

Does the English Word “Easter” Derive from the Name of the Pagan Goddess “Ishtar”?

A Short Article by Tim Hegg

In this article I am focusing on the etymology of the English word “Easter,” not primarily on the various traditions incorporated in the modern celebration of the Christian holiday by that name. What I mean is this: the English word “Easter,” as far as I have researched it, does not derive from the Akkadian name of the pagan fertility goddess, Ishtar. Granted, Bede (in 725 CE) wrote his *The Reckoning of Time* in which he derives the English word “Easter” from the Old German goddess Eostre, whose feast was celebrated at the vernal equinox.¹ Bede does not, however, make any etymological connection to the ANE goddess Ishtar in his statement about the English word “Easter.” The fact that the two words have similar phonology (sound somewhat alike) does not in any way indicate an etymological derivation.

Historically there were a number of Old Germanic goddesses who were venerated as “the goddess of the dawn,” and the name Eostre is derived from the Proto-Indo-European goddess named Ausos, from which derives Old German Eostre and Ostara. These names were derived from the Old Germanic word for “sunrise” and thus “east,” since the sun rises in the east. The month in which the Church most often celebrated the death and resurrection of Yeshua was April, and therefore fell in the month which, in Old Germanic culture, was named for the goddess of sunrise. This name, Eostre, continued to be used in later Germanic culture, and became the standard German name of the month of April, eventually losing all connection with the goddess or with a festival venerating the goddess. This is just like the month names in our own English culture. Take “January” for instance. “January” is derived from Janus, the name of an ancient Italian deity, but we do not venerate this pagan goddess when we use the word “January.” In fact, our word “January” is no longer connected in any way to an Italian deity. In the same way, the German word Eostre came simply to mean “April,” and had lost its connection to the Old German goddess of the sunrise. It was simply the name of the month in which the resurrection of Yeshua was most often celebrated by the Medieval Church, and thus remained traditionally the name given to the holiday.

By the time the KJV was translated, i.e., 1611, the word “Easter,” (cf. Acts 12:4) had become the long standing name of the holiday based upon the month in which it most often occurred. The name Easter itself, then, had no more connection to the pagan Germanic goddess, and most certainly no connection to the Ancient Near Eastern goddess of fertility, i.e., Ishtar.

The entry in the Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology² likewise takes the derivation of “Easter” as from the Old Germanic word meaning “sunrise” or “east,” and thus from the Old English “eastron” or “eastro,” Sanskrit “usra” (meaning “dawn” or “east”) and German “austron,” (meaning “dawn” or “east”). The entry in this dictionary does mention the viewpoint of Bede by way of information, but then gives the more obvious etymological derivation as noted above.

Even given that the English name “Easter” does not derive from the pagan connection to fertility goddesses, I would still consider many of the “trappings” that have attached to the Christian celebration of Easter as being quite out of the ordinary and perhaps having pagan connections, though such connections are disputed by some scholars. Surely Christians in our time obviously do not recognize nor affirm any pagan connections to the traditions which they attach to their celebration of Easter, and it would be wrong for us to accuse them of knowingly or willingly participating in something pagan when they celebrate the resurrection of Yeshua. The questionable traditions attached to the modern celebration of Easter, are, it seems to me, quite obvious: Rabbits and Easter eggs seem to have no connection at all to the resurrection of Yeshua (though it is true that the egg became a symbol in some European cultures as a depiction of new life). But something that is very egregious in my mind, in regard to the modern Christian celebration of Easter, is that it is entirely separated from, and a replacement for, Passover. Rather than seeking to honor the biblical festival given to us by God Himself, it has been replaced with a festival in the Church which bears no resemblance to what we read in the Scriptures regarding Passover and its

¹ Faith Wallis, translator, *Bede: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool University Press, 1999), p. 54.

² C. T. Onions, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 298.

God-ordained celebration. Even though we cannot incorporate all of the commandments God has given us regarding the yearly festival of Passover (since there is no Temple, no priesthood, and thus no sacrifices), we can most certainly abstain from eating leaven, observe a Sabbath on the 1st and 7th days, and use the week to center our attention upon the glorious reality of Yeshua's resurrection from the dead and by this, forever conquering death and sin for all who belong to Him. I hasten to say that many Christians who celebrate Easter may still have a very true heart of faith in God and in His Son, Yeshua, and may be very blessed as they center their thoughts and faith on the risen Messiah. My feeling toward them is more one of hope rather than disgust, for I hope that they will be drawn to the Scriptures and to the value and glory of the biblical festival of Passover, and in being drawn in this way, might even have a greater desire to celebrate the glory of our risen Savior.