

Sunday, April 4, 2021—Is The Word “Easter” Exclusively Pagan?

Is “Easter” Exclusively Pagan?

- An article on the KJV Today’s website titled [*“Easter” or “Passover” in Acts 12:4?*](#) first caused me the question the explanation provided by Dr. Gipp in the previous section. This article provides a framework for the discussion outlined in this section. While The KJV Today article does a fair job of highlighting the etymological history of the English word “Easter;” it is ultimately incomplete. The article says nothing about the historic connection in the English language between “Easter” and the Jewish “Passover.” Consequently, I do not agree with the article’s overall conclusion that “Easter” in Acts 12:4 is referring to a Christian festival.
- In this section we will consider the following sub-points regarding etymology of the English word “Easter.”
 - The Influence of Alexander Hislop.
 - The Etymology of “Easter”
 - The Christian Use of “Easter”

The Influence of Alexander Hislop

- The true utility of the KJV Today’s article is found in that it serves to break the almost slavish connection between Easter and Ishtar/Astarte in the minds of many believers on both sides of the textual debate.
- The connection between Easter and the Semitic goddesses Ishtar or Astarte, in the minds of modern Christians can be traced back to the publication of *The Two Babylons* by Alexander Hislop in 1853. Hislop, an outspoken critic of Roman Catholicism falsely postulated an etymological relationship between “Easter” and Ishtar or Astarte based upon phonetic similarities.
 - “What means the term Easter itself? It is not a Christian name. It bears its Chaldean origin on its very forehead. Easter is nothing else than Astarte, one of the titles of Beltis, the queen of heaven, whose name, as pronounced by the people of Nineveh, was evidently identical with that now in common use in this country. That name, as found by Layard on the Assyrian monuments, is Ishtar.” (Hislop, 103)
- According to the KJV Today’s article, “Easter” and Ishtar/Astarte are not etymologically related.
 - “While it is true that Ishtar (a form of Astarte) sounds similar to “Easter” the two words are not etymologically related. Astarte is "תְּרוֹתֶשֶׁתׁ (ashtarot)" in Hebrew. This name is derived from the word "אֲשֶׁת־רֶהַבׁ (ashterâh)" which means "increase" or "flock" (*BrownDriver-Briggs’ Hebrew Definitions*). "אֲשֶׁת־רֶהַבׁ (ashterâh)" is translated as "flocks"

four times in the KJV. Hence, the name "Astarte" or "Ishtar" is a Semitic word related to animal fertility. This makes sense because Astarte was regarded as a goddess of fertility.”
(“Easter” or “Passover” in Acts 12:4?)

- Hislop’s false etymological connection between “Easter” and Ishtar/Astarte was only one of his mistakes. As we will see in the next sub-point, the true origin of “Easter” is connected with the Anglo Saxon goddess Eostre. More importantly, however, is his advancement of the notion that any word derived out of paganism mandates an absolute pagan meaning/connection in later/modern usage. For example, if I make a dinner appointment for Thursday night am I automatically worshipping the Norse god Thor; from whose name “Thursday” is derived? No, I am just talking about what day of week I am going to meet someone for dinner. This highlights that the true error of Hislop is found in his confounding of a word’s origin with its later/modern usage. Just because a given English word is of pagan origin does not mandate pagan meaning in modern usage.
- Brian Tegart is the author of an internet article titled, *Acts 12:4 – Passover and Easter* in which he states the following regarding the errors of Hislop.
 - “. . . the idea that Easter is derived from Astarte/Ishtar seems to come first- or secondhand from Alexander Hislop's 1853 book *The Two Babylons*. As far as I can see, Hislop repeatedly makes the assertion of the connection between Easter and Astarte, but never provides any sources for his claim. What is entirely ironic is that Hislop is not arguing that "Easter" was associated with Astarte at the time of Herod - his argument is that "Easter" was originally entirely Christian but was corrupted by the Roman Catholic Church incorporating elements of pagan religions (including Astarte) in the 5th century A.D., long after Herod died. Despite this alleged connection of Astarte with Easter many scholars now think this connection is a "false etymology," meaning that it is only assumed correct because of the similar sounds between "Easter" and "Ishtar". Instead, the name "Easter" is probably derived from the Anglo-Saxon pagan goddess (post-dating Herod) of "Eostur" (and for those anti-Easter folk out there: even if the name has some pagan origins does not mean the Christian commemoration is therefore also pagan).”
(Tegart, Acts 12:4 – Passover and Easter)
- Once Hislop connected “Easter” and Ishtar/Astarte it was picked up on by Protestants and Fundamental believers and advanced in an uncritical manner. In this way, the influence of Hislop looms large over the entire discussion of “Easter” in Acts 12:4.

The True Etymology of “Easter”

- The etymology of "Easter", on the other hand, has nothing to do with "flocks" or animal fertility, according to the KJV Today. "Easter" ("Ostern" in German) is a Germanic word derived from the word "east" ("Ost" in German). The Online Etymological Dictionary in quoted in support:

- "Old English east "east, easterly, eastward," from Proto-Germanic *aus-to-, *austra- "east, toward the sunrise" (cf. Old Frisian ast "east," aster "eastward," Dutch oost Old Saxon ost, Old High German ostan, German Ost, Old Norse austr "from the east"), from PIE *aus- "to shine," especially "dawn" (cf. Sanskrit ushas "dawn;" Greek aurion "morning;" Old Irish usah, Lithuanian auszra "dawn;" Latin aurora "dawn," auster "south"), literally "to shine." The east is the direction in which dawn breaks." ([Online Etymological Dictionary](#))
- The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the recognized authority on the history of the English language, is in complete agreement with the Online Etymological Dictionary as to the etymology of the English word "Easter." Interested parties are encouraged to consult Appendix A on page 14 to read the OED's etymological history for the word "Easter."
- There is nothing in "East" that suggests animal fertility. Hence the word has nothing to do with Astarte or Ishtar. Relating the Germanic word "Easter" to the Semitic word "Ishtar" is as fallacious as relating the English word "Baby" to the Semitic word "Babylon," according to KJV Today's article.
- Today, "east" refers to the direction from which the sun rises. The direction of east goes by that name because the Saxon word "east" meant "dawn", "sunrise" or "morning." Therefore, etymologically "Easter" basically means "dawn." According to the Venerable Bebe (672-735), the Old English word for the month of April was "Eosturmonað" or "East/Sunrise month." "Eostre" came from the name of a Saxon spring fertility goddess who went by that name.
 - See "Easter" or "Passover" in Acts 12:4? for more details on the historical development of the word "Easter."

Christian Use of "Easter"

- The fact that a Saxon goddess went by the name "Eostre" does not mean that "Easter" is a pagan word. Those who hold this myth make it sound as if there was once a goddess with a certain name and Saxon Christians simply took that name arbitrarily without any biblical basis. If, for example, the pagans worshiped a goddess by the name of "Sally" and Christians today refer to the day of the Lord's resurrection as "Sally", then surely we have a problem. But that is not the case for Saxon Christians using "Easter" as the name of the day of the Lord's resurrection. As "easter" was a descriptive word that referred to the dawn or sunrise, we can understand why both pagans and Christians wished to use the word "east" for their respective purposes. Pagans wished to worship a goddess of sunrise, so they called her "Eostre". Christians on the other hand wished to celebrate a very special dawn, so they called the day "Easter."
- The Bible describes Christ's resurrection as being discovered in the "morning" at "dawn" or at "the rising of the sun." One could view the resurrection morning as "dawn" par excellence.
 - Matthew 28:1—" . . . as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week . . . "

- Mark 16:2—“And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun.”
- Luke 24:1—“Now upon the first day of the week, very early in the morning . . .”
- John 20:1—“The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark. . .”
- Per the OED, "Par excellence" means “By virtue of special excellence or manifest superiority; pre-eminently; supremely, above all.” There have been many dawns throughout history, but that special dawn on the day of the resurrection is deserving of that noun more than any other. We often refer to notable biblical events using par excellence nouns, such as "the fall", "the flood", "the exodus", "the exile", "the advent," "the cross," etc. "Easter" is the Saxon word for this greatest dawn in all of history. By way of metonymical association, this term which refers to the "dawn" of the resurrection came to refer to the entire day of the resurrection. ([*“Easter” or “Passover” in Acts 12:4?*](#))
- The imagery of “dawn” and the “rising of the sun” is not reserved for the morning of Christ’s bodily resurrection from the dead. The scriptures utilize the same imagery to describe the second Advent of the Lord Jesus Christ back to earth.
 - Isaiah 60:1-3—“. . . to the brightness of thy rising.”
 - Malachi 4:2—“But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings;”
 - Luke 1:76-79—“. . . whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us . . .”
 - II Peter 1:19—“. . . until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts”
 - Revelation 22:16—“I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star.”
- Some Christians try to avoid anything that has to do with sunrise imagery, presuming that it is pagan. Yet God in his word compares Christ’s second coming to the rising of the Sun. The word, “Easter,” with its connotation to sunrise, pays tribute to this biblical imagery of Christ as the "Sun of righteousness" (Malachi 4:2). The Old West-Saxon version of the Gospel of Luke translates the word as "eastdæle", which is the Saxon word for "east/sunrise". This is another proof that the word "Easter" came from the biblical language of the Saxons. Luke 1:78 in the
- West-Saxon translation of 990 reads:

- "Purh innoþas ures godes mildheortnesse. on þam he us geneosode of eastdæle up springende;"
- “Easter” is etymologically related to "east" (the direction) and refers to the "rising" of our Lord from the dead. This connection between the eastern direction and the resurrection makes some Christians nervous about a possible pagan influence. However, there is no reason for such concern because this connection between the eastern direction and the verb "to rise" can be found in the New Testament itself.
- “The Greek verb "ἀνατελλω (anatello)" means "to rise" (Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon) and it is the word translated as "arise" in the above passage in 2 Peter 1:19 about Christ rising in our hearts.” ([*“Easter” or “Passover” in Acts 12:4?*](#))
- Biblically there is a connection between the eastern direction and the verb "to rise" even in the language of the New Testament. The writers of the New Testament did not avoid using the verb "ἀνατελλω" (to rise) despite its derivation from the Greek word for “east.”
- Despite any explanation that "Easter" is derived from a generic Saxon word for "dawn" that is not pagan in and of itself, the mere possibility that a goddess went by the name of "Eostre" appears to scare some Christians into avoiding the word "Easter". These Christians need to realize that pagans should not be given monopoly over valid words in the English lexicon (See the KJV Today article for a discussion of pagan words that believers use every day such as the days of the week.). We just have to admit that the English language is the language of a people who were once pagan and that there are many vestiges of pagan etymology in English. Also to be noted is the irony that this word "Ishtar", which some Christians wish to avoid, appears to be related to "Esther" which is the name of an entire book of our Holy Bible. Esther lived in a pagan culture and was given a pagan name as with Mordecai (which is related to the pagan god Marduk). While it has been demonstrated that Easter has nothing to do with Ishtar, the Bible itself shows that God can redeem a name even if it is in fact related to Ishtar. ([*“Easter” or “Passover” in Acts 12:4*](#))