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Christianity & the Easter Bunny

By Jim Myers

What do Jesus and an egg-laying Easter bunny have to do with each other? The answer is, "Nothing!" There's no story in the Bible about a long-eared, cotton-tailed creature known as the Easter Bunny that lays eggs. And, in case you didn't know, real rabbits certainly do not lay colored eggs in nests.¹ **Jesus did not create a new holiday called "Easter."** The Early Church Fathers never participated in a festival called "Easter." The word "Easter" does not appear in the Hebrew **Tanakh** (Old Testament) nor is it found in any of the ancient Greek or Latin manuscripts of any of the books found in the New Testament. *So, where did all of these things come from?*

The first recorded use of the word "**Eosturmonath**" (OHS-truh mon-ath), which is the word Easter comes from, is in an 8th century document written by a Christian monk at the Northumbrian monastery of Saint Peter, which today is part of Sunderland, England. His name was **Bede** (bead) and he was a well-known author and scholar.² The reason that Bede used the word "Eosturmonath" was because it was the equivalent month on the Old English/Anglo Saxon calendar that corresponded to the Jewish month of Nisan, which is when the Jewish festival of *Pesach* was celebrated.³ The Jewish meaning of *Pesach* is very different from how modern Christians view Easter.

Pesach is one of the most widely celebrated Jewish holidays and commemorates the biblical story of Exodus, when Hebrew slaves were released from bondage in Egypt. Called "*Pesach*" (pay-sak) in Hebrew, it is a celebration of freedom. It is celebrated for seven days in Israel and for eight days in the Diaspora (outside of Israel). Every year, Jews are commanded to retell the *Pesach* story. This usually takes place during what is now called the *Passover Seder*, which is a home celebration. It is always observed on the first night of *Pesach* and in some homes on the second night as well.⁴

So, how did Easter replace *Pesach* in Christianity? One explanation is this:

Traditional annual Pesach continued to be practiced by the Christians in Asia for some time. However the rest of the world replaced Pesach with Sunday communion crowned with Easter Sunday. The custom in the rest of the world was described by Irenaeus as a duty of "celebrating the mystery of the resurrection of our Lord, only on the day of the Lord. [i.e. Sunday]." (Eusebius, Eccl. Hist. 5:24).

Around 153, near the end of his life, Polycarp visited the Roman Bishop Anicetus to discuss the differences that existed between Asia and Rome "with regard to certain things" especially the observance of Pesach. They "disputed much with each other" over Pesach. Irenaeus says:

"Neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp not to observe it, because he had always observed it with Yochanan (Apostle John) the disciple of our Lord, and the rest of the Apostles, with whom he associated; and neither did Polycarp persuade Anicetus . . ."⁵

A controversy broke out in early Christianity over the date that the celebration should be held. **Bishop Victor of Rome** (189-199) declared that those celebrating it on the Jewish date of Nisan 14 were heretics and should be excommunicated. The controversy continued for over a century until the Council of Nicea (325 CE) ruled that the date should be computed independently of the Jewish calendar as the Alexandrian Christians were doing. This didn't end the controversy over when it should be celebrated, because after the publishing of the Gregorian calendar in 1582, Catholic and Protestant churches of the West used different methods for computing the date.⁶

In the 14th century, when **John Wycliffe** was working on the first English translation of the New Testament, he recognized that there was no Anglo-Saxon word for the Jewish holiday of *Pesach*, so he simply transliterated the Latin word "*pascha*." When **William Tyndale** began working on his English translation of the New Testament **King Henry VIII** was still the defender of the Catholic faith. In order to find a safer location Tyndale decided to accept the help of a London merchant and go to Germany to do his work in 1524.

Tyndale discovered that there was no English word he could use to translate the words *Pesach* or *pascha*⁷ and he did not want to use the foreign words. He realized the name of month of *Pesach* was known to the English and German people as "**Easter**." He decided to use it because English readers read it on their calendars. Therefore, Tyndale translated Acts 12:4 as --

Then were the days of unleavened bread, and when he had caught him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to iij. quaternions of soldiers to be kept, intending after **ester** to bring him forth to the people.⁸

The word found in Acts 12:4 of the Greek manuscripts is - πασχα (pascha), which is simply a transliteration of the Hebrew word (pasàch). The only place the word "Easter" is found in a modern English translation is in the **King James Version** of this one verse. The KJV translators followed Tyndale, instead of Wycliffe.

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.

Later, when Tyndale began his translation of the **Pentateuch**, he once again faced the problem of how to translate *Pesach*, in which it is found 22 times. He recognized that using the Anglo Saxon name of the month of *Easter* would not work as the name for a Jewish holiday. Therefore, **Tyndale coined a new word in 1530 -- Passover**. Clearly, Tyndale introduced two very important words that have found their way into many Bibles today -- *Easter* & *Passover*.⁹ What was his reward for his work? On the morning of 6 October 1536, Tyndale was taken to the place of execution, tied to the stake, strangled to death and then burned. His last words reportedly were: "Oh Lord, open the King of England's eyes."

The first documented use of the "bunny" as a symbol of "Easter" occurred in the late 1500's. However, a celebration with an "Easter" bunny can be traced back to 13th century and feasts that were held to celebrate the Teutonic deity **Eostra**, the goddess of spring and fertility, on the Vernal Equinox. Her symbol was the rabbit.¹⁰ By 1680, the first story about a rabbit laying eggs and hiding them in a garden was published. The "**Easter hare**" laid eggs for children to find. *According to the legend, only good children received gifts of colored eggs in the nests that they made in their caps and bonnets before Easter.*¹¹

These legends were brought to the United States in the 1700s when German immigrants settled in Pennsylvania Dutch country.¹² Every spring Pennsylvania Dutch children would be spinning with excitement as they waited for the arrival of "**Oschter Haws**" (their Easter Bunny character) and the gifts that accompanied him. The children would also build their nests in a secluded place in the home, the barn or the garden out of their caps and bonnets.¹³

In the more recent traditions of the character now called the "Easter Bunny," it has become a giant loveable and friendly bunny that is as real as Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy to many children. The modern traditions and customs associated with Easter, however, differ around the world. By the way, in the 1800's the Germans created the first edible "Easter Bunnies."

The inclusion of eggs in the spring celebration should come as no surprise because the egg is the symbol of new life in many cultures. The notion that the

Earth itself was hatched from an egg was once widespread and appears in creation stories ranging from Asian to Ireland. Even today rural "granny women" (lay midwives/healers in the Appalachian mountains) still use eggs to predict, with uncanny accuracy, the sex of an unborn child by watching the rotation of an egg as it is suspended by a string over the abdomen of a pregnant woman.¹⁴

Dyed eggs are also given as gifts in many cultures. Decorated eggs bring with them a wish for the prosperity of the abundance during the coming year. Folklore suggests that Easter egg hunts arose in Europe during "the Burning Times", when the rise of Christianity led to the shunning (and persecution) of the followers of the "Old Religion". *Instead of giving the eggs as gifts the adults made a game of hiding them, gathering the children together and encouraging them to find the eggs.*¹⁵

The widespread connection between spring fertility rituals, renewal and resurrection, and mysticism allowed people from many cultures to adopt the Christian Easter story and at the same time add their own pre-Christian practices. This is very clear by the fact that there are only a few other countries who follow the same Easter traditions as those in America.¹⁶ The original meanings were replaced with Christian theology.

The transformation of the Jewish festival *Pesach* into the Christian rituals of *Easter* took place over three centuries as Christians moved away from the original teachings of the Jewish Jesus. One of the greatest challenges for newly converted pagans to the Jewish Jesus Movement was that the Jewish God had no mythology. In many ways, the evolution of Gentile Christian theologies created one. **Make sure to note that the name *Easter* itself, along with the egg laying Easter Bunny didn't become part of the Christian celebration until after Christopher Columbus discovered America.** *In historical terms, that wasn't that long ago and it had nothing to do with Jesus or his teachings.* **BHC**

¹ <http://news.discovery.com/history/what-does-the-easter-bunny-have-to-do-with-easter.html>

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bede>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germanic_calendar

⁴ <http://judaism.about.com/od/holidays/a/Jewish-Holiday-Passover-Pesach.htm>

⁵ <http://www.messianic-torah-truth-seeker.org/Torah/Pesach/Christian-Communion.html>

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Easter_controversy

⁷ <http://www.tyndale.org/DeCoursey/life.html>

⁸ http://faithofgod.net/WTNT/acts_12.html

⁹ <http://av1611.com/kjbp/articles/moorman-easter.html>

¹⁰ <http://news.discovery.com/history/what-does-the-easter-bunny-have-to-do-with-easter.html>

¹¹ <http://housatonictimes.com/articles/2012/03/06/life/doc4f5678ffcca3f879079008.txt>

¹² <http://news.discovery.com/history/what-does-the-easter-bunny-have-to-do-with-easter.html>

¹³ <http://www.holidays.net/easter/bunny1.htm>

¹⁴ http://www.goddessgift.com/Pandora's_Box/Easter-history.htm

¹⁵ http://www.goddessgift.com/Pandora's_Box/Easter-history.htm

¹⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/04/12/top-5-easter-traditions-a_n_185687.html

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