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1-800-611-8080 / www.cgom.org
PO Box 54621, Tulsa, OK 74155-0621

The Easter Story

Remember me, said Jesus. How?

Is there an alternative to Easter?

by James McBride

Easter! New hats and frocks. The Easter parade. Rolling colored eggs. A Sunday sun-rise service. Great fun for the kids. A focus on life renewed: the resurrection of Jesus, triumphant over the grave.

The season, though, began less joyously. Friday - 'Good Friday' - is a day of sadness. By tradition that's when Jesus suffered an ignominious death on a Roman stake. In some Christian societies it's a day for self-flagellation. Some individuals submit themselves to a mock crucifixion. The steps of Jesus along the Via Delorosa in Jerusalem are traced in pageantry.

Death and Resurrection

But such remembrance is far removed from actuality. The spring festival known as Easter - as most Bible students know - did not originate with the death and resurrection of Jesus, pre-dating him by hundreds of years. The 'death and resurrection' of a Saviour is a concept well-known in the Old Testament.

Some scholars see it implied in the Genesis description, in Eden's garden, of a 'promised seed', a suffering Messiah: "*He will crush your [ie Satan's] head and you will crush his [the Redeemer's] heel*" (ch 3:15). Job, one of the earliest of the Bible writers, also understood it: "*I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has thus been destroyed then out of my flesh I shall see God*" (Job 19:25).

The Psalmist sings: "*Therefore my heart was glad and my glory [soul, life] rejoiced; my body too will dwell securely.*

For you will not leave my soul in [the grave] nor allow your holy one to see corruption" (Psalm 16:8-10).

Jesus, too, saw this teaching - in the life of the prophet Jonah, drawing from there the analogy of his own death and resurrection (Matthew 12:40). Examples of this could be multiplied!

It isn't surprising, then, to find that early in man's history the concept had crept into the religion of those who had rejected God's revelation - men who '*altered God's truth into falsehood, and revered and served the creature rather than the Creator*' (Romans 1:25).

Pagan Mythology

One such myth is that of the Egyptian *Isis and Osiris*. Then there's *Cybele and Attis*.

Another - mentioned by the prophet Ezekiel is that of *Tammuz and Ishtar*. The apparent 'death' of nature in autumn and subsequent 'resurrection' in spring also contributed to the Babylonian myth. Every year Tammuz, the god of the underworld, was mourned by his worshipers. Ezekiel found him - an abomination to God - being worshipped in God's Temple where "*...women sat weeping for Tammuz.*" (ch 8:14). This was for forty days leading to the last week of March when he was 'resurrected'. Tammuz was the husband of his mother - some say sister - Ishtar. (*Ishtar* - also called *Astarte* - has a familiar ring: *Easter!*)

That a Saviour would die and be resurrected is a concept known widely in the ancient world - even apart from the Bible revelation. It gave rise to the various mythical cycles in which the 'god' dies and is miraculously restored to life.

Any substantial Encyclopedia, of course, will detail how these various rites were absorbed into the Christian church from around the fourth century. They include the forty days of Lenten abstinence, the sun-rise service on Easter morning (*ie* facing east), the rolling of colored eggs. Ezekiel 8:16 is instructive.

These practices replaced the 'death and resurrection' festivals instituted by God and observed by Jesus, the apostles and the first Christians.

Worship - God's Way

Having initiated human life, the Creator gave us guidance on how to live and how

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to worship Him. One aspect was a series of annual reminders of His plan - seven recurring annual festivals each of which highlights an aspect of that plan, and each pointing to Jesus Christ. The Spring festival consists of the sacrifice of the *Passover*, followed by the seven *Days of Unleavened Bread*, the whole being loosely termed 'Passover'.

In harmony with God's perfect timing (eg Galatians 4:4), Jesus died late in the afternoon of Nisan 14*. At this time, between 3pm and 4pm, the Passover lamb was ceremonially sacrificed in the Temple. Paul refers to Jesus as '*Christ our Passover*' (I Corinthians 5:7). Many Christians today observe it as the 'Night to be remembered', investing it with Christian significance. It begins a week of rejoicing known in the Scriptures as *Unleavened Bread*. To the Corinthian brethren - largely Gentile - Paul in that same passage acknowledges that the brethren were observing these days (vv.6-8). Passover is to be observed 'throughout your generations' - and will continue to be observed after Messiah returns.

Jesus, however, introduced a further observance which is to continue *until* he returns.

Lord's Supper

It is a solemn memorial of his night of betrayal, anguished suffering and subsequent crucifixion on a Roman stake. Called by Paul the *Lord's Supper*, it is held *annually* 'on the night in which he was betrayed' - the beginning of Nisan 14*.

At the evening meal on that Passover eve he introduced the simple everyday symbols of bread and wine as representative of his broken body and shed blood: "*For I have received from the Lord what I have also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, 'Take, eat. This is my body broken on your behalf. This do in remembrance of me'. Similarly he took the cup after they had supped saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood.. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me'. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you shall proclaim the Lord's death till he comes*" (I Corinthians 11:23-26). Note that the Passover is '*for ever*', while the memorial is '*until he comes*'.

A Lesson in Humility

Further, Jesus enjoined the practice of 'foot washing', having himself set the example to the disciples at that last meal before he suffered: "*...if I, your Lord and Teacher, wash your feet you surely ought to wash one another's feet; for I have set you an example so that you might do just as I did to you.... If you grasp these truths, blessed are you if you practice them*" (John 13:12-17).

A Pure Heart

The *Days of Unleavened Bread*, also observed by the early church, was a period of seven days starting with the Passover during which no 'leavened bread' - ie yeasted, raised, fermented bread - was eaten. In Christian use it is symbolic of a pure life, energized by the risen Christ through his Spirit. Leaven is corruption, physically. Spiritually it signifies hypocrisy (Luke 12:1), and false teaching (Matthew 16:12). This festival thus encapsulates the concept of *resurrection, a pure heart and pure truth*. The Scriptures therefore give no specific day - eg 'Easter Sunday' - to commemorate this momentous event. Rather it is an entire week of celebration during which Christians live without this symbolic corruption in our bodies or our homes. By our eating daily of *unleavened* - 'sweet' - bread we are reminded that throughout life we 'feed on *that bread which came down from heaven*' (John 6:51).

The Bible festivals (the 'appointed feasts of the LORD' - Leviticus 23:2 - not of Moses) are free from the leaven - hypocritical and false - that permeates most of Christianity by the observance of days which are plainly from idolatrous sources.

This year, why not commit yourself to the observance of those days God has set aside for His people!

**This on the calendar widely used throughout the then known world. On the current, Julian, calendar it falls sometime in March/April. A calendar linking the old calendar and the new is available from any of our addresses.*

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