

## THOUGHTS ABOUT EASTER

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What is Easter? The answer is simple enough. It is the greatest feast of Christendom. It is the annual festival observed by Christians to commemorate the death, resurrection, and ascension of their Lord and Savior, God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Almost everybody knows, or thinks they know, what Easter is. Few people realize how it came to be and its connections with Judaism and Paganism. Looking into these problems will be the theme of this presentation.

Wouldn't it be much easier, you might be thinking, merely to look in the Bible and there it would be, large as life? Verily, verily, THIS IS EASTER! Unfortunately, it is not that easy. That's because EASTER IS SIMPLY NOT THERE! Furthermore, the Encyclopedia Britannica states, "There is no indication of the observance of the Easter festival in the New Testament, or in the writings of the apostolic Fathers. The sanctity of special times was an idea absent from the minds of the first Christians." [En. Britt 11 ed. Easter]

In fact, the word "Easter" only occurs ONCE in the entire King James Version of the New Testament [Acts 12:4] These days this solitary reference is considered to be a mistranslation. The passage refers to the apostle Peter's imprisonment, stating that his captors intend to release him after Easter. The Revised Standard Translation and the New English Bible have both deleted the word "Easter" and replaced it with the word "Passover." Peter's captors intended to release him after Passover. Nobody in the first century had ever heard about a Christian Easter. Doubtless some over zealous scribe must have written the word "Easter" into the text many years later.

The first Christians actually continued to observe Jewish festivals but in a new spirit. Passover was practiced with Christ as the "true Paschal Lamb." As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians [1 Cor. 5:7] "...Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." It's not surprising that a dispute soon developed between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians as to the day for the observance. The Western churches kept Easter on the first day of the week, the Eastern churches followed the Jewish rule, and kept Easter on the fourteenth. The final settlement over the celebration of Easter Sunday was not fully agreed on until the Council of Nicea in 325 CE where the fathers of the Church took years to decide on which books should be in the Bible and decreed "that none should hereafter follow the blindness of the Jews." [Socrates, H.E. i 9]. Henceforth Easter was Sunday.

Let us go back a little further and look into the origin of this unusual noun. The English word "EASTER" and the German word, "Ostern," come from the same root "Eastre" the goddess of spring. That is according to the Venerable Bede [De Temp.Rat. c. xv] who lived in the 8th century [673-735 CE]. Easter was derived from "Eostre, or Ostara" the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring. Other names for the goddess included Ishtar and Astarte. It is she to whom the month, answering to our April, was called Eostur-monath, or Easter Month. This month, claimed Bede, was the same as the Mensis Paschalis, the month of Paschal, which meant, it pertained to Passover or Easter. It is interesting to note the similarity of the names used for the Easter festival in other languages. In French it is "Paques" - in Italian, it is "Pasqua" - in Spanish, "Pascua" - in Danish, "Paaske" - in Dutch, "Paasch" - in Welsh, "Pasg." These words were derived from the Latin and Greek - "Pascha" These, in turn, came from the Hebrew name of the festival of Passover which is "Pesach." Literally, this means, "he passed over". It refers, of course, to the famous and terrifying legend of the destroying angel who PASSED OVER the children of Israel and smote [read murdered] all those poor Egyptian firstborn youngsters and cattle instead.

I want you to ponder on the concept of killing children for "the glory of God" during these so-called holy days. It is a good time to reflect on the psychopathology that lies behind the myths which are joyously recounted at time of the year. If you look at the stories objectively you will be surprised at their grossness. More about this later.

Have you ever tried to figure out when Easter will occur? That's a good question because it is a movable feast and the date floats around a lot. I recall in 1962, my son was 7 years old and his birthday fell on Good Friday. He was so intrigued by this that he asked whether it would always fall on a good Friday? I told him - No. "When will happen again?" He wanted to know. We'll see, came the reply, next time we go to the library. The answer turned out to be, not very often. His birthday and Good Friday coincide in 1973 when he would be 18. The next time will be 1984, he will be 29. The time after that comes on his 102nd birthday in 2057! On 2068, at age 113, he will have to throw a big party because it won't occur again till the 22nd century! It's all very strange. Just how, you might wonder, do they figure out the date? Actually, it's simple. Easter is a mixture of Astrology and a Lunar calendar. Easter falls on or after the first Sunday, after the first full moon, after the vernal [Spring] equinox. The equinox occurs when the Sun's path intersects the celestial equator and this usually means on March 21, or sometimes March 20. Easter Sunday can therefore be as early as March 22, or as late as April 25. See, I told you it was easy!

There are many rituals connected with the observance of Easter. First, the 40 days of Lent. Lent, by the way, comes from the Old English word "Lencten" for the lengthening of hours, or Spring. For those who need a refresher course, Lent starts on Ash Wednesday and extends 40 weekdays to Easter Sunday. It is a period of self-denial, penitence and fasting. The day before Lent, in Roman Catholic churches, is called Mardi Gras [literally "Fat Tuesday".] The Germans call it Fetter Dienstag.

This is a time for Carnivals and merry making. The word Carnival comes from the Latin and means carne = meat, vale = good bye. It is an excuse for wild parties, heavy drinking, over-eating, and parades. This is done to put the faithful in the mood for somber reflection during the restrictive Lenten season.

There are the fifteen special days, [observed in France as the Quinzaine de Paques] starting on the Sunday before Easter, Palm Sunday, and followed by Holy Week. It ends on the Sunday after Easter, known as Low Sunday.

We could go on and on with the boring details about Pentecost and Whitsuntide and Trinity Sunday but time does not permit.

During the third and fourth centuries the church adopted a 40 day fast for Lent in imitation of Christ. [Handbook of Christian feasts and customs. P. 170] Let us consider some of the things which the Bible tells us allegedly occurred to Jesus during the 40 days of his temptation. The following is, indeed, the Bible story and some people might think it has comical overtones. [Matt. 4:1-11 & Luke 4:1-13] It goes like this.

Right after Jesus had been baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist he went into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. When he had fasted forty days and nights, afterward he hungered. Is that surprising? Why a man who was supposedly "divine" should go to such lengths to stage a hunger strike is not clear. The idea of 40 days is a common one, remember Noah and the ark? [Gen 7:12] That's when it is said to have rained for 40 days and 40 nights. Remember, also, that Moses fasted 40 days without food and water when he was getting the 10 commandments for the second time? [Exodus 34:28]

Anyway, the story says, Jesus was very hungry and like many starving people, he started to have hallucinations. It reminded me of a comment by Bertrand Russell who contends that there is little difference between the man who drinks too much and sees snakes, and the man who eats too little and sees God! Only, in this case, Jesus saw The Devil! Now the Devil knew how hungry Jesus was [or at least pretended to be] and he remarked, if you really are the Son of God, why don't you turn a few stones into bread? That sounded like a reasonable idea to me, but the question was never answered. Instead Jesus quipped, "You shall not live on bread alone!" Which is true, but he dodged the question. Just imagine how impressed we would have been if Jesus had taken a few pebbles and turned them into rolls? "You get the first bite, Satan, Old Boy!" What would the Devil have been able to say then?

Anyway, the Devil decided to whisk him away to the "Holy City" [Jerusalem I suppose?] and set him up on A PINNACLE of the temple. How many pinnacles do you suppose there were? The reference makes it sound like there were several, yet from what I have read there was only one! A small point, forgive me for saying so.

In any case, there they were, Jesus and Satan, perched on the pinnacle on top of the Temple for all to marvel at, but no one saw them. The Devil said, why don't you jump to see if the angels will support you? It seems to me that Jesus missed a great chance to say - after you! On second thoughts, if you really believe the Devil could fly Jesus up, why not suppose that the Angels could fly him down? Once again, a missed opportunity to be a Batman or Super Hero, or even a David Copperfield, If Satan could fly, why not Jesus? Instead of which, Jesus begged off with the excuse that you shouldn't "tempt the Lord thy God." Well wasn't that exactly what the Devil was doing? Once again I think Jesus lost the opportunity to do some good PR work.

Finally, the Devil took him up to an "exceedingly high mountain," I suppose they were on a magic carpet, or somesuch device. From this great height they could see ALL the kingdoms of the earth [Remember, there were no real democracies in those times, just Kingdoms!] It also sounds to me as though the earth was still flat in those days and that was the reason they could see ALL the kingdoms at one time. Anyway, the Devil offered them all to Jesus if he would just become a Devil worshiper. No way, said Jesus, I only worship God and so Satan had to let him go. Then the angels came in and "ministered" Jesus with some fast food. If you think this story is a little farfetched, please try to keep a straight face. Let me assure you that it is a favorite topic for the clergy during the Lenten season!

We must proceed. Jesus was supposedly crucified, died and came back to life at this time of the year, somewhere around 33 CE. Let's look at a few details and determine how accurate do you suppose that this story really is. Suppose, for example, that Jesus really lived and said most, if not all, that is attributed to him. He must have been quite a controversial figure. A heretic, a blasphemer, a troublemaker, a disturber of the peace, a revolutionary. Let's suppose that he got the authorities so angry they wanted to see him dead. Anything is possible. Some of his so-called crimes like blasphemy and sedition were punishable by death, but death by whom?

According to the Jewish Encyclopedia [quoted by Robert Scheaffer in "Making of the Messiah"] in the year 40 CE the Romans removed the death penalty from the control of the Jewish courts. In other words, 40 CE was the year when the Romans stripped the Jews of their right to inflict capital punishment. This means that in 33 CE the Jews still had the authority to kill offenders. According to experts like Haim Cohn, a Justice of the Israeli Supreme Court, "It was [at that date] inconceivable that a Jew would be delivered by a Jewish court to the Roman enemy for execution, whatever his crime.." [The Trial and Death of Jesus, 1977].

Instead of crucifixion, the Jews would have stoned Jesus and hung him on a tree! This is what the Hebrew Bible [Old Testament] describes as the penalty for blasphemy. [Deuteronomy 21:22-3] Does this sound incredible to you? That is exactly what happened to Stephen a few years later. He was a follower of Jesus who was accused of blasphemy. [Acts 7:59] Let me also remind you there are 5 references [Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:29, Gal 3:13, 1 Pet 2:24] in the New Testament which claim that Jesus was hanged on a tree instead of being crucified! The very reference to hanging on a tree implied that he was stoned first. "...Jesus, whom you slew and hanged on a tree." [Acts 5:30]

Because the death and resurrection stories are essential for Christian belief they merit careful study. How accurate are they? Remember, what St. Paul said to the Corinthians? "If there be NO RESURRECTION of the dead, then is Christ NOT RISEN: and if Christ be NOT RISEN, then ALL OUR PREACHING IS IN VAIN, and your faith is also in vain." [1 Cor.15:13-14] Even if we take the rest of the gospel story as true, how much evidence do we have that the resurrection took place? Did anybody actually see it? No! The favorite explanation is to point to the empty tomb. I submit to you that this, if it were true, merely meant that the body was no longer present. It could have gone in alive and come out alive. It could have gone in dead and come out dead. It could have been removed,

embalmed and laid to rest somewhere else. Nobody ever claims to have seen the resurrection take place! The four gospels are very confusing if you read them carefully.

For example in Matthew [28:1] we read that it was the end of Sabbath ..at dawn." Mark [16:2] said the sun was rising. Luke [24:1] wrote it was very early in the morning. John [20:1] said it was yet dark. Small details, you say? Alright. Who first went to the tomb? Matthew said, Mary Magdalene and another Mary. Mark claimed it was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome. Luke stated it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna, and Mary, James' Mother and other women.

John's gospel had Mary Magdalene going there alone. If this were a court of law, the first witness would say two women went to the sepulchre; the second witness, three women; the third witness four women, and the fourth witness, only one woman. Wow! Isn't this supposed to be God's infallible word?

Very well, what happened after the disciples got there?

Let's take a look at Matthew [Chapter 28] It was the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn.. the first day of the week [that's Sunday]. Already there is a serious problem. The Jews believed their days STARTED when the SUN WENT DOWN not when the SUN CAME UP! The original Greek text does not mention the dawn. The verb used is EPIPHOSKEIN, meaning to "shine forth." Jews, to this day, believe that a new day has started when 3 stars can be seen. So the truth is that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the sepulchre at dusk, not dawn. Jerome, the church father in the fourth century, [340-420] wrote ABOUT THIS PASSAGE in Latin in the Vulgate - "Vespere autem sabbati" or "on the EVE OF THE SABBATH!"

In any case, Matthew proclaims, [28:2] behold, there was a great earthquake when an angel of the Lord, came down from heaven and rolled back the stone. Unfortunately none of the other Gospels, nor anybody else, noticed the earthquake. It makes you doubt that it was very great. This angel wore the usual white-as-snow uniform. He had a face like lightning. After he had moved the stone, he sat on it. The angel spoke to the women and told them that Jesus is risen and to tell the disciples to go to Galilee where they will see him.

They went to tell the disciples but Jesus intercepted them, and allowed them to see him first. Jesus said, "All hail!" They held him by his feet and worshipped him. Anyway, the ladies told the disciples and all eleven disciples went to Galilee, into the mountains and worshipped him, but some doubted.

They received instructions to go out and baptize the world and that's how Matthew ends. The gospel of Matthew does not mention the ascension of Jesus.

In Mark, considered by many to be the oldest of the 4 gospels, the famous 16th chapter tells the story. The Sabbath was past [in other words it was evening]. Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had brought sweet spices to anoint Jesus. The Bible says that very early in the morning they went to the sepulchre at sunrise and wondered who would roll away the stone? They found that the huge stone was rolled away. They entered the sepulchre and saw a young man [it doesn't say an angel] in a long white garment [that sounds like an angel!] sitting down. "Don't be afraid," he said, but, of course, they were. "You are looking for Jesus who was crucified? He's not here, he's risen. Tell the disciples he is heading for Galilee." Jesus actually appeared first to Mary Magdalene and she told the disciples she had seen him. Nobody believed her. Later two disciples saw Jesus when they were walking in the country. When they told the rest, no one believed them either. Later on while they were eating a meal, Jesus showed up and scolded them for their unbelief. He outlined their mission and said they could pick up serpents and drink poison and remain unhurt. This is the basis of some of the strange serpent cults which still exist. After his short talk Jesus was whisked up into heaven to sit not "at" but "on" the right hand of God. This occurred on the SAME DAY that Jesus was resurrected. That's all Mark tells us.

Next comes Luke, the beloved physician, in the 24th chapter. In this version, it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the other of James and a number of other women who came to the sepulchre very

early in the morning. They brought spices and ointments, presumably for embalming the body. They, too, found the stone rolled back and found two men in shining garments [maybe angels] but no earthquakes or lightning.

The women were afraid, and the men [or angels] said, "Why look for the living among the dead? He is not here but risen, don't you remember what he told you that after crucifixion he would rise again after three days?" The women said they remembered. They went and told it all to the apostles but, apparently, nobody could remember. In any case, they didn't believe it. Then two of the men went for a long walk to Emmaus, about 7 miles from Jerusalem. They were talking about recent events when Jesus came up and walked with them. For some odd reason they couldn't recognize him. Jesus played along and asked what was upsetting them, pretending he didn't know. They were amazed. "Are you a stranger, the only man who hasn't heard the news?" they said, but Jesus wouldn't let on. They told him all about the women, the sepulchre and the angels. "How dull you are!" said Jesus, and gave them a lesson in Scripture. He kept this up until evening when they stopped and he broke bread for them to eat. Suddenly their eyes were opened and they realized who he was - Jesus Christ! At which point he vanished like the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland! They left at once to head for Jerusalem to join the eleven and to break the news. As they were talking, Jesus suddenly appeared among them. He must have floated through a wall because they thought he was a ghost! "Touch me, I'm not a ghost," Jesus remarked, "look at my hands and feet." They still didn't believe him. "Do you have any meat I could eat?" The side effects of resurrection had apparently worked up quite an appetite in Jesus. They brought him broiled fish and honeycomb and he ate it. Later he took them out to Bethany, [not the Mount of Olives,] and blessed them with uplifted hands and was carried up into heaven. That's Luke's story anyway.

In John, chapters 20 and 21, start with Mary Magdalene at the sepulchre alone. She saw the stone had been taken away, so she ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and told them. "They have taken away the Lord and we don't know where." [John 20:1-2]

Peter and the other disciple [still unnamed] raced to the sepulchre, the other disciple got there first. They looked in and found the grave clothes but no body. The disciples DID NOT KNOW that Jesus must rise again from the dead and they left! Mary Magdalene stayed to weep. As she did so she stooped down and looked inside the sepulchre. Lo and behold, now there were two angels dressed in their traditional white uniforms. They asked her why she was crying [a really dumb question!] She walked out of the tomb and saw a man she believed was "the gardener." She did not know who he was. He also asked her, "Woman, why weepst thou?" She started to explain but he decided to stop playing games and called her by name. Then she knew who it was! It turned out that he was not the gardener after all but the risen Christ! It is no wonder she did not recognize him, he must have been stark naked! Remember, the grave clothes were still in the sepulchre. Also, the soldiers had cast lots for Jesus' clothes while he was on the cross! [John 19:23] Not only was he naked but he was covered with 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes which Joseph of Arimathaea had bought and embalmed him with [John 19:39-40]. It's no wonder Jesus said to her, "Touch me not!" He must have been a real sticky mess. You know how gooey aloes can be? Well myrrh is much worse. It's a highly aromatic resin from the bark of a tree used to stick grave clothes to a corpse for good!

Mary Magdalene was told to go to the brethren to warn of the impending ascension. She did so. On Sunday evening, when the disciples assembled, the doors were shut when Jesus, all of a sudden, appeared. He stood with them and showed them his hands and side. They were glad [not scared as had been described in Luke [24:37]. Jesus breathed on them to give them the Holy Ghost. [John 20:22]

Then came the story of Thomas Didymus who missed the meeting, and said afterwards that wouldn't believe unless he had put his finger in the nail holes! After eight days, Jesus put in another magical appearance through shut doors and it was then that Doubting Thomas had his wish granted. On a still later occasion Jesus showed himself to the disciples on the Sea of Tiberias, Peter and some disciples were fishing and Jesus stood on the shore. "Have you any meat?" [meaning fish] [John 21:5] Jesus shouted to them. They didn't know who he was. They answered, "No." "Cast your nets on the right

side," said Jesus. There were so many fish they couldn't lift the nets. It was then someone recognized Jesus! So they dragged the full net ashore with 153 great fishes and they cooked them over coals. Jesus said, "Come and dine" and none of the disciples dared ask him - who are you? They "knew" it was the Lord. This was the third time Jesus had appeared to his disciples after his death. It's odd to my mind that there should be any doubts in their minds as to who he was.

There followed a series of peculiar questions in which Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him, and told him to feed his sheep [which means you and me!]. Then there was the odd exchange about the "beloved" disciple, John, and whether Jesus would make him stay on earth until his return. This was the basis of the legend of the wandering Jew. That wraps up the gospel of John. It is weird stuff, but there was no earthquake and no ascension. The book of Acts, was supposedly written by St. Luke, starts off by saying that Jesus was around for 40 days after his resurrection [there's 40 days again!] and Jesus was eating with his apostles. He told them not to leave Jerusalem until they had received the power of the Holy Ghost! [I thought they already had it! Jesus had breathed on them and given them the Holy Ghost in John 20:22] When he said this he was TAKEN UP and a cloud received him out of their sight. Afterwards, they all went back from Mount Olivet to Jerusalem [Acts 1:12]

These documents represent ALL of the known evidence for the so-called resurrection and ascension. What about St. Paul? He was gung ho about the resurrection. What evidence did he have? Absolutely none! Never once did Paul even refer to the empty grave. The reason is that in Paul's time the story had not yet been invented. It was a later fabrication, hence the various versions in which it occurred. In any case, Paul was talking about spiritual resurrection. Remember the story about Paul on the road to Damascus? Luke had implied that Jesus had ascended to heaven in a body of flesh and blood [Luke 24:36-43] Paul denied it. "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." [1 Corinth. 15: 50]

The time has come to ask ourselves what possible significance would it have to us, if on one hand the resurrection story were true and on the other false? From my point of view there is precious little evidence in its favor but let us say it did occur. Let us pretend that Jesus really died and came back to life and sailed up to heaven? So what? What's the big deal? There were characters in the Old Testament who came back to life, remember old Elijah and Elisha who brought a corpses back to life? [1 Kings 17:21 & 2 Kings 4:32] Ezekial revived a whole army from dead bones! [Ezek.37] What about Elijah who went to heaven in a whirlwind and a chariot of fire? [2 Kings 2:11] What about Enoch, wasn't he wafted up to heaven even earlier? [Gen. 5:22] So what?

Then, there was Lazarus. He had supposedly been dead for days and he stinketh? [John 11:14] Finally, I'll give you an even better example. What about the time when Jesus died on the cross in Matthew [27:52-53] and the earth shook and all the people came out of their graves and went into the holy city and appeared unto many! That's more like it, that's a real resurrection, because they had been dead for years!!

Do you suppose they went straight back to their graves or did they take up their old style of living where they left off and later die for a second time? It's a good question.

Actually, there are many examples of resurrection and heavenly ascent outside of the Bible. One of the most spectacular was Romulus, founder of Rome, who, according to Livy, disappeared in a thunderstorm and ascended wherever Romans ascend.

The question that I really want to ask believing Christians is why death and resurrection have any meaning for them? The answer is simple enough. It is because they have been convinced for the need to be "saved." Saved from what? Saved from the fiction of Original Sin which St. Paul invented. IF Eve transgressed and IF Adam was deceived by her and IF we are all born with original sin, then we need to be saved from the wrath of the gods. I ask you, in all sincerity, isn't this a childish concept? Isn't this an antique belief? Isn't it idiotic to take stories like the Garden of Eden seriously in this day and age? Of course it is, but we have grown to be tolerant of strange religions. We have all the tolerance in the world for them. It is our tolerance which allows things like Astrology and Psychic readers to go on television along with all those tax-exempt Televangelists. We hope that such obviously erroneous

ideas will fall by their own weight and eventually fade away. But will they? I confess that I have my doubts.

Some of the strangest of religious beliefs seem to persist for the longest times no matter how much evidence is produced to dispute them. The idea of an angry deity who needs to be appeased by the sacrifice of firstborn children is so utterly ridiculous that it needs to be ridiculed. The Egyptians in their Book of the Dead explained how the gods needed the sacrifice of firstborn children.

The Old Testament bloodthirsty god, Jehovah, felt the same way. In Exodus Chapter 13:2 we read, "Sanctify unto me all the firstborn, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is mine." It goes on, 13:12... "and every firstling that cometh from a beast...the males shall be the LORD'S." [13] "And every firstling of an ass thou shalt redeem with a lamb; if thou wilt not redeem it, then thou shalt break its neck; and all the firstborn of man among thy children shalt thou redeem." This marked the beginning of the substitution of animal for human sacrifice. The idea was still there but it was mitigated by animal substitution. Of all the sick, stories in the Old Testament the worst are those involving child sacrifice. I refer to the Abraham and Isaac horror story. [Gen. 22.2] Jephthah and his daughter [Jg. 11:30] and the death of Egyptian firstborn children.[Exod. 12:12] They are all senseless examples of violence and murder. In my belief, the death of Jesus in the New Testament is another example of the same theme. The death of God's "only begotten son," in other words his firstborn, was the only kind of sacrifice that could fully atone for the Original Sin. Nothing more was possible, nothing less would do.

I contend that all these ideas are passé. There are no gods to be appeased, no original sins from which to be saved, no need for death and resurrection, or baptism or anything else.

It is time the whole world gave one big shrug and shook off the oppression of supernaturalism. It may not happen soon, but it will happen eventually.

As for the Easter bunnies and eggs and all those fertility symbols, they are all much older than Christianity. So were the Hilaria of ancient Rome when people celebrated the death and resurrection of the pre-Christian god Attis. This took place as a 3 day orgy at the vernal equinox which was on or about March 25.

Please enjoy whatever Pagan good fellowship takes your fancy. I want to take this opportunity to wish everybody a very happy Spring Festival.