



QUESTION – What does the New Testament tell us about 'Easter' and should Christians celebrate it?



By the time you read this, 'Easter' will already have been celebrated by Churches in the Western World, and, although 'Easter Eggs' were on sale even before the 'Christmas Trees' had been dismantled and the remains of the turkey had been disposed of, 'Easter' will once again have passed off with little notice having been paid to it by society at large.

After the merry "Ho! ho! ho!" festivities of the commercially exploited "*Christmas Holiday*", the ingenious devisers of commercial advertising-campaigns have not yet managed to invent a way of 'selling' Easter to a population which appears to be becoming more and more irreligious. I suppose that the business-world's marketing managers find it far easier to deal with a baby in a manger, than with a Man on a Cross.

Still, whilst some diaries do not even mark the day, - (the one before me as I write makes no mention of 'Easter Sunday' although it *does* tell me that "Easter Monday" is a Bank Holiday) - "Easter" will no doubt remain on the religious calendar, and I am writing this because it has raised two questions to which I hope to be able to provide at least partial answers. Because of the constraints of space, I shall deal with the first question this month, but the second, which I believe is the more important of the two, must wait, (d.v), until the next issue.

Question No.1 asks, "**What does the New Testament tell us about 'Easter' and should Christians celebrate it?**"

Question No. 2 asks: "**How long was Jesus really in the grave?**"

The New Testament and Easter

The simple answer to our first question is that ***the New Testament scriptures tell us nothing at all about an annual celebration of 'Easter'***. In fact, the only place the word 'Easter' can be found in the New Testament scriptures is in the 'Authorized', or 'King James', version of Acts 12:4, where it is a mistranslation of the Greek word '*Pascha*', which, in all later revisions, is correctly rendered '*Passover*'. In that chapter '*Pascha*' is used with reference to the Jewish Passover feast, and has nothing whatsoever to do with the 'Easter' celebrated by denominational churches today.

'Easter's' Origin.

Indeed, the origin of 'Easter' has remained a debating point for centuries. 'The Venerable Bede', who is remembered as a great theologian and historian and who was born in the year 673 A.D., offered the most likely explanation when he indicated the word's pagan origin. He declared that the word is derived from '*Eastre*', which was the name of an early, now-forgotten pagan 'Dawn goddess'.

Even the Roman Catholic Church candidly concedes this non-Christian origin, when it admits that the familiar 'Easter Eggs', '*may possibly be a 'baptized' pagan custom*', because they are '*an obvious symbol of fertility*' connected with the worship of this pagan goddess.

These admissions, however, have not lead Rome to reject either Easter, or Easter Eggs, because, although it also declares that '*Chocolate eggs and such like fooleries are a degeneration of no significance*', it speaks approvingly of the '*bringing of baskets of eggs to church for a blessing, before or after Mass*'.

The historic truth is that when the Emperor Constantine banned paganism and ordered Christianity to be recognized as the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Church of Rome set about the process of turning pagan temples into 'Churches', giving the names

of 'Saints' to the pictures and statues of pagan deities, and 'baptizing' or 'Christianising' both the gods and the festivals of the pagans, throughout his Empire. In the process of 'converting' these heathen festivals, 'Easter' was pronounced by Rome to represent the birth of new life and declared to be the memorial of the death, burial and rising again, of the Lord Jesus.

The Date

For almost the first three centuries Christians did not know an annual observance of the Lord's death and resurrection. Consequently, having created this new festival, the Roman Church authorities then had to decide on a date for its celebration, and it was the Council of Nicea, in 325 A.D., that settled the matter. The Council ruled that '*Easter Sunday*' should be designated the day of the Lord's resurrection and celebrated on the first Sunday after the full moon occurring on, or next to, March 21st; in other words, the full moon after the vernal equinox. As a result of this ruling, 'Easter' became a 'moveable feast', which can occur between March 22nd and April 25th, both dates included. This year "Easter Sunday" happens to fall on April 16th.

This ruling brought 'Easter' into line with the Jewish Passover, which celebrated on the 15th of Nisan, the month that corresponds to our March-April. There is always a full moon at Passover-time, and Jewish Christians certainly believed that this was the time when Jesus was arrested, tried, crucified, buried and raised from the dead.

Conflict of Calendars.

However, the Nicean Council's decision was neither appreciated nor accepted by many of the divisions of the Christian world outside of Rome's authority, because churches in different parts of the ancient world used different calendars. For example, since the establishment of the Church in Jerusalem, history records that believers outside of Italy have known;- the Armenian Calendar, which celebrates '*Christmas*' on Jan. 6th, the Byzantine Calendar according to which the year begins on September 1st, the Coptic, the Syrian, the Chaldean, the Julian, and finally, the Gregorian Calendar which we follow here in the West today; (although, oddly enough, we still follow the Julian calendar for Income Tax Returns and national accounts, made up on April 5th!)

Furthermore, the Jewish year functions according to two calendars, the older, civic year has a calendar which begins with the month Tishri, and a calendar for the religious year, which, according to Exodus 12:2, at the command of God, was adopted in the time of Moses and which begins with the month Nisan. Exodus 12 states, **"In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the 21st day of the same month in the evening"**.

Commenting on this passage, the Jewish historian, Arthur Hertzberg, tells us that '*Passover begins on the 15th*' of Nisan. The 14th of Nisan, in the evening, is when the Passover Meal is eaten, followed by the Passover's seven days of unleavened bread.

You will remember that Matthew 26:2 records the words of Jesus spoken to the apostles. **"You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified."** Now go back to Exodus 12, where we read that the Passover lamb was killed and its blood applied to the doorposts and lintel of each home, and, having made themselves ready for departure, the Israelites ate the roast lamb as part of the special meal commanded by God. Then, after God - (*not* 'the Angel of Death!') - had passed over Egypt, having been saved by the blood of the Passover lamb, they left Egypt and entered upon their freedom.

It is here that we see how the Lord's death corresponds with the Passover celebration, and are able to understand why he chose to die at that time. Paul writes, in 1st Cor. 5:7, that Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. On the 10th day of the seventh month, Tishri, the Jews observe the Day of Atonement ('*Yom Kippur*'), the most solemn

day in their religious year, when the High Priest offered a sacrifice, first for his own sins, and the sins of the priesthood, and then those of the people.

But Jesus did not choose to be sacrificed on the Day of Atonement. He chose the Passover. The reason? The Day of Atonement had to be an annual solemnity; a constantly recurring event, because the people's sins were recurrent and on that day there was a **"remembrance of sin every year"**. (Heb.10:3)

The Passover, on the other hand, occurred only once – never to be repeated. **"He appeared once, at the end of the age, to put away sin by the offering of himself."** (Heb.9:26) And, when He had, **"by the offering of himself, purged our sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high"**. (Heb.1; 3) **"So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many, and to those who look for him, he shall appear the second time, with sin, unto salvation."** (Heb.9:28)

A Final Observation.

Over the date of the Lord's Incarnation there will, in this life, always remain a question mark, with a very strong case to be made against the notion that He was born on December 25th. So, if there is one good thing that 'Easter' does for us, it is to remind us that we can, with accuracy, fix the time of the year when He went to the cross and when He arose from the dead.

As Christians, we have no need for an annual commemoration of the His atoning work. When we meet at the Lord's Table, week after week on His own day, and in obedience to His clear command/request, we **"proclaim the Lord's death, until he comes again"**. (1st Cor.11:26) So, let us **"not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching"**. (Heb.9:25) Do you want to celebrate the *real* 'Easter'? ***Then, be at the Lord's Table next Lord's Day!***