

# THE ORIGIN OF EASTER.

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To the student of the world's history there is great interest and food for reflection in the facts concerning the origin of the religious observance of Easter. Strange though it may seem, this popular church festival dates back to a heathen custom. Our twentieth-century celebration is the modern evolution of heathen ideals and the transformation by Christian usage and environment of a great popular pagan festival of olden time—that of the goddess Ostara. In the Anglo-Saxon language this festival was termed "Eastre," and the name was applied to a celebration which the Saxons of old were wont to observe about the same season at which the Christian festival of Easter takes place.

The goddess Ostara seems to have been regarded as the personification of the morning, or of the east, and also of the opening year, or the beginning of spring. Apropos of this heathen representative of the east, it is to be noted that from very early times the east has been held in certain distinction above the other points of the compass and enveloped with a sort of sacred halo. The ancient worshippers of the sun used to place their altars in the eastern part of their temples, facing the rising orb of the day. That the east had a certain sacred character is evidenced in the Scriptures, which contain several noteworthy references: "The glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east" (Ezekiel xliii, 2); "There came wise men from the east to Jerusalem" (Matthew ii, 1); "And, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them" (Matthew ii, 9). A high regard for the east was manifested by the early Christians, who perpetuated the idea handed down from their ancestors. Looking toward the sun in the east, in praying or repeating the creed, was thought to put worshippers in remembrance that Christ is the sun of righteousness, and such was the attitude in olden times during devotion—a custom now obsolete.

It was from Northern Germany in the very early days that the worship of Ostara, the goddess of the east, was brought to our ancestors in Great Britain. It is well-known that the Anglo-Saxon name of April was *Estermonath*, and in Germany this month is still known as *Ostermonath*. Many of the popular observances of Easter, even to this day, clearly indicate its heathen origin. The heathen bonfires were perpetuated in the paschal tapers with which the churches were once lighted on Easter eve. The brilliant illuminations of the churches, and parts of some of the cities, in Russia at Easter are also reminders of the early heathen festivals.

Easter, it is said, is the modern English form for the Saxon word "oster" or "osten," meaning "rising." The German word is "ostern," the Hebrew-Greek form is "pascha," the French "paques," the Scotch "pasch," the Dutch "paschen," the Swedish "pask," and the Danish "paaske." The common name in the East was the "paschal feast," because kept at the same time as the paschen, or Jewish Passover, and in some measure succeeding it. In the sixth of the Ancyran canons it is called "The Great Day."

The proper time for the celebration of Easter was the source of great discord among the early Christians. It has been aptly pointed out that though there has never been any difference of opinion as to why Easter is kept, there has been a good deal of disagreement as to when it ought to be kept. The paschal controversy, which for a time divided Christendom, grew out of a diversity of custom, the errors of an imperfect calendar, and the process of amalgamation of a new order upon the old. The great mass of the Eastern Churches in Asia Minor, among whom were many Judaizing Christians, kept Easter on the 14th of Nisan, the Jewish month corresponding to our March or April, considering it to be equivalent to the Jewish Passover. But the Western churches kept the feast on

the Sunday following the fourteenth day, remembering that Christ's resurrection took place on the Sunday, and also desiring to mark more clearly their disconnection with the Jews.

The difference, borne at first with mutual forbearance and charity, assumed regrettable bitterness and rancor during the third century. The East was unhappily severed from the West, and all who, after the manner of the Asiatics, kept Easter on the 14th, whether that day were Sunday or not, were styled "quartadecimans" by those who adopted the Roman practice.

A primary source of the divergence was the imperfection of the Jewish calendar. This was so defective that

it came about that the Jewish Christians often celebrated their Easter before the vernal equinox, a circumstance which was strenuously objected to by the early Christians of the West, who regarded the vernal equinox as the commencement of the natural year. They were opposed to a mode of reckoning which might sometimes cause them to hold their paschal feast twice in one year, and omit it altogether the next. So strong was this feeling that it culminated in a drastic apostolic decree which declared that, "If any bishop, priest, or deacon celebrated the holy feast of Easter before the vernal equinox as the Jews do, let him be deposed."

It was through the happy initiative of the Emperor Constantine, in the early part of the fourth century, that the uniformity of practice was inaugurated which, though not immediately accepted, finally prevailed and obtains at the present time. The Emperor so influenced the great Ecumenical Council at Nice, of 325 A.D., that a canon was passed which favored the practice of the Western churches by declaring that everywhere the great feast of Easter should be observed upon one and the same day, and that not the day of the Jewish Passover, but the Sunday after. As a result, the rules were laid down which we find in the Book of Common Prayer of the twentieth century.

"That the 21st day of March shall be accounted the vernal equinox. That the full moon happening upon or next after the 21st of March shall be taken for the full moon of Nisan. That the Lord's day next following that full moon be Easter day. But if the full moon happen upon a Sunday Easter day shall be the Sunday after."

On Easter day depend all the movable feasts and fasts throughout the years. It was debated, at the time of the introduction of the Gregorian calendar, whether Easter should continue to be movable or a fixed Sunday. Deference to ancient custom, it is said, led the ecclesiastical authorities to adhere to the method of determination by the moon. It is an interesting fact and worthy of remembrance that the date of Easter was fixed by what is known as the "calendar moon," which, it appears, always follows the real moon by two or three days. The object in arranging a calendar moon, it is said, was to prevent the occurrence of Easter on the same day as the Jewish Passover. The precaution, however, has been a failure, for the two festivals it transpires, have fallen on the same day in 1805 and 1825. The year 1908 was marked by the same unique coincidence, both Easter and the Jewish Passover occurring on the same day, April 12th. This unusual event will happen again in 1923, 1937 and 1961. Many like to think that, instead of owing its derivation to the heathen goddess "Eastre," the word comes from the Teutonic "oster," which signifies "rising." If the latter supposition were correct, Easter would be in name, as well as in reality, the feast of the Resurrection.

The apostle Paul calls Christ "our Pasch." It was he who wrote the inspired words which are embalmed in church liturgies, and hallowed in the hearts of men because of their beauty, truth and power: "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead." The blessed argument is that Christ's resurrection is the proof of the fulfillment of the promise of the resurrection of His faithful followers. Orthodox Christianity hinges on the reality of that event, which is the real origin of the spirit of the Easter festival.

It is perhaps to be regretted that the inauguration of the holy celebration of Easter should have been connected with a heathen festival; that from pagan sources comes the word which commemorates the most blessed fact in the Christian faith. But it is well to remember, as has been appropriately pointed out, that we must take it as it is found and fill it with the noble, high, and divine meaning for which it now stands. The names of the days of the week and the months of the year are also heathen in origin and in their earlier associations; but we must accept them, as we cannot unwrite history and unmake language.

Easter in its modern sense has no taint of heathen idolatry. It means a living, pulsating Christianity born of the life of God, which is illustrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ—in the soul of man.

## LILIES FOR GOD.

*THEY were tending sweet lilies for Easter morn,  
For the shrine of the Risen God;  
There were creamy lilies with gold in their hearts,  
Each surmounting a royal rod;  
And white lilies that clustered upon their stems,  
And vale-lilies that bent toward the sod.*

*And a child stood and looked through the gate at them,  
At these children of wealth and glee,  
Who were gazing upon their sweet gifts for God,  
And were prattling so merrily;  
And a wistful look crept into his eyes  
That was, Oh! so sad to see.*

*"Oh, I'd love to give God some sweet lilies like these  
On to-morrow, His Easter Day;"  
But a thought like an ocean of grief welled up,  
And it swept all his joys away;  
"Easter lilies they cost even rich folks so much,  
And I haven't one penny to pay."*

*He was poor, Oh, so poor, but he never had begged,  
"Yet," he mused, "I could ask for a flower,"  
But before he had uttered a pleading word  
Came a thought full of comforting power,  
(Such thoughts are white lilies that Angels bear  
Unto earth from Heaven's own bower.)*

*"On to-morrow these lilies will all be God's;  
Other lilies as sweet as they  
Will be gathered but, may be, not given to him,  
So I'll just thank God to-day,  
That if I cannot give a sweet lily to Him  
Other children can. And I'll pray*

*"That all the sweet lilies God made to grow,  
May to-morrow be given to Him."  
And the thought made bright and happy the world  
That had seemed so sad and dim,  
While the heart of the boy with wistful eyes  
Was filled with joy to the brim.*

—MARGARET E. JORDAN.