

HAPPY PASCHA

# The pagan goddess behind the holiday of 'Easter'

Most languages use Aramaic to describe Jesus's resurrection. Why is English different? Meet the 'woman' to blame

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'Ostara' by Johannes Gehrts, created in 1884 and published in 1901. (public domain)

Why do only English speakers celebrate “Easter”? Most other peoples of the world call the holiday observed by Christians this Sunday by some variant of the word “Pascha.” (Eastern Orthodox churches will observe the holiday on April 12.)

Blame it on a woman — and no ordinary woman at that — a goddess.

As recounted by the English monk Bede, the 7th-8th century “father of English history,” the former pagans in England called April, or the month marking Jesus’s resurrection, “Ēosturmōnaþ” — Old English for the “Month of Ēostre.”

According to Bede in his “De temporum ratione” (“The Reckoning of Time”), the Christian holiday “was called after a goddess of theirs named Ēostre, in whose honor feasts were celebrated in that month.”

Ēostre is variously depicted by scholars as a fertility goddess and a goddess of dawn and light. The dawn connection could explain a linguistic link between Ēostre and the word “east.”

An academic and a Christian missionary, Bede’s reference to Ēostre (or Ostara) is textually unique, to the extent that many throughout the centuries have asserted it was fabricated. It was only in the 1950s that archeological evidence

was found supporting his claim of such a goddess in England. But recently, [work was done at the University of Leicester on place names](#) and their connections to Ēostre, which, arguably, buttress Bede's version.

In almost every other international language, the holiday is called by some permutation of “Pesach,” the Hebrew word for the Passover holiday/sacrifice.

According to an [essay by Hebrew University Prof. Steven Fassberg](#), during the period of history marking the birth of the Christian church, both Hebrew and Aramaic were used in the Galilee, where Jesus's ministry was based. In Aramaic, the holiday is called “Pascha.”

The Hebrew word “pesach” is a noun, but it can also be inflected as a verb to mean, depending on the biblical context, “skip over” in a physical sense (according to rabbinical scholar Rashi), or more spiritually as “spare” (as used in the Aramaic translation by Roman convert to Judaism Onkelos in the first century CE).

The authors of the Septuagint, the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek completed in 132 BCE, also used the more spiritual connotations of the word, as in to save or to hide. This Greek version of the Old Testament was eventually used by most early Christians in the Roman Empire.

The Gospel of John, written in Greek around the first-second century CE, goes further and uses the Passover motif in calling Jesus the “[lamb of God](#)” — an allusion to the [priestly Passover sacrifice on Jerusalem's Temple Mount](#).



Garbed in white and sounding silver trumpets, priests-in-training prepare for a practice Passover sacrifice. (Courtesy of The Temple Institute)

Interestingly, only the Hebrew noun “Pesach” is transmitted to Aramaic, not the verb forms, where it begins to take on a further meaning — the Christian observance of Jesus's resurrection.

Today, Modern Hebrew has readopted the Aramaic word “Pascha” to mean the Christian celebration of Jesus's resurrection, not the Jewish Passover.

So how is it that one of the two major Christian holidays was named by Anglo Saxons after a pagan deity? And how is it that this name was not only tolerated, but eventually became its normative moniker throughout the English-speaking world?

According to the 1835 “*Deutsche Mythologie*” by Jacob Grimm, “This Ostarâ, like the [Anglo-Saxon] Eástre, must in heathen religion have denoted a higher being, whose worship was so firmly rooted, that the Christian teachers

tolerated the name, and applied it to one of their own grandest anniversaries.”

In other words, early Church fathers seemed to take the tack that if you can't beat them, join them — and “usurp” an existing holiday for Christian purposes.

Historically Easter is not the first instance of a pagan ritual described by Bede that is now imbued with Christian meaning. Also in “The Reckoning of Time,” Bede describes the Anglo-Saxon Pagans’ “Mōdraniht,” (Old English for “Night of the Mothers”) that was held on December 24, or Christmas Eve.

Many Christians are uncomfortable in acknowledging the Easter holiday’s pagan name. Others are taking a more philosophical approach and making a valiant effort to rebrand it. “In an attempt to honor God, many have desired to move away from the term Easter, using Resurrection Day in its place,” [writes one website](#).

But for today, Christians around the world observe Easter with prayer and feasting on a traditional meal, which at many tables includes grandmother’s famous recipe for “paschal” lamb.