyone accepted or heard of this change. Those who continued to celebrate New Year's Day on April 1, therefore, were sometimes referred to as April fools.

The Orthodox churches continue to use the Julian calendar for their Easter calculations, while most of Christendom uses the Gregorian calendar. Regardless of the date of the holiday, there was still no sign of bunnies or eggs, nor of the word **Easter**.

\* There is a reference to Pascha in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8: "*Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*" The context of this passage, however, does not support the establishment of a unique Christian holiday. One would think that if observation of the day were an important aspect of primitive Christianity, there would be a less ambiguous reference in the New Testament.

## Now

Easter is a pagan holiday. It's very name, according to the 8th century English scholar the Venerable Bede, derived from that of the Teutonic (Anglo-Saxon) goddess of spring, fertility, and the dawn—**Eostre** (Ostara and many other alternate spellings)—and its traditional bunny and egg symbols inexorably tied to pagan beliefs and practices. [[Click here](#) for a modern pagan website's Eostre page. Caution: nudity]



Eostre © hranajanto.com

The Easter Bunny has its roots in Eostre herself. Widely associated with fertility, the hare was Eostre's personal early symbol. It maintained its place in the springtime celebrations of the Germans, and immigrants brought the tradition to America. Sometime after the Civil War, the Easter Bunny slowly worked its way into the American celebration of Easter. When I was discussing the origins of Easter with a sister recently, she told me she thought the bunny was a harmless symbol and that she associated it with innocence and purity. "To me, it's a nice thing," she said. Unfortunately, worshipping God isn't about what we think, it's about what God thinks. And if the bunny has pagan roots, and the Devil is responsible for paganism, then the bunny is, in fact, an invention of the Devil!

Long before Christ, primitive people celebrated the return of the sun (the lengthening of the days) at the vernal equinox in late-March. It was a time to appeal to the gods for a successful growing season. In some cultures, ancient people set down bonfires to honor the triumph of light, the antecedent of Easter sunrise services.

The egg has long been a symbol of fertility and rebirth for many cultures, and the exchange of colored eggs pre-dates Christianity. In Egypt and Persia, eggs were presented to friends at the spring equinox to honor the beginning of the season. These traditions have persisted and broadened to incorporate a number of culturally-specific practices. In Slavic countries, eggs are silver or gold. In Poland and the Ukraine, colors and designs are simple. In Greece, red eggs are exchanged. Austrian Easter eggs sport tiny plant designs. In Germany, green eggs (without ham) are created for Maundy Thursday. In Armenia, hollow eggs are decorated with religious images.

One of the most popular of Easter traditions is the Easter Egg hunt, particularly after President Rutherford B. Hayes offered the first White House egg roll in 1878. The justification for such pseudo-idolatry is that the egg can be seen as representing the rebirth of Christ at the resurrection or the stone that was rolled away from the tomb.

The Easter Parade may be a distinctly American tradition, inaugurated in Atlantic City in 1860 as a day for the well-to-do to stroll down the boardwalk in their new spring clothing, but its roots may lie in the early church belief that the week before Easter was a good time to be baptized. Catechumens wore fresh white robes as a sign of new life (hence, the week became known as "White Week"). Later in some European countries, people came to believe that a new piece of clothing worn on Easter Sunday brought good luck.

Easter traditions are not limited to residual paganism. Over the centuries, the Roman church continued to add layer upon layer to the Easter season, although much of the liturgy was established in some quarters by the end of the fourth century when a wealthy Spanish lady named Egeria (or Etheria) took a three-year pilgrimage to the Holy Lands. A copy of her diary was found in Italy in 1884, and in it she describes Holy Week in Jerusalem. It is too long to include here, but if you're interested, I have excerpted the [Easter portion](#) (less the footnotes). You can access the entire document at <http://www.ccel.org/m/mcclure/etheria/etheria.htm> and the Christian History Institute summarized her pilgrimage in [Glimpses #129](#).

The Easter season now begins 40 days before Easter with Lent, preceding by some by Fat Tuesday (Mardi Gras) as a pre-Lent accommodation to self-indulgence. It's doubtful, however, if many New Orleans Mardi Gras celebrants give up much the next day other than making a briefly-held resolution never to drink *that* much again. Each day of "Holy Week" carries a special significance, highlighted by Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter itself. By some accounts, the season then continues until Pentecost, 50 days after Easter.

Some condemn any observation of Easter as a special day. See for example, an [article](#) in *Watchman Magazine*, in which author Joe R. Price covers much of the same information I have included in this issue of *ET&N* and concludes that "those who seek the Lord's approval and blessings will not engage in such rituals of men." Price makes many valid points (along with some errors, but I find it ironic that he quotes Colossians 2:16 ("Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day") as part of his condemnation. The lesson of that section of Scripture is that the observation of

festivals such as Easter is a matter of conscience and that no one should tell you whether or not to do so.

## Conclusion

Like [Christmas](#), Easter is rooted in many pagan beliefs and traditions, but unlike Christmas there is ample evidence of very early annual observation of the resurrection of Christ in the pre-Nicene church, perhaps even based on Apostolic authority. Furthermore, Easter is also closely aligned with the biblical feast of Passover, when God spared His people through the blood of the lamb. Such obvious parallels with the Gospel cannot be overlooked.

On the other hand, it cannot be pleasing to the Almighty that His church has chosen to label such an observation with the name of a pagan goddess, nor to have it contaminated with pagan symbols like eggs and rabbits. It also cannot be pleasing to Him that many who profess to be Christians only honor His church on such a day. The clear lesson of the New Testament is that the church is called to gather at least weekly to encourage one another.

Therefore, were it in my power to do so, I would banish the name of Easter from every church and encourage Christians everywhere to reject the bunny and the egg as having anything whatsoever to do with a special annual celebration of the Resurrection. I would instead rename the holiday Paschal (in the biblical tradition, hold it on the Sunday of or after Passover) and have it be a full day of joyful solemnity with Christians everywhere gathered for prayers, hymns, scripture-reading, and fellowship in gratitude for the incomparable gift God gave us—the opportunity to be reconciled with the Almighty, completely forgiven of our sin, and ultimately united with Him in eternity.

## Discussion

Apparently our traditions are jealously held. The [Easter](#) issue of *ET&N* touched some nerves and generated a number of comments:

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One subscriber asked: "*Must we also then "banish" and desist from mentioning those pagan-deity-honoring month names such as January, February, March and April and names of days such as Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday?*"

DS: With the exception of Sunday (which isn't specific anyway), we do not hold any particular day or month as anything spiritually significant, so the issue is very different. Can't some of you just imagine God "looking down" from the throne and saying to Jesus, "Can you believe it? They named the day celebrating your Resurrection after an Anglo-Saxon goddess!" The combination of secular Easter traditions and the anniversary of the Resurrection strike me as syncreticism of the most serious kind.

The Bible teaches: "" (B)eware that you are not ensnared to follow them [pagan cultures], after they are destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How do these nations serve their gods, that I also may do likewise?' You shall not behave thus toward the LORD your God, for every abominable act which the LORD hates they have done for their gods..." (Deuteronomy 12:30-31a)

When I wrote as much to this subscriber, he replied: *"It seems to me that the name "Easter" has completely transformed in meaning and has lost all its pagan connotations. However, I fully respect the conscience of those who see it differently and have scruples against the term. Each man must be fully persuaded in his own mind."*

DS: I agree and said as much in the article (at least relative to observing the day or not). But if Easter has, in fact, lost all its pagan connotations, why are we still painting eggs and honoring rabbits?

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My friend Daryl from Texas also objected:

*I'll disagree with you this time. Well, first let me agree: I don't like the name "Easter"—I prefer "Resurrection Sunday." I agree that more emphasis should be given to what God has done through the resurrection—and that God certainly would not be pleased that so many who claim to following Christ only honor him on that day. But that is not the fault of "Easter" or "bunny rabbits", etc. That is the fault of a legalistic mind-set that sees "Easter" and "Christmas" as the time to "get their ticket punched."*

*(To be fair, I know you did not say that the infrequent attendance of these disciples was due to bunnies!)*

*The reason I don't like Easter is because people focus more on the candy, the spring fashion show or a thousand other things that have nothing to do with the resurrection.*

*But is it fair to equate the casual observance of an Easter egg hunt with idolatry? If you had never heard of Eostre or knew of the traditions associated with her—would you have been guilty of idolatry by eating a chocolate bunny? Would Paul be guilty of worshipping an idol if he ignorantly ate meat sacrificed to an idol? Didn't he say something about eating and not asking? When children are out on Halloween dressing in costumes and pestering their neighbors for candy—are they worshipping the Devil? Are they poster children for Wicca? Or are they practicing Catholicism (Hallowed Evening)? Or do they know or care? Doesn't intent have something to do with the situation?*

Comment: Daryl and I had a couple of e-mails back and forth about these issues. [Click here](#) if you're interested in reading the exchange.

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Then I got this note from Jack:

*I was raised in a denomination that totally discarded all Christian history (except for the first 100, and the last 200 years) and my life was poorer for it. We cannot discard 2000 years of tradition and the worship engaged in by all the saints to condemn what was given them by the Holy Spirit as a means to know God. Easter has been an important part of the Church year for hundreds of years. God will use any means he wants to reach his people and all the theologians in the world can not stop Him. The Easter celebration has brought millions to Christ. If you feel better using Pascha than by all means do so and I will respect your way to Christ. I hope you will do that same to all of us who want to hold on to Eostre, (not the bunny I agree with you on that).*

DS: I agree that God can use any means He wants, but honoring God is all about what it means to Him, not to us. It was not my intent to judge anyone's heart—only to point out the roots of the holiday as it is currently observed and ask whether **some** of that truly glorifies God. The religious elite of the first century thought they were worshipping appropriately, but Jesus said much of it was in vain. I wonder (but do not presume to know) what God would say about Easter.



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Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

## **NEXT REGULAR ISSUE: Cities of the New Testament - Laodicea (April 13)**

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