

# The Origin Of Easter

Most people take it for granted that the observation of Easter is in the Christian Bible.

Quotation: *'Encyclopaedia Britannica'* [11<sup>th</sup> Edition] –

*“There is no indication of the observance of the Easter festival in the New Testament, or in the writings of the apostolic fathers.”*

**The Christian Bible, in fact, nowhere instructs Christians to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ.**

Neither Jesus nor any of the apostles gave directions to observe anything like Easter Sunday. The scriptures contain **no** record of any Christians in the early Church anywhere observing Easter or the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Quotation: *'Ecclesiastical History'* by historian Socrates Scholasticus; chapter 22 –

*“Neither the apostles, therefore, nor the gospels, have anywhere imposed ... Easter ... the Saviour and His apostles have enjoined us by no law to keep this feast ... just as many other customs have been established in individual localities according to their usage, so also the feast of Easter came to be observed in each place according to the individual peculiarities of the peoples inasmuch as none of the apostles legislated on the matter.”*

**The Easter tradition developed sometime after the close of the New Testament writings, and therefore is not of Biblical origin.**

Depending on where you live, celebrating Easter may include customs as diverse as watching the sun rise, wearing and parading in fancy clothes, ringing bells, baking hot cross buns, burning special candles and general time of feasting. In some areas Easter rabbits have a prominent part, along with coloured eggs.

Quotation from *'The Easter Book'* by Jesuit researcher and author Francis X. Weiser; pages 15, 181, 188 –

*“Just as many Christian customs and similar observances had their origin in pre-Christian times, so, too, some of the popular traditions of Lent and Easter date back to ancient nature rights ... The origin of the Easter egg is based on the fertility lore of the Indo-European races ... The Easter bunny had its origin in pre-Christian fertility lore. Hare and rabbit were most fertile animals our forefathers knew, serving as symbols of abundant new life in the spring season.”*

Various other customs harken back to ancient annual spring celebrations of the death and revival of vegetation and various gods associated with vegetation.

**Few Christians stop to ask why such customs have become popularly associated with the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ.**

Before we look at the story of how the Christian world adopted the keeping of Easter Sunday, let us note some of Jesus Christ's own practices.

**Luke 2:41** [NIV] *“Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover.”*

**Jesus grew up observing the Passover as well as the other special annual days set apart in the Old Testament. [Leviticus 23:1-37]**

Jesus saw how, for this occasion, sacrificial lambs were chosen to be slain and how their blood was spilled in remembrance of the first Passover nearly 1,500 years previously.

The Israelites had been slaves in the land of Egypt. The time had come for God to deliver them.

Through Moses, God instructed the Israelites to slay and eat the lambs and to smear some of the blood over the doorposts of their homes.

God said that at midnight He would strike dead the firstborn in every house **not** marked by the blood. [Exodus 12:13]

**The observance of the Passover in memory of that pivotal event was especially meaningful to Jesus Christ.**

**The lambs being slain represented Him! He was the Lamb of God. [John 1:29, 35]**

**1 Peter 1:18-21** [NIV] *“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.”*

The spilt blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, was to protect from eternal death all who sincerely repent and believe.

The Passover always falls on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month Nisan of the calendar given by God to Israel. [Exodus 12:1-11, 13:4]

**This puts the Passover in March or April of our present Roman calendar.**

**At the conclusion of His ministry, Jesus was sacrificed, crucified on a hill outside Jerusalem, at the same time Passover lambs were being slain at the temple on Nisan 14. [1 Corinthians 5:7]**

On the evening before His crucifixion, Jesus Christ gave some extremely important instructions to His disciples and through them the Christian Church.

According to the Biblical method of reckoning, days begin and end at sunset, **not** at midnight. So this evening was the first part of Nisan 14.

**Luke 22:15** [NIV] *“And he said to them, ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.’”*

**Jesus was introducing new symbols for the Passover, not the eating of the Passover lamb as practiced in the Old Testament.**

**1 Corinthians 11:23-26** [NIV] *“For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”*

**Jesus Christ’s church was to continue to observe the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan.**

**Luke 22:19-20** [NIV] *“And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.’”*

**This simple evening ceremony was to be observed as an annual memorial of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God for the sins of the whole world. [John 3:16-17]**

**The observance instituted by Jesus Christ was to commemorate His death not His resurrection.**  
[1 Corinthians 11:26]

Its observance was clearly commanded by Jesus Christ and taught by His apostles.

**No command to commemorate Jesus Christ's resurrection is found in the Christian Bible.**

**Many people assume Christianity, as we see it today, is little different from Christianity of the first century.**

**This is not so.**

**Sweeping changes have taken place in doctrine and in practice.**

**Even before the apostles died, many congregations began to stray from what Jesus Christ and the apostles had taught.**

**Jude 3-4** [NIV] *“Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a licence for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.”*

**Jude found it necessary to exhort Christians not to stray from teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostles.**

**Galatians 1:6-7** [NIV] *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel, which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.”*

**Paul warned churches in southern Galatia about false gospel messages.**

**Romans 16:17-19** [NIV] *“I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.”*

**Paul warned the Christians in Rome to be aware of false teaching.**

**Titus 1:14-16** [NIV] *“and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the commands of those who reject the truth. To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted. They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.”*

**Paul reminded Titus to be aware and to deal with those who were rejecting the truth.**

**3 John 9-10** [NIV] *“I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.”*

Some false teachers had gained the upper hand and were no longer willing to receive instruction from the apostle John.

As a result of all this, second-century Christianity faced conflicting doctrines and dissimilar opinions.

Quotation: *'The Story of the Christian Church'* by J.L. Hurlbut, page 41 –

*"... we find a church in many aspects very different from that in the days of the apostles Peter and Paul."*

Quotation: *'The Story of Civilization'* volume 3, by historian Will Durant; page 616 –

*"Divided into a hundred feeble parts by every wind of intellect, by disloyal heretics, ecstatic prophets, and brilliant sons, Celsus had sarcastically observed that Christians were split up into ever so many factions, each individual desiring to have his own party. About [AD] 187 Iranaeus listed twenty varieties of Christianity; about [AD] 384 Epiphanius counted eighty. At every point foreign ideas were creeping into Christian belief, and Christians were deserting to novel sects."*

It was in this context that Easter came into popularity.

Easter, as we know it, resulted from a gradual change that took place during the course of centuries. The critical step was the establishment of a generally accepted day of observance.

Quotation: *'Encyclopaedia Britannica'* 11<sup>th</sup> Edition; article 'Easter' –

*"... the first Christians continued to observe the Jewish festivals, though in a new spirit, as commemorations of events those festivals had foreshadowed. Thus the Passover, with a new conception added to it of Christ, as the true Paschal lamb and the firstfruits from the dead, continued to be observed, and became the Christian Easter."*

**But who approved the change from Passover to Easter?**

**The truth is that neither Jesus Christ nor the apostles approved this change.**

Quotation: *'The New Catholic Encyclopaedia'*; article 'Easter' –

*"Not only was the significance of the Jewish feast changed by Christians, but also the date. The Jewish method of fixing the date, the 14<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan, did not confine it to any day of the week. At a very early time Christians assigned their Pasch to the Sunday following the Jewish feast. By the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century this was the universal custom except in Asia Minor, where the Jewish dating was followed by the so-called Quartodecimans."*

**It is clear that confusion existed in the early centuries about the celebration of the Passover.**

Quotation: *'Ecclesiastical History'* book 5; chapter 23. Eusebius, a fourth-century church historian recorded –

*"There was a considerable discussion raised about this time, in consequence of a difference of opinion respecting the observance of the Paschal season. The churches in Asia, guided by a remoter tradition, supposed that they ought to keep the fourteenth day of the moon for the festival of the Saviour's Passover, in which day the Jews were commanded to kill the Paschal lamb ... it was not the custom to celebrate it in this manner in the churches throughout the rest of the world ... Hence there were synods and convocations of the bishops on this question and all unanimously drew up an ecclesiastical decree, which they communicated to all churches in all places, that the mystery of our Lord's resurrection should be celebrated on no other day than the Lord's Day [Sunday]."*

**Note the emphasis here, not on commemoration of Jesus' death, but on the Sunday celebration of His resurrection.**

It was not until early fourth century that Roman Emperor Constantine put a stop to the persecution of Christians. Christianity was already strong in spite of persecution, quickly became a privileged religion of the Roman Empire.

**It was not that Constantine felt the need to be a Christian, he didn't personally embrace Christianity until he was on his deathbed. But Constantine saw in the energetic and increasingly popular Christian religion a powerful tool that could help hold his far-flung Empire together.**

**Constantine was, of course, quite disturbed that major quarrels and disagreements threatened to divide and weaken this tool he wanted to use.**

In an effort to secure unity, Constantine convened a council at the town of Nicaea in AD 325. Leading churchmen from most parts of the Empire took part.

Quotation: *'Evangelical Dictionary of Theology,'* 1984; article 'Easter' –

*"The early development of the celebration of Easter and the attendant calendar disputes were largely a result of Christianity's attempt to emancipate itself from Judaism. Sunday had already replaced the Jewish Sabbath early in the second century, and despite efforts in Asia Minor to maintain the Jewish Passover date of 14<sup>th</sup> Nisan for Easter [hence the name Quartodecimans], the Council of Nicaea adopted the annual Sunday following the full moon after the vernal equinox [March 21]."*

**Easter became official dogma in the state-backed Christianity of the Roman Empire.**

The Easter celebration underwent other changes.

Quotation: *'Evangelical Dictionary of Theology,'*; article 'Easter' –

*"Originally Easter was a unitary night celebration [like Passover], recalling both death and celebration of Christ ... Accordingly, after the fourth century the unitary feast was broken up into several parts and the resurrection came to be celebrated on Easter Sunday morning, with Eastertide extending another forty or fifty days. Over the centuries many popular customs have been added reflecting pagan spring folklore [Easter egg and rabbit] as well as Christian and Jewish sources."*

**Sunday celebration of Jesus' resurrection replaced the Passover held in commemoration of His death. It was a change of meaning and date.**

**But what difference does this make?**

Isn't it a laudable idea to celebrate an event so great and meaningful as Jesus' resurrection?

It seems reasonable to do so.

That's why many as far back as the second century A.D. readily accepted the idea.

**However, Christians should want to do things the way God in His Word, the Christian Bible, says to do them.**

**That is the standard by which all matters of Christian conduct should be determined.**

After all, a Christian is one who follows Jesus Christ.

**Luke 6:46-49** [King James] *"And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say? Whosoever cometh to me, and heareth my sayings, and doeth them, I will shew you to whom he is like: He is like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock: and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it: for it was founded upon a rock. But he that heareth, and doeth not, is like a man that without a foundation built an house upon the earth; against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great."*

This was a question that Jesus Christ asked His followers.

**Matthew 7:21-23** [King James] *"Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."*

**The major problem with the Easter Sunday tradition is that it does not honour and commemorate Jesus Christ's sacrifice the way God says to honour and commemorate it.**

**It marks a departure from what Jesus Christ explicitly stated.**

In telling us how the Passover of the New Testament was instituted the apostle John relates another part of this ordinance.

**John 13:1-17** [NIV] *"It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel round his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped round him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus replied, 'You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' 'No,' said Peter, 'you shall never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.' 'Then, Lord,' Simon Peter replied, 'not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!' Jesus answered, 'A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.' For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. 'Do you understand what I have done for you?' he asked them. 'You call me "Teacher" and "Lord", and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.'"*

**Many would consider it too humiliating to wash the feet of someone else. But Jesus did it, and He commanded His disciples to do it. [Matthew 28:19-20]**

**1 Peter 5:5** [NIV] *"Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'"*

**Peter, possibly remembering this act of his Master Jesus Christ, told all Christians to have a humble attitude of mind towards one another.**