



Digging Deeper

4/5/26

Resurrection Day/Easter

By Jews for Jesus (www.jewsforjesus.org)

Purpose of Resurrection Day

Resurrection Day is one of the holiest days in the Christian calendar, concluding Passion Week (which recalls Jesus' sufferings, in older English his "passion") and the forty-day period of Lent, and inaugurating the seven-week Easter season. On this day, Jesus' followers celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah, from the dead. Unfortunately, throughout the centuries some Gentiles named the name of Jesus but by their actions actually brought disgrace to his name (in Jewish tradition, this is known as chillul ha-Shem, a desecration of God's name). They thereby used the events leading up to Jesus' death and resurrection as an excuse to persecute innocent Jews. Thus for many Jews, the word "Easter" carries connotations of dread as they remember pogroms, blood libels and other atrocities perpetrated against their ancestors, or even against themselves.

Yet resurrection from the dead (techat ha-metim in Hebrew) is a decidedly Jewish concept which grew out of the Messianic hope spoken of in the Hebrew Scriptures:

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.(Daniel 12:2-3)

Origin of Resurrection Day

All four gospel accounts tell of Jesus' death and resurrection; these accounts essentially agree with one another, but each narrative presents unique details that add to our understanding of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Following Jesus' death on the Cross at the hands of the Romans on what is now called Good Friday, his disciples were inconsolable. The man who claimed to be the Messiah did not physically liberate his people or establish God's kingdom on earth; instead, he died an ignoble death on a cross. Darkness covered the whole land (Luke 23:44). The disciples, at this point, had their hopes disappointed, for like many Jews of the time, they had expected Jesus to triumphantly destroy Rome and usher in the messianic age. Instead, Jesus went to his death. Yet the story did not end there.

Joseph of Arimathea, Pontius Pilate and Jesus' Burial

A rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, obtained Jesus' body from Pontius Pilate, wrapped Jesus in linen, anointed him according to Jewish burial custom (John 19:40) and laid him in a tomb, rolling a stone over the door (Mark 15:46). The leadership, consisting of Jewish priests and Pharisees, asked that Pilate station guards around the tomb so that none of Jesus' disciples could steal the body and falsely claim that he was resurrected (Matthew



27:62–66).

In the meantime, Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary bought spices so they might visit the grave of Jesus after Shabbat to anoint him (Mark 16:1). Such was their love that just after Shabbat, very early on Sunday morning, they went to his tomb, only to discover that the stone had been rolled away and he was gone, being told by an angel who appeared to them: “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay” (Matthew 28:5–6). From these words Christians have derived the joyous greeting: “He is risen. He is risen indeed!”

When the two Marys told and showed Jesus’ disciples all they had seen, the men did not believe them. Even Jesus’ closest Jewish disciples took a while before believing that Jesus was truly risen. Only when they saw and verified these things did the disappointment reigning in their hearts melt—rejoicing took center stage, perhaps tinged with bafflement. The Lord was not merely gone, he was risen from the grave! But how, and where was he now?

Skepticism of and Evidence for Jesus’ Resurrection

There have been numerous skeptics who have looked at the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection and come to the conclusion that it really did happen, and that this makes a watershed difference in our lives. Nevertheless, in the skeptical age in which we live, many—perhaps most—Jews and non-Jews alike do not believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. Instead they believe that the resurrection was a hoax, that Jesus was a fraud; or that we can’t really know for sure what happened. This was the case in the days of the gospel writers, who writing a few decades after, knew of a similar claim and addressed it:

While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

Matthew 28:11–15

Interestingly, a few Jewish scholars have indicated belief in the resurrection of Jesus (though not in his Messiahship). One such scholar is Pinchas Lapide, an Orthodox Jew who nevertheless said “I accept the resurrection of Easter Sunday not as an invention of the community of disciples, but as an historical event.” Lapide, Pinchas, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), p. 15

The gospel accounts and the book of Acts rebut some popular interpretations such as Hugh Schonfield’s once-famous book *The Passover Plot*. Schonfield, Hugh, *The Passover Plot* (London: Hutchinson, 1965). They detail the various appearances of Jesus after his resurrection. In fact, the word “Easter” appears just once in the King James translation of the New Testament (Acts 12:4), but most other translations correctly render the Greek word as “Passover.” The early Jewish Christians would have been the first to commemorate Yeshua’s death and resurrection, timing it in accordance with the Passover, which Jesus had celebrated the day before his death. Later, the date was moved to the Sunday following the Passover (see under “Establishment of Resurrection Day”).

How Resurrection Day Is Observed by Followers of Jesus (Yeshua)

This section describes Resurrection Day as celebrated largely by non-Jewish followers of Yeshua around the world; Jewish believers often, though not always, choose to remember Yeshua’s resurrection

differently. This day is perhaps the holiest day in the church calendar year, being preceded by the 40-day liturgical period known as Lent. Established at the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325, Lent is celebrated by most branches of Christianity, and in its focus on spiritual preparation has parallels with the Jewish period of the Omer. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, a day of solemnity during which ashes are placed on the forehead as a gesture of repentance and grief over one's sins. This ritual draws Christians into the state of moral introspection appropriate to the season. In the weeks that follow, many Christians fast or abstain—sometimes from a vice, sometimes a luxury such as wine or television—so that they can focus more fully on the Lord.

Passion Week or Holy Week

Passion Week, also known as Holy Week, begins with a celebration of Yeshua's "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey on Palm Sunday, so called because Jesus was greeted with the waving of palm branches and shouts of Hosanna (Hoshienu), all of which was a display of messianic fervor. This event described in Mark 11, is looked at as a fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, "Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion! Shout daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your king is coming to you, a righteous one bringing salvation. He is lowly, riding on a donkey—on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

To read more on Jesus' last week leading up to Passover, [click here](#).

Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday

In the days that follow Palm Sunday, many liturgically-oriented Christians commemorate Passion week. That week Maundy Thursday is celebrated, the date of the Last Supper, when Jesus observed the Passover and established what Christians refer to variously as the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper or Communion. "Maundy" comes from the Middle English word meaning commandment; on this day Jesus commanded his followers to love one another.¹

Christians from both the Protestant and Catholic traditions more broadly observe Good Friday (the date of Jesus' death) and Easter Sunday (commemorating his resurrection). Special church services—for example, following the "Stations of the Cross" on Good Friday, attending an Easter Vigil (for Catholics) or attending sunrise services on Resurrection Day (for Protestants)—recall Jesus' final days, death and resurrection.

The week that follows Resurrection Day is called Easter Week, and the seven weeks that follow Resurrection Day are known as Easter Season or Eastertide. During this period many continue the traditional practices of Easter (saying the Paschal greeting, decorating the church with Easter lilies, making Easter eggs), though its celebration is not as universal as that of Resurrection Day itself.

Do Messianic Jews Celebrate Resurrection Day?

For Messianic Jews, Resurrection Day can be an opportunity to connect the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible with the life and death of Jesus. This may mean celebrating Jesus' resurrection in a Jewish context—not Easter bonnets and bunnies, but as the first example of the traditional Jewish hope in resurrection for all.

Of course, for Jews who are not believers in Jesus, the day is a date like any other. But for Jewish believers, Yeshua's resurrection is traced back to the Hebrew Bible. David writes in Psalm 16:10: "For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption."

On one Shavuot many years later, the Apostle Peter interpreted this verse to refer to Jesus' resurrection from the dead—though King David died, his descendant Yeshua did not see corruption or decay but came alive from the dead. (Acts 2:29–31) Daniel spoke of the resurrection of all people when he wrote, "And

many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2).

Parallels in the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac

And perhaps most interesting of all is the story of the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac, in Genesis 22. In this chapter, God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his "only" son Isaac. At the last minute God stays Abraham's hand and provides a ram as a substitute. Interestingly, Jewish painter Marc Chagall included The Sacrifice of Isaac among his biblical paintings. In it, we find the scene of Abraham and Isaac, as depicted in Genesis 22, but also a small vignette in the upper right corner of Jesus carrying the cross—the color red dripping down onto the scene of the Akedah. Though as far as we know Chagall was not a believer in Jesus, and though his understanding of Jesus' death was that of a representative martyr, nevertheless he linked the Hebrew Bible with the New Testament in that painting.

Several Jewish midrashim tell us that Isaac was in fact put to death and was then resurrected. While this is contrary to the actual biblical story, it reminds Jewish followers of Jesus that just as Abraham offered his "only son whom you love, Isaac," God also gave his "only son" Yeshua as an atoning sacrifice—and that Yeshua was in reality, not just in a midrash, but resurrected from the dead.

Perhaps Jewish believers in Jesus could read such portions of the Tanakh as they celebrate the Messiah's resurrection.

We encourage you to read the gospel accounts of the Resurrection of Yeshua. Please contact us if you are interested in seeing more resources about Jesus' Resurrection from the dead.

Traditional Customs and Folklore of Resurrection Day

Again, this section refers to customs observed mostly by non-Jewish followers of Yeshua. Among Christians, Resurrection Day honors decoration and artistic expression as means of worshiping God and celebrating the Resurrection. Christians have long decorated Easter eggs to symbolize the empty tomb from which Jesus arose. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, Christians used to abstain from eggs during Lent, so they decorated them to celebrate the end of this prohibition on Resurrection Day.

In many churches, Easter egg hunts are popular among children; the Easter bunny is a mythological creature like Santa Claus who is supposed to judge children and determine who's naughty and nice. Children carry Easter baskets and search high and low to find the coveted Easter eggs and chocolate Easter bunnies. The Easter Egg hunt is not dissimilar to the hunt for the afikomen during Passover. Uncovering an egg hiding under a blade of grass or mound of dirt, just like finding the hidden matzah under a tablecloth or stowed away in a cupboard, can be used to teach children what it might have felt like when the first followers of Jesus found themselves face to face with the Messiah. The Son of God stood before them half-hidden, a man of flesh and blood in ordinary garb; when they realized who he truly was, some of them rejoiced.

Easter and the Spring Equinox (Vernal Equinox)

Because Resurrection Day falls after the vernal equinox, the holiday also bursts with vibrant spring colors; after the gray waiting and self-abnegation of Lent, Christians decorate churches and homes with Easter lilies and bright flowers; and even dress up in floral patterns and pastels, wearing powder-blue suits or enormous soft pink hats.

Sunrise services are often celebrated on Resurrection Day. The etymology of "Easter" is much debated, but one interpretation says it derives from "east," where the sun rises.²

It is fitting to celebrate Resurrection Day at break of day, for the gospel accounts related that this is when certain women went to go see Jesus's tomb, but found it empty. The risen Son and the risen Sun alike are glimmerings of God's glory.

Spiritual Applications of Resurrection Day

The resurrection of Jesus is one of the central tenets of the Christian faith, summarized by the Apostle Paul: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). The New Testament says that those who believe in Jesus will be resurrected as he was. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26).

And the Apostle Paul asks rhetorically, "Death where is thy victory? Sin, where is thy sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55). Easter, or Resurrection Day, is a day to rejoice in Christ's victory over death and sin, and a day to share that joy of salvation with a fallen world and our own people.

Establishment of Resurrection Day

This section contains detailed information on the history of setting the calendar day for Resurrection Day. Only for fans of calendar calculations and history!

Setting the Date:

The remembrance and celebration of Jesus' resurrection—later called "Easter," see below—was originally celebrated on Nisan 14, the date of the Passover, by the Jewish Christians who comprised the early church. Later, some Christians, particularly those in and around Rome, began celebrating the resurrection on the Sunday nearest Passover, since they knew from the gospel account that Jesus arose from the dead on a Sunday. Although "[the] earliest Christians celebrated the Lord's Passover at the same time as the Jews ... By the middle of the 2nd century most churches had transferred this celebration to the Sunday after the Jewish feast."³

Widespread disagreement in the early church about when to celebrate the day nearly caused a schism and meant that uniformity of observance didn't come until later. One scholar explains: "Fixing the date on which the Resurrection of Jesus was to be observed and celebrated triggered a major controversy in early Christianity in which an Eastern and a Western position can be distinguished. The dispute was not definitively resolved until the 8th century."⁴

"Yet," one author writes, "many disparities remained in the way the several churches calculated the date of Easter."⁵

Calendric differences between Rome and Alexandria led to disparate dates being celebrated as the resurrection day; in addition, Christians in Asia Minor who celebrated the day on Passover "clung to the older custom."⁶

These Christians continued to celebrate Nisan 14 while the Roman church asseverated that it must fall on the Lord's Day (Sunday)—however, "the Quartodecimans ("14th day" proponents) remained a minority"⁷

and the Roman position prevailed. Eusebius summarizes the controversy in his Ecclesiastical History:

A question of no small importance arose at that time. For the parishes of all Asia, as from an older tradition, held that the fourteenth day of the moon, on which day the Jews were commanded to sacrifice the lamb, should be observed as the feast of the Saviour's passover. It was therefore necessary to end their fast on that day, whatever day of the week it should happen to be. But it was not the custom of the

churches in the rest of the world to end it at this time, as they observed the practice which, from apostolic tradition, has prevailed to the present time, of terminating the fast on no other day than on that of the resurrection of our Saviour.

Synods and assemblies of bishops were held on this account, and all, with one consent, through mutual correspondence drew up an ecclesiastical decree, that the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord should be celebrated on no other but the Lord's day, and that we should observe the close of the paschal fast on this day only.

But the bishops of Asia, led by Polycrates, decided to hold to the old custom handed down to them. He himself, in a letter which he addressed to Victor and the church of Rome, set forth in the following words the tradition which had come down to him:

We observe the exact day; neither adding, nor taking away...

All these observed the fourteenth day of the passover according to the Gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith... And my relatives always observed the day when the people put away the leaven.

Thereupon Victor, who presided over the church at Rome, immediately attempted to cut off from the common unity the parishes of all Asia, with the churches that agreed with them, as heterodox; and he wrote letters and declared all the brethren there wholly excommunicate.

But this did not please all the bishops. And they besought him to consider the things of peace, and of neighborly unity and love. Words of theirs are extant, sharply rebuking Victor.

Among them was Irenaeus, who ... fittingly admonishes Victor that he should not cut off whole churches of God which observed the tradition of an ancient custom...⁸

Thanks to the efforts of Irenaeus and others, crisis was averted and Victor's attempt to split up the Church failed.⁹

While an unequivocal preference for the Roman position was expressed, churches weren't excommunicated for celebrating a different date. Codification of the date came with the Nicene Council (also called the Council of Nicaea, convened by Constantine A.D. 325), which determined that the day must fall on the first Sunday following the first full (paschal) moon appearing after the vernal equinox. Even then the official Roman Catholic date did not become universally accepted until the eighth century A.D.

A further divergence took place when the Western Church decided to follow the Gregorian correction to the Julian calendar in 1582 while the Russian and Eastern Churches stuck to the Julian calendar, using it to this day. (The Eastern Church also follows a prohibition that forbids Easter from coinciding with Passover.) Attempts at creating a universal Easter date in the 20th and 21st centuries have failed, which means that Resurrection Day is celebrated on different dates by Orthodox and Western Christians.

An Alternative View:

Some scholars, in contrast to general consensus and ecclesiastical history, believe Easter to be an ultimately pagan celebration. One writer explains this revisionist position by examining the etymology of "Easter":

The English word Easter, which parallels the German word Ostern, is of uncertain origin. One view, expounded by the Venerable Bede in the 8th century, was that derived from Eostre, or Eostrae, the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring and fertility. This view presumes—as does the view associating the origin of Christmas on December 25 with pagan celebrations of the winter solstice—that Christians appropriated pagan names and holidays for their highest festivals. Given the determination with which

Christians combated all forms of paganism... this appears a rather dubious presumption. There is now widespread consensus that the word derives from the Christian designation of Easter week as in albis, a Latin phrase that was understood as the plural of alba ("dawn") and became eostarum in Old High German, the precursor of the modern German and English term. The Latin and Greek Pascha ("Passover") provides the root for Pâques, the French word for Easter. 10

Thus, the word "Easter" is a rather late derivation, and differs from the usual "Pesach" etymology of the word in other languages. The lateness of the English "Easter," however, does not mean that the holiday was pagan, nor does it mean that the holiday was a late invention; all evidence points to the contrary: that Resurrection Day was celebrated in the years immediately following Christ's death and was a distinctly Christian celebration. As another author puts it: "As at Christmas, so also at Easter, popular customs reflect many ancient pagan survivals—in this instance, connected with spring fertility rites, such as the symbols of the Easter egg and the Easter hare or rabbit." In other words, folklore and practices of pagan origin may have been grafted into Resurrection Day, but the holiday's origin and nature is essentially Christian—and Jewish!

Resurrection from the Dead in Jewish Tradition

Historically, Jewish belief in a bodily resurrection from the dead has received a split decision. Even Jews who agree that resurrection is real disagree on such details as, "Who will bring about the resurrection?" "From what material will the new bodies be constructed?" "Which people will return from their graves?" "What condition will they be in when they return?" and "Will they come back naked or clothed?" Questions and more questions, and some of the answers are just as fanciful. Among the more poetic ancient Jewish theories on resurrection is the idea that "drops of perspiration from God's head will come down to earth, and when they fall, the dead will rise from the dust."¹¹

One of the earliest extra-biblical writings which mentions belief in resurrection is found in II Maccabees (150 B.C.E.). In the midst of torture a Jew tells his captors:

"Tis meet for those who perish at men's hands to cherish hope divine that they shall be raised up by God again but thou...shalt have no resurrection to life." (II Maccabees vii 14)¹²

Belief in a bodily resurrection inspired the Jewish guerrilla fighters in their revolt against the Persian king, Antiochus. They viewed the resurrection as a reward which would certainly be granted to those who sacrificed their lives to regain the Temple for God.

The Maccabees were not the only Jews who saw resurrection as a reward. Midrash Rabbah LVI.2 tells of Rabbi Isaac who taught that Torah was given as a reward for worship, as was the return of the exiles, and the building of the Temple. Therefore, he reasoned, "The dead will come to life again only as a reward for worshipping."

Other rabbis taught that everyone would be resurrected, whether good or bad, and that God would pronounce judgment on each one at that time:

The righteous and wicked alike will be resurrected, not only that the faithful Jews who died in exile amidst suffering and martyrdom may now enjoy the glory of Redemption, but also that the wicked who persecuted Israel during the years of exile may now receive punishment. 13

The doctrine of resurrection of the dead was a highly debated issue in the first century, when the two prominent sects of Jews were the Pharisees, who believed in a bodily resurrection, and the Sadducees, who did not. Rabbi Gamaliel set forth the Pharisaic arguments by quoting sources his opponents could respect.⁴ Gamaliel cited the Torah, "And the Lord said unto Moses, 'Behold, thou shalt sleep with thy

fathers; and this people will rise up'." (Deuteronomy 31:16) He also quoted the Prophets, "Thy dead shall live, thy dead bodies shall arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs and the earth shall cast forth the dead." (Isaiah 26:19) And he quoted from the Hagiographa (Greek for the Hebrew Ketuvim or Writings). Finally, he selected Song of Songs 7:9, "And thy palate like the best wine, that goeth down smoothly for my beloved, causing the lips of those who are asleep to speak."

The Midrash Rabbah is replete with reference to the resurrection. One needs to look no further than the Midrash on Genesis. The commentary on Genesis 14:7 tells about R. Isaac who taught that if a potter could fix an earthen vessel he made, the Creator of the universe could repair (i.e. bring to life again) a human vessel he had formed. Commenting on the Genesis 3:19 passage "For dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return," Rabbi Simeon B. Yohai said, "Here the Scripture hints at resurrection, for it does not say 'For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou go', but 'shalt thou return'."

Moses Maimonides believed so strongly in the doctrine of resurrection that he wrote a supplement to the Mishnah called Treatise on Resurrection. But one need not be an expert on the Mishnah to know that the last of Maimonides' Thirteen Articles of Faith is: "I believe with perfect faith that there will be a revival of the dead at the time when it shall please the Creator, blessed be his Name and exalted be his Name for ever and ever."¹⁴

The late Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Dr. Joseph H. Hertz, said: "Many people find Resurrection incredible; yet it is not more of a mystery than birth, or the stupendous miracle of the annual resurrection of plant-life after winter."¹⁵

End Notes

1. See OED Online, s.v. "maundy":

Etymology: < Anglo-Norman *mandet*, *mandé* (c1120), Old French, Middle French *mandé* (1223) < classical Latin *mandatum* *mandate* n., in phrase *mandatum novum* a new commandment (with reference to John 13:34: see below). In Anglo-Norman and Old French the word primarily denoted the foot-washing ceremony . . . The ceremony of washing the feet of a number of poor persons on the day before Good Friday was instituted as a way of recalling and following the example of humble service given by Jesus who, at the Last Supper, washed the feet of his disciples and exhorted them to wash one another's feet (John 13:4-14). The words 'A new commandment (*mandatum novum*) I give to you, that you love one another' (John 13:34), from the discourse which followed the washing of the disciples' feet, were adopted as the first antiphon sung at the ceremony, which hence acquired the name of *mandatum*.

2. English is unique in using the word "Easter"—in most languages the word for this holiday relates to the word for Passover. For example, the French "Pâques" derives from the Hebrew word *Pesach*, for Passover. In other words, Easter in its very etymological history has long been inextricably linked to the history and symbolism of Passover.

3. Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s.v. "Church year."

4. Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s.v. "Easter."

5. Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s.v. "Church year."

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250105.htm>. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book V, Chapter 23-24, excerpts. (Chapter 23. The Question then agitated concerning the Passover; Chapter 24. The Disagreement in Asia)

9. Later disagreements did eventually precipitate a split between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches.

10. Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s.v. "Easter."

11. Ephraim Elimelech Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, translated by Israel Abrahams, Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1975.

12. Abba Hillel Silver, *Messianic Speculations in Israel*, Maccimilian Co, New York 1927, p.123.

13. A. Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, Schocken Books, New York, 1975, p. 357.

14. *Midrash Rabbah*: in Ten Volumes, translated and edited by Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, Soncino Press, London, 1961, p. 115.

15. Joseph H. Hertz, *The Authorized Daily Prayerbook*, Bloch Publishing Company, New York, 1985 (18th Printing), p. 255.