

Would Jesus Keep Easter?

For millions of people Easter Sunday is the most important religious observance of the year. But, if Jesus walked the dusty roads of Galilee today, would He keep Easter?

by Jerold Aust

Each spring the excitement of Easter fills the air. Many churches prepare special Easter programs about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. At home mothers color Easter eggs, and parents hide the brightly colored holiday symbols around the house and lawn so that, come Easter morning, their children can excitedly hunt for them.

Stuffed Easter bunnies and chocolate rabbits are seen everywhere in the weeks leading up to this major religious observance. Then there are the Easter sunrise services, where churchgoers gather to hear about Jesus' resurrection and honor that miraculous event by watching the sun come up in the east.

But what do colored eggs and the Easter rabbit have to do with Jesus Christ's resurrection? How did these seemingly irreligious symbols come to be associated with that event?

Can we find any historical or biblical record of Jesus or His disciples keeping Easter or teaching parents and children to dye eggs and display bunnies on this holiday? Did Jesus or His apostles instruct any of His followers to meet to honor His resurrection at sunrise on Easter Sunday-or at any other time, for that matter?

If Easter were not sanctioned by Jesus or instituted by His apostles, then where did Easter come from? In other words, if Jesus were living among us as a flesh-and-blood human being, would He keep Easter or encourage others to do so?

Answers to these questions are readily available. Some may take a little research, but they become clear when we look into history and the Bible.

The apostles' record on Easter

As surprising as this may sound, nowhere in the New Testament can you find any reference to Easter. In the King James Version of the Bible (in Acts 12:4) you do find the word *Easter*, but it is a blatantly erroneous mistranslation that has been corrected in virtually every other Bible translation. The original Greek word there is *pascha*, correctly translated *Passover* in virtually every modern version of the Bible everywhere it appears in the Scriptures. It refers to the biblical Passover originally instituted when God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12:1-14).

The original apostles, from the inception of the New Testament church to near the end of the first century, when the apostle John died, left absolutely no record of keeping Easter or teaching others to do so. From Jesus to John not one of the apostles gave even the slightest hint of keeping or advocating the observance of what we know today as Easter Sunday.

However, that doesn't mean the early Church did not hold to specific religious observances. The apostle Paul, some 25 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, spoke plainly to members of the church at Corinth that they should continue to keep the *Passover* as Christ commanded. Paul wrote: "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.'

"For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:23-27).

Paul was concerned that the Church members in Corinth observe the Passover in the right way, with reverence and proper comprehension of its meaning.

The writings of Paul and Luke, his traveling companion and author of the book of Acts, regularly mention keeping the weekly Sabbath day and the biblical festivals listed in Leviticus 23. But Easter is conspicuously absent (1 Corinthians 5:6-8; 16:8; Acts 2:1-4; 13:42, 44; 17:1-3; 18:4; 20:6, 16).

Since Easter wasn't introduced by Jesus or the apostles, where did it come from, and how did it come to be such an accepted part of traditional Christianity?

The origin of Easter

It's not that difficult to trace the surprising origins of Easter and what it really represents. Many scholarly works show that Easter is a pre-Christian religious holiday, one that was created and developed long before Jesus' time and carried forward to the modern era through such empires as Babylon, Persia, Greece and finally Rome.

Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words notes: "The term 'Easter' is not of Christian origin. It is another form of *Astarte*, one of the titles of the Chaldean [Babylonian] 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, "Easter").

Alexander Hislop in his book *The Two Babylons* (1959) explores the origins of Easter. He discovered that a form of Easter was kept in many nations, not necessarily only those that professed Christianity. "What means the term Easter itself? ...

It bears its Chaldean origin on its very forehead. Easter is nothing else than Astarte, one of the titles of Beltis, the queen of heaven, whose name, as pronounced by the people of Nineveh, was ... Ishtar" (p. 103).

Easter and the practices associated with it can be traced back to various pagan rituals. Hislop explains that "the forty days' abstinence of Lent was directly borrowed from the worshippers of the Babylonian goddess"(Hislop, p. 104). In Egypt a similar 40-day period of abstinence "was held expressly in commemoration of Adonis or Osiris, the great mediatorial god" (Hislop, p. 105).

A pre-Christian spring festival

How, then, did 40 days' abstinence come to be associated with a resurrection? Hislop continues: "Among the pagans this Lent seems to have been an indispensable preliminary to the great annual festival in commemoration of the death and resurrection of Tammuz, which was celebrated by alternate weeping and rejoicing" (Hislop, p. 105).

Tammuz was a chief Babylonian deity and husband of the goddess Ishtar. Worship of Tammuz was so widespread in ancient times that it even spread into Jerusalem. In Ezekiel 8:12-18 God describes that worship and calls it an abomination-something repugnant and disgusting to Him.

The Babylonians held a great festival every spring to celebrate Tammuz's death and supposed resurrection many centuries before Christ walked the earth (see "The Resurrection Connection," below). Hislop comprehensively documents evidence that shows Easter's origins precede the modern Christian holiday by more than 2,000 years!

Hislop cites the fifth-century writings of Cassianus, a Catholic monk of Marseilles, France, on the subject of Easter's being a pagan custom rather than a New Testament observance. "It ought to be known that the observance of the forty days (i.e., the observance of Lent) had no existence, so long as the perfection of that primitive Church remained inviolate" (p. 104).

Sir James Frazer describes Easter ceremonies entering into the established church: "When we reflect how often the Church has skillfully contrived to plant the seeds of the new faith on the old stock of paganism, we may surmise that the Easter celebration of the dead and risen Christ was grafted upon a similar celebration of the dead and risen Adonis [the Greek name

for Tammuz], which ... was celebrated in Syria at the same season" (*The Golden Bough*, 1993, p. 345).

Why eggs and rabbits?

What about other customs associated with Easter? One Catholic writer explains how eggs and rabbits came to be connected with Easter. You will quickly notice an absence of any link or reference to the Holy Bible when it comes to these mythic rituals:

"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" (Greg Dues, *Catholic Customs and Traditions*, 1992, p. 101; emphasis added).

Like eggs, rabbits came to be linked with Easter because they were potent symbols associated with ancient fertility rites. "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. The Easter Bunny has never had a religious meaning" (Dues, p. 102).

Honest Bible scholars freely admit that Jesus never sanctioned this pre-Christian holiday, nor did His apostles. Not until Emperor Constantine and the Council of Nicaea in 325-almost three centuries after Jesus was killed and rose again-did Easter replace the Passover, the biblical ceremony Jesus and the apostle Paul told Christians to observe.

Says the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: "A final settlement of the dispute [whether and when to keep Easter or Passover] was one among the other reasons which led 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'" (11th edition, pp. 828-829, "Easter").

Constantine's decision was a fateful turning point for Christianity. Those who remained faithful to the instruction of Jesus and the apostles would be outcasts, a small and persecuted minority (John 15:18-20). A vastly different set of beliefs and practices-recycled from ancient pre-Christian religions but dressed in a Christian cloak-would take hold among the majority.

Would Jesus keep Easter?

Since the pagan symbols of eggs and rabbits were adopted by the Catholic Church centuries after Christ's ascension, should Christians keep this holiday or encourage others to observe it?

To answer that question let's go back to the title of this article, "Would Jesus Keep Easter?" He certainly could have told us to. So could the apostles, whose teaching and doctrine are preserved for us in the book of Acts and the epistles written by Paul, Peter, James, Jude and John. But nowhere do we find a hint of support for Easter or anything remotely resembling it. What we do find, as pointed out earlier, is clear instruction from Jesus and Paul to keep the Passover and other biblical-and truly Christian-observances.

Holy Scripture does not support this pre-Christian holiday and in fact condemns such celebrations. Because Scripture condemns pagan practices and the worship of false gods (Deuteronomy 12:29-32), we know that God the Father and Jesus His Son have no interest in Easter and do not approve of it.

Jesus, in fact, is diametrically opposed to religious rituals that supposedly honor Him but in reality are rooted in worship of false gods. He makes clear the difference between pleasing God and pleasing men: "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men ... All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition'" (Mark 7:6-9, emphasis added throughout).

Easter is a tradition of men, not a commandment of God. But it's more than that.

It is a pagan tradition of men that, like other traditions involved in the worship of false gods, is abhorrent to the true God. Jesus and His apostles would never sanction its observance because it mingles paganism with supposedly Christian symbolism and ritual. It is rooted in ancient pre-Christian fertility rites that have nothing to do with Jesus.

In reality, most of the trappings associated with Easter reveal that the holiday is actually a fraud pawned off on unsuspecting and well-intentioned people. God wants us to worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24), not to recycle ancient customs used to worship other gods.

Even the timing of the events used to justify celebrating Jesus' resurrection on a Sunday morning—that He was crucified on the afternoon of Good Friday and resurrected before dawn on Sunday morning—are demonstrably false, as an examination of the Scriptures shows.

For those who want concrete proof that He was indeed the Messiah and Savior of mankind, Jesus made a promise: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:39-40).

Try as some might, there is no way to calculate three days and three nights from late Friday afternoon to Sunday morning before daylight. At most this amounts to barely more than a day and a half. Either Jesus was mistaken, or those who say He was crucified on a Friday and resurrected on a Sunday are mistaken. You can't have it both ways.

Jesus' instructions remain consistent

If Jesus walked the dusty roads of Galilee today, would He keep Easter? Certainly not. But He would be consistent because He does not change (Hebrews 13:8). For instance, He would keep the annual Passover in the same manner as He instructed His followers to keep it (1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:15-17). And Jesus would observe the Days of Unleavened Bread in the way He inspired Paul to instruct early Christians (1 Corinthians 5:6-8).

Anyone who wants to be right with God, who wants to be a true disciple of Christ, the Master Teacher, will carefully examine his beliefs and practices to see whether they agree with the Bible. Such a person will not try to honor God with ancient idolatrous practices, violating His explicit commands (Deuteronomy 12:29-32; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; 7:1). Easter, as we have seen, is filled with idolatrous trappings.

Simply claiming that something is Christian or is done to honor God doesn't make it acceptable to God.

Easter doesn't represent a resurrected Jesus Christ. Rather—difficult as it may be to admit—it merely continues the practices pagans followed thousands of years ago to honor their nonexistent gods. If we are to escape the calamities prophesied to come on those who place the ways of this world ahead of God, then we must repent of following traditions that dishonor Him (Revelation 18:1-5).

God would much rather have us honor and obey Him according to His instructions in His Word. Then He can use us to represent His holy Son, our Savior and the Messiah, who will return to earth. No greater calling can be extended to human beings. May you have the heart to seek understanding and God's perfect will.