

A Biblical and Historical **Look at Easter**



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Printed in China.



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Easter is a holiday we are all familiar with to some extent. The candy, bunnies, and everything else are things we see and enjoy in stores annually. Regardless of your religious affiliation, you have probably personally enjoyed the celebration of this holiday too. In this booklet, we want to think further about Easter. What is the origin of Easter? Is it meant for Christians? Is it a pagan holiday that Christians have adopted erroneously? What is the real meaning behind the events celebrated by people all over the world?

Is the Date of Easter of Pagan Origin?

Some scholars claim that Easter has pagan origins and, as a result, ought not to be celebrated by Christians at all. Many believe that Easter developed as Roman Catholicism co-opted pagan festivals celebrated in different regions in honor of various false

gods and goddesses. The starting point of the claim that Easter has a pagan origin is tied to a goddess of the Anglo-Saxons named Eostre. She is believed to be the goddess of the dawn and was worshipped in the spring by pagans in northern Europe and the British Isles. In *The Two Babylons*, Alexander Hislop argued Eostre is a name derived from the Babylonian goddess Astarte. Hislop extended this connection to include goddesses from around the world: Ishtar, Ashtoreth, Venus, and others. Hislop argued that all the systems of gods and goddesses find their origin with Nimrod and his wife Semiramis at the Tower of Babel. Thus, every primary god is a figure of Nimrod, and every primary goddess is a figure of Semiramis.

Similar claims were made by Ralph Woodrow in his 1966 book *Babylon Mystery Religion*, depending upon Hislop's work to support his claims. These books seek to connect modern practices of Roman Catholicism to the idolatrous worship of various gods. This connection of Eostre to these other goddesses cannot stand up to scrutiny.

Woodrow later renounced much of his use of Hislop's work, recognizing the poor scholarship in the book. To demonstrate some of the false conclusions Hislop proposed, Woodrow explains:

By this method, one could take virtually anything and do the same—even the “golden arches” at McDonald's! The Encyclopedia Americana (article: “Arch”) says the use of arches was known in Babylon as early as 2020 B.C. Since Babylon was called “the golden city” (*Isa. 14:4*), can there be any doubt about the origin of the golden arches? As silly as this is, this is the type of proof that has been offered over and over about pagan origins.¹

Hislop argued from phonetics that Eostre from Saxony must be the same as Astarte, Ishtar, and Ashtoreth. It is, however, a lexical fallacy to claim that homophones, words that sound the same, are synonyms or semantically related in any way.² Using Modern English examples of “muscles” verses “mussels” shows the illogical nature of this kind claim. Hislop attempted to make

other connections, but they are unconvincing because they fail to account for the time these goddesses were worshipped or the importance of the confusion of languages at Babel.

There remains one written record of a goddess who might be connected to Eostre of the Saxons. The church scholar Bede, who lived in modern-day England from AD 673–735, recorded the names of several of the goddesses worshipped by early Saxons.³ He identified Eostre as one whose festivals were celebrated in the month given her name stating:

Eosturmanath has a name which is now translated “Paschal month,” and which was once called after a goddess of theirs named Eostre, in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that month. Now they designate that Paschal season by her name, calling the joys of the new rite by the time-honoured name of the old observance.⁴

Bede’s description was tentatively confirmed in the nineteenth century by the German

philologist Jacob Grimm. Grimm preserved the histories, languages, and traditions of the Germanic/Teutonic peoples: the Franks, Saxons, Angles, Slavs, Vandals, Goths, among others. According to Grimm's understanding of comparative philology, these groups shared a common language family. Grimm traced the connections among many of their gods and goddesses in his writings. Bede is discussed in the work *Teutonic Mythology*, first published in 1835:

The two goddesses, whom Bede (*De temporum ratione* cap. 13) cites very briefly, without any description, merely to explain the months named after them, are *Hrede* and *Eâstre*, March taking its Saxon name from the first, and April from the second. It would be uncritical to saddle this father of the church, who everywhere keeps heathenism at a distance, and tells us less of it than he knows, with the invention of these goddesses.

We Germans to this day call April *ostermonat*, and *ostarmânoth* is found as early as Eginhart [c. 800] ([contemporary

of Charlemagne]). The great christian festival, which usually falls in April or the end of March, bears in the oldest of [Old High German] remains the name *ôstarâ*; it is mostly found in the plural, because two days (*ôstartagâ*, *aostortagâ*, Diut. 1, 266) were kept at Easter. This *Ostrâ*, like the [Anglo Saxon] *Eâstre*, must in the heathen religion have denoted a higher being, whose worship was so firmly rooted, that the christian teachers tolerated the name, and applied it to one of their own grandest anniversaries. All the nations bordering on us have retained the Biblical "pascha;" even Ulphilas writes *paska*, not *austro*, though he must have known the word; the Norse tongue also has imported its *paskir*, Swed[ish] *pask*, Dan[ish] *paaske*. The [Old High German] adv. *ôstar* expresses movement toward the rising sun (Gramm. 3, 205), likewise the [Old Norse] *austr*, and probably an [Anglo Saxon] *eâstor* and Goth[ic] *áustr*.⁵

Some scholars have called Eostre an invention of Bede and discount the connections, but the confirmation of Grimm cannot be

easily discredited. The quality of Bede's other works does not lead us to disbelieve him. Grimm established a connection between the Anglo-Saxon *Eâstre* and the German *Ostrâ*. Similar connections are found in etymologies that describe the origin of *Easter* from many sources. *Ester* and *oster*, the early English and German words, both have their root in *aus*, which means east, shine, and dawn in various forms.⁶ These names may have developed independent of the name of the goddess as a reference to the Easter festivals, or they may have been related to her name in some way.

Could There Be Another Origin of the Name Easter?

Some have suggested *Easter* finds its root in the German word for resurrection, *auferstehung*. Christian F. Cruse defended the usage of the word *Easter*:

Our English word Passover, happily, in sound and sense, almost corresponds to the Hebrew [*pesach*], of which is a translation. Exod. Xii. 27. The Greek *pascha*,