

National Unitarian Fellowship

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Viewpoint



Religious Festivals

Easter—Pesach—Ostara

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Introduction

This edition of the *Viewpoint* brings to an end the series on Religious Festivals. Thank you to everyone who has contributed through the year.

Although this is the end of the series, the following three items symbolize endings, beginnings, freedom and renewal. Adrian Worsfold begins by offering us his honest critique of the Easter story. Easter has so often seemed absent in our Unitarian literature. Those readers, who have not yet watched the video of Ben Whitney's account of his book: *The Fool on the Hill*' www.ukunitarian.tv?nuf-benwhitney may well wish to watch this through as well. The book is in the NUF Book Collection. Anyone wishing to read it do get in touch.

The second festival included is that of the Jewish Pesach, which recalls the Passover and Exodus from Egypt. Again, this is one of renewal and freedom and is a crucial annual ritual of the Judaic Faith.

Finally, Tony McNeile writes on the Pagan festival of Ostara or Spring Equinox. Again, like the previous two items, there is a continuity with the past but also some shared pointers to the human capacity and need to celebrate renewal through ritual and story.

In the next *Viewpoint*, we will look at 'Unitarians and Social Responsibility'. If any of our readers would like to submit their point of view on this subject, and write about their involvement in social volunteering or paid work, please submit your article to me before 15th May. Articles from 500 words to 2,500 words would be welcome.

Joan Wilkinson

Possibilities of Easter Impossible – Christian Festival

25th March – 1st April

By Adrian Worsfold

For most people, the most significant holy days from Christianity is Solar Christmas. It might be the presence on earth of the Incarnation, but for most Christians the major festival is the Lunar related drama of Holy Week culminating in Easter.

If the great world-wide Churches were to come together and fix one date for Easter, presumably on the solar Gregorian Calendar, that would be an Ecumenical Council of world impact still. At present, even the Resurrection itself is part of the wider division of Christendom across Julian and Gregorian calendars.

You can't do Easter without the Passion; you can't do the resurrection without all that week that makes the Crucifixion. Here, supernaturally-speaking, two millennia back, is when Christ apparently did his work of salvation and redemption for the world. And every time a Mass or Eucharist is celebrated, that one event is participated in: as transubstantiation (Roman, Orthodox, traditionalist Anglo-Catholics) or consubstantiation (Lutheranism) takes place. Christ simply did not die upon the cross, but died that others would not, and thus the body (bread) is broken and blood (wine) consumed, and then he was resurrected to defeat death; able to ascend to heaven to come again at the fulfilment of time. (Others of course only 'remember'; but remembering can be an intense recollection in a sense of participating in the mind.)

So, we should be able to do some history on this one event; and do some science.

On science, here is the problem. If someone dies, within a very short period of time, the brain is locked as unusable. If Jesus is fully human, the brain is unrecoverable soon after death. So, to resurrect takes a miracle among miracles and is not science.

That one cannot do history is down to history's need for primary documents. There aren't any. Here's an analogy. Suppose there is an A Level school history book about the English Civil War. As a produced book for a purpose it must be a primary source about something. Not the Civil War. With its double page spread, reliance on bullet points, plenty of white space, plenty of pictures and simple maps, it is a primary source on the condition of education in England in the early twenty first century. We then compare this with a history book in the 1950s, which, if anything, shares much of its form with a sophisticated novel.

Doing history in the first decades of first century Palestine has to be a secondary process; looking at the wider religious and cultural environment, a recreative process of probabilities and possibilities by critical methods of examining the Early Church texts.

The New Testament documents are not even primary documents about the Early Churches, but that's the nearest they get. All New Testament books are post-Easter, all have Pauline gloss to some degree, in that they hardly represent the Jewish Church (ceased 132 CE; James's book being the closest) or the Gnostics (although one sees some Gnostic pull in John's Gospel and even Paul himself). The material is biography-like and history-like in a real-world sense, rather than having books of sayings, as in the fifth Gospel, *The Gospel of Thomas*, or condemning the material against the spiritual, as among Gnostics. The material world matters, and the resurrection was bodily.

Trouble is, those who believe in miracles want it both ways. Resurrection is a miracle but should be subject to evidence. And so often the preacher will say: the disciples were beaten men (they ran away): yet something happened.

Now if I ran away from someone facing death and later on I saw him, I would assume nothing other than he had escaped death. If, however he started walking through walls and appearing and disappearing at will, I'd start to scratch my head.

The problem with this approach is the sociology of it: the downbeat are the very people in pregnant religious settings, expectant and charismatic, who are likely to turn defeat into further expectation: infused as they are with ongoing direct meanings of what has been going on. If the man is dead, then there is a binary situation: indeed, defeat or, supernaturally, victory means coming back. Resurrection means coming back; it is their practical outcome of the ideological coming Kingdom. Why should people who lose the leader, yet having expected the heavens to open, suddenly give up? The leader is greater than all the powers, and time is short. There is thus more continuity than discontinuity.

The continuity is in the setting, the ideas, the claims, the wants and needs, the making revisions; the discontinuity is in events. Religion is ritualistic: gatherings, prayers, meals, and these continuities are adjusted into the discontinuities.

There were variable views and arguments in the Early Church on what constituted Jesus as 'risen'. One view was that the Hebrew Bible showed prophetic and prophetic after-the-event texts demonstrating that this Jesus was approved and exalted. Another was that they broke bread in a condition of ecstasy and had visions of the Messiah

with them - the Kingdom and the Messiah are so close. Another was that the corpse lived anew, walked, and met the disciples before ascending. Yet another was a divine man was on earth, and being divine and risen, returned to heaven.

Let's try the view that Jesus did not die upon the Cross, and I don't mean in the Muslim sense - it doesn't solve the scientific problem. In other words, he was not on the Cross long enough to suffocate, that at the festival he was taken down, and Joseph of Arimathaea had enough social clout to take possession of the body from the Romans and use healing herbs acquired. After a while Jesus got up, a miracle in itself, mystified a few people on the way, but spoke to his disciples on what to do and then slipped away over the border of the Roman Empire to look for those lost tribes of Israel.

What's wrong with this? Well, simply, the stories do not reflect that reality, even if mythicised. He appears to have injuries, but is not crippled, and has changed characteristics to walk through walls and appear and disappear. Turning up weak in front of his disciples isn't exactly going to inspire them. Also, he seems to travel around incoherently in geographical terms.

He also ascends away. In other words, the Early Church is asking: Why does not Jesus keep appearing to us now risen? He does not because he ascended and sent his paraclete, the Holy Spirit, to be the guide. He is the first of the resurrected, and others will follow in time, and Christ waits in heaven, not in Afghanistan.

If we keep pushing the stance of the same corporeal personality who had died and moved about after resurrection, we come to the equivalent of the Star Trek energising problem. The problem has always been that although the reconstructed ones on the planet, say, had all

the features and memories of those who walked into the energiser, the people who had walked into the energiser were destroyed - they died. The problem is that if the resurrected Jesus remembered what he was doing before, the chap who died still ended it all. Star Trek and the Easter faith both have the same difficulty.

Of course, the whole Easter problem is how he got to the Cross as well as how he went through it and defeated it. Much of the Gospels concentrate on this. The whole arrest story doesn't work, and it could be Jesus arranging to match the Hebrew Bible requirements for being the sacrificial servant via Judas (Psalm 41:9-10, Zechariah 11:12, Exodus 21:32). Then the Sanhedrin would not have met at night for their trial, would not have considered a messianic claim blasphemous or given it a later Christian gloss, did not need to pass a religious heretic to the Romans, would not have given a death sentence in one sitting, or used any method other than stoning for a religious crime.

There are two parts to the resurrection: the tomb emptying and the appearances. Mark originally contained no post-Resurrection appearances yet there would be in future. Matthew has two: the first at the tomb to Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary", and the second to all the disciples on a mountain in Galilee, claiming Jesus's world-wide status. Luke contradicts Matthew regarding an appearance at the tomb; and replaces Galilee with Jerusalem. Jesus appears to Cleopas and another (brother James?) going to Emmaus, to Peter (according to other apostles), and to the eleven remaining plus others. On a mountain outside Jerusalem Jesus appears to the disciples and ascends. Luke-Acts has appearances to Paul (going to Damascus), to Stephen, and to Peter where he hears a voice. In John, Jesus does appear at the empty tomb to Mary Magdalene, to the disciples without Thomas, to the disciples with Thomas, and to Peter and six disciples in

a likely added-on scene.

That women are variably given as the first witnesses (or not for Paul!) cuts both ways. One way is that having women as first witnesses is paradoxically to suggest the event of him leaving a tomb is more likely. The other is an explanation as why no one knew for a time - unreliable witnesses who, it seems, were also told to tell no one. This matters as the appearances accounts predate the tomb traditions.

It suggests an answer for the Early Christians' question: Why don't we go and worship at the tomb? It even asks: Where is any tomb? Yes, later, authorities fixed a place, thanks to Constantine's wife in the fourth century, but we are talking here about early highly charismatic and fluid believers full of expectation and questions. It's just possible that pilgrimages did happen and were halted about 70 CE and the antipathy towards the Jewish messianics removed any such accounts. this is unlike for other messianics. Was Jesus then thrown into a common pit with the bones muddled up with others and rapidly decomposed?

Christians often say no authorities produced the bones. But were the authorities bothered in a situation where, apparently, some saw appearances when others did not? Could the resurrected Jesus have been arrested? Of course not, and authorities lose interest in the dead and respond to the living.

Authority matters. So, Paul says (perhaps some pre-Paul here) that there is the first appearance to Peter, then to the Twelve, then to five hundred (a congregation), then to James (brother of Jesus), then to "all the Apostles," and Paul. It's important to state who meets the resurrected Jesus, as that way they claim authority, and Paul is so self-deprecating in being the last one. Cross-cultural Paul as Saul will have

been in Jerusalem for the Passover, and he had no interest then in Jesus or those put to death to keep order. Paul got involved only as he encountered some Jews in synagogues saying a Messiah had been the first of the resurrected and was awaited to transform everything, and at the same time he encountered Gentiles looking for a one-God faith like the one the Jews enjoyed. Paul said it's either the Law or the Messiah, and he didn't alter that binary choice - he changed sides from Law to Messiah. Once he did, the Gentiles could be included. Peter was the head man, in resurrection tradition, but Paul in effect ran the Department for Gentiles.

In the end, the miracle and strong evidence approaches lead up blind alleys. It is all about meaning, and how society and culture live inside people's heads. The narratives are clever. There is Luke's supper at Emmaus where they do not know who it is until he speaks of the prophets up to himself and consumes with them the bread and wine to emphasise this central ritual of the Church community (that, according to the Last Supper, was not going to happen until the Kingdom of God comes: thus, the Church stands in its place during the wait). As soon as they see this, via him, and their eyes are opened, he disappears. When Thomas is absent, Jesus opens the Scriptures. When Thomas is present, he can learn that faith is in as much as what you don't see as what you do. At the Sea of Galilee, going fishing, you do the fishing under the Lord, and the converts will come in, and Peter is to tend the shoal. Where better than a mountain top - in Galilee - to give the Great Commission? But Jerusalem is where he tells of Baptism not of water but the Holy Spirit: Pentecost is approaching. Bethany has the final instructions with the Holy Spirit coming.

Indeed, despite the primacy of Easter, it seems that the resurrection is a contained event, even 'subjective' in experience among a set few.

The big event is the Church's birth, the launch of the ship of faith, which is Pentecost.

So, what to make of this? We have resurrection belief from Zoroastrian Persia penetrating part of Judaism - including the Baptist and Jesus. To this the Hebrew Bible traditions of Messiah include the suffering servant - to prompt God to end time, suffering and bring in the Kingdom - for which some penitents are healed to be ready to enter. Stories get told and embellished, but what is fascinating about the resurrection stories is that they are all literary-theological: they are all 'get it?' messages.

What becomes clear is not that 'something happened' but that nothing needed to happen at all, beyond the Romans casually removing a potential nuisance. Humans attach themselves very strongly to causes that will transform, to people gripped by and generating charisma, who escalate religion into the magical and supernatural. Popularist signs-and-wonders religion works among ordinary folk and the supernatural thinking intellectuals try and make sense in words.

There is no real presence in the Eucharist, which is simply a traditionalist formula for another of these signs and wonders. Into modernity and beyond, and Easter becomes, like Christmas, another metaphor for renewal. Christmas becomes the universal baby celebrated, and Easter the moment of transformation and renewing change. But these myths are weak; they capture children but not many of those of more abstract thought.

If we could energise back into time, we'd need anthropologists to try and translate their culture to ours. Writing 'thick evidence' into summary essays, we'd find the whole report so very strange because our sociology of knowledge is so very different. Yet some people against

this collective drift still have a personal imagination and group association that proclaims the Easter 'event'. For some time, I would attend throughout Holy Week (I once wrote and led a service within it), turn up each year at the crack of dawn Resurrection bonfire, and make the day's proclamations, despite not believing in any of it as history and science. On such a knife-edge, it is easy to drop away from this drama – which I did subsequently when I ceased to be a 'follower'.

Pesach/Passover Friday 31st March-7th April 2018 Jewish Festival Joan Wilkinson

Can it be a coincidence that the first day of Pesach this year, with its central meal Sedar, recalling the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt, falls on the same day as Good Friday, when Christians remember the day when Jesus celebrated the Passover meal or Last Supper with his disciples, prior to being crucified?

Just as Adrian has pointed out in his critique of the Easter story, the account of the Jewish history and laws, in the first five books of the Bible, the 'Torah', or as we know it the 'Pentateuch', was written centuries after the story of the Exodus is supposed to have occurred in the fourteenth century BCE. Literary, textual, historical and archeological studies suggest that this narrative of Jewish history was written during the exile in the sixth century BC, the exact dating suggested is 562 BCE – 560 BCE. Stories and some texts will have been handed down and included, but a coherent history including the laws and rituals, was brought together as a way of binding together Jews returning from the Babylonian exile and those of the diaspora. The Torah, with its history and rituals, has continued to be the founding and binding text to Jews through the centuries since.

Deuteronomy 6: v21: 'We were Pharaoh's bondmen in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand:', sets the scene for the celebration of Pesach. It is thought that the old custom of daubing blood on the doorposts and lintels was to ward off demons and later became the outward sign for the story of the tenth plague visited on the Jews in Egypt. The Jews were told to daub blood of a sacrificial lamb on their door posts so that the Lord would pass over their homes, slaughtering only the first-born sons of the Egyptians. Immediately following this event the Jewish slaves escaped leaving no time for the bread to rise, thus the symbolic nature of the unleavened bread used at the Seder. Pesach also became the name of a sacrificial lamb in the Temple period.

Now there is no temple, but the main meal of Pesach, Sedar, symbolically continues the Pesach ritual. In preparation for the meal, major grains such as wheat, rye, barley, oats and spelt, are cleared out of the house and burned. The house is cleaned thoroughly, some even using a toothbrush to ensure no trace of grain remains. Only then can the meal be prepared. Some Jews observe the day before Pesach as 'The Fast of the First-Born', when the eldest son will fast in remembrance of the Passover event in Egypt.

The central script is contained in the 'Haggadah' and the leader of the Sedar, robed in white (Kittel), will follow the wording included there to tell the story of the Exodus. The Sedar plate is divided into five sections and contains different items of food, each symbolizing an aspect of the Exodus. Before each person tastes the food from a particular section, the leader will read words from the Haggadah before blessing the food and breaking the unleavened product kept in a special Sedar bag. This bread is called Matzah and is handed to each person. Each person will then eat and take a small drink of wine, and so the ritual

proceeds until all five foods have been blessed and eaten.

There are many different editions of the Haggadah depending on different perspectives held. Just as in Christianity, there are many branches of Judaism, but all will include the story of the Exodus. There are even Christian Haggadahs for those Christians reinterpreting the Sedar meal to recall the last supper, when Jesus led the Passover meal with his disciples. (There are several Sedar meals to be viewed on youtube, including Christian)

Following the Sedar there may be joyful music to express the freedom and renewal experienced in the retelling of the Exodus story. The ritual binds together rich and poor, old and young, families and Jews around the world as one nation. It symbolizes the first step toward final redemption from slavery. The meal often ends with the sung words: 'Next year in Jerusalem'.

During the period of Pesach no leavened bread must be eaten or fed to cattle.

The first and last days of Pesach are legal holidays, with special meals, prayers, services and abstention from work, with some Jews observing the whole week.

This festival occurs in the first month of the Jewish calendar, Nisan, which was when pre-Israelites celebrated the first grain harvest and births of the first lambs, but Pesach has become the most important festival and the one to be celebrated by Jews around the world.

Ostara, the Spring Equinox 21st March – Pagan Festival

Tony McNeile

Ostara is the celebration of the vernal equinox, March 21st, one of the eight festivals of the pagan year. The theme is 'Balance' because there is balance between night and day, light and darkness. It is the first day of spring when the plans and activities of Imbolc, the earlier festival held on February 2nd. become a reality.

Ostara is a German Goddess of fertility who is associated with the moon. When the moon is full at this time of year, you can see the outline of her sacred hare. Ostara was often depicted as the body of a woman with the head and shoulders of a hare. The hare was viewed as a mystical creature that was reborn every morning and this was a sign of immortality.

The egg too is associated with Ostara. It is the symbol of new life emerging from existing life. So too is a seed which is recognised as the future generation that has come from the past.

The spring equinox was celebrated in pagan cultures with decorated eggs, dancing and leaping across a fire into a new future. In my childhood we always had coloured eggs for our Easter morning breakfast and also looked forward to receiving a chocolate Easter Egg.

At my grandfather's house in the country we could go on expeditions in the countryside around sunset or in the early morning hoping to see one of those march hares darting about or perhaps two of them having a boxing match.

At the Ostara meeting of our Earth Spirit group, the programme will include a meditation on achieving a balanced way of thinking and living and a craft activity, usually decorating eggs or making symbols of

the goddess. We go home with our Easter Egg and a packet of wild flower seeds.

Comments -

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

Please send your comments to the editor:

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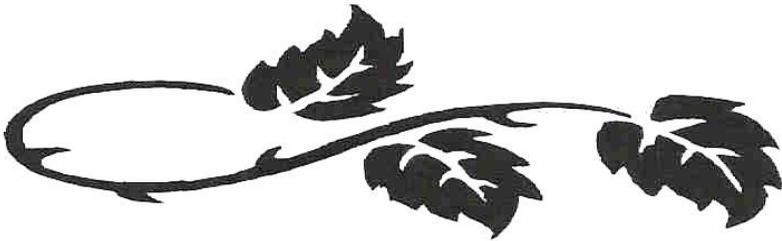
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