

The Religious Observance of Easter

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IN recent years there has been a remarkable tendency in Scotland towards the observance of the old church festivals of Christmas and Easter. This is, no doubt, due to the influence of English customs and the regrettable ignorance of Reformation principles. There is now no Paul in our land to warn us of the be-witchery of Rome and exhort us to stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and not to be entangled again, with the yoke of bondage. It is almost needless to say that the Reformers had very good reasons for rejecting these church festivals, and we should be extremely chary of giving them the slightest countenance.

Easter, as most are aware, is an annual festival held in commemoration of Christ's resurrection. It is regarded as the most important festival of the church year. The name is once mentioned in the New Testament—Acts xii. 4. It so happens, however, that had the translators been consistent, they would have translated the word (to pascha) "passover," as they have done in other places. The reference is to the Jewish passover, and not to what is known as Easter in modern times. In fact, the very name Easter shows that it has other than a Christian origin. It is derived, as Dr. Skeat points out, from Eastre, an Anglo-Saxon goddess, whose festivities were held at the vernal equinox (about 21st March). Hislop, in his interesting and instructive work, the "Two Babylons," maintains the name has some connection with Astarte, who is mentioned in the Bible as the Queen of Heaven. Be that as it may, there can be no doubt that he has pointed out a number of very striking coincidences, which point strongly to the heathen origin of many customs in connection with Easter. The period of forty days fasting known as Lent, which precedes Easter, is still observed by the Yezidis, or pagan devil-worshippers of Koordistan, who seem to have inherited it from their old masters, the Babylonians. The pagans of Mexico, too, had such a fast in early spring as Humboldt informs us. In Egypt, likewise, according to Wilkinson, there was also a feast of forty days in commemoration of Osiris, the great mediatorial god. From these instances and from others which might be quoted, it seems evident that this period of fasting was prevalent among the heathen. And the Church of Rome pursuing her usual policy, which has proved so disastrous to a pure Christianity, conciliated the pagans to a certain extent by introducing many of their feasts and customs into

the Christian Church. It is admitted, of course, that the Church of Rome points to the forty days' fast in the wilderness, when Christ was tempted of Satan, in support of Lent, but it requires a fairly powerful imagination to make that fast immediately precede His resurrection. Lent had no existence in the early Church. "It ought to be known," says Cassianus, writing in the 5th century, "that the observance of the forty days had no existence so long as the perfection of that primitive church remained inviolate" (Giesler, vol. ii., p, 42).

Again, the hot cross buns of Good Friday and the coloured Easter eggs all indicate a heathen origin. The buns are relics of the worship of the Chaldean goddess Astarte, "the queen of heaven." It is to this custom that Jeremiah refers when he says, "The children gather wood, the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead their dough to make cakes to the queen of heaven", (vii. 18). The egg had a sacred significance among the Druids, and was regarded as the symbol of their order. In ancient times eggs were used in the religious rites of the Egyptians and the Greeks, and were hung up in their temples. Hyginus tells us, in his "Fabulae," of the wonderful Babylonian egg "of wondrous size, which is said to have fallen from heaven into the river Euphrates. The fishes rolled it to the bank, where the doves having settled upon it and hatched it, out came Venus, who was afterwards called the goddess of Syria"—i.e., Astarte. Hence the egg became one of the chosen symbols of her worship. A higher ground for the observance of Easter, however, may be claimed inasmuch as Easter is observed in place of the old Jewish institution of the Passover. But such a contention is untenable, inasmuch as that institution is represented in New Testament times by the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. When the appeal is made to church history, the case falls through for want of evidence. "This much already laid down," says Socrates, one of the earliest church historians, "may seem a sufficient treatise to prove that the celebration of the feast of Easter began everywhere more by custom than by any commandment either of Christ or His Apostles" (Hist. Ecc. v. 22). Canon Venables is no less explicit in his article on Easter in the "Encyclopaedia Britannica." "There is no trace of the celebration of Easter," he says, "as a Christian festival in the New Testament or in the writings of the apostolic fathers. The sanctity of special times or places was an idea quite alien from the early Christian mind, too profoundly absorbed in the events themselves to think of their external accidents." Such a testimony ought to be of some weight coming from a Church of England dignitary. The absence of the observance of Easter in the New Testament and in the apostolic

fathers is quite sufficient reason that the modern Church should take no notice of it.

To those who remain unconvinced and who plead the old excuse, what harm can there be in observing a day in commemoration of Christ's resurrection, all that can be said is that, if its observance was so important, it would be commanded in the New Testament. Its absence from the New Testament is the most damaging evidence that can be brought against it. The Church has a day set apart by apostolic usage in commemoration of the blessed truth that Christ rose from the grave, and if Christians are anxious to hold this truth in memory as they should, they have fifty-two Sabbaths in the year to do so. Better this than to compromise our Christianity by commemorating such an event on a day that has a very questionable origin, to say the least of it, and which is trammelled with ceremonies of a decidedly heathen origin. D. B.