

Acts 12:4 - Passover and Easter

By: Brian Tegar

Acts 12:4 (KJV) "And when he had apprehended him, he put *him* in prison, and delivered *him* to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people."

Acts 12:4 (NKJV) "So when he had arrested him, he put *him* in prison, and delivered *him* to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover."

The presence of "Easter" in Acts 12:4 in the KJV is perhaps the best-known and most-discussed "translation error" in KJV-only discussions. Mountains of articles and commentaries have been written on this single word, whether the Greek word "pascha" should be translated as "Easter" or "Passover" in this verse. It is my goal in writing this article to not simply reiterate what is amply found elsewhere, but to provide a fresh perspective by slicing through the rhetoric and simplifying the issue by providing some brief history, clear definitions from scripture and often-ignored facts.

Early English Bibles

In the late-14th century, when Wycliffe translated the first English New Testament, the English word "Passover" did not even exist yet! In the 29 places¹ "pascha" occurs in the New Testament, Wycliffe used "pask" or "pask" - a modified version of "pascha" (following the Latin Vulgate word "pascha" which is essentially identical to the Greek word). In Tyndale's 1535 translation, most instances appear as "ester" - the three exceptions are Matt 26:17 (which has "paschall" lamb but is called the "ester" lamb just two verses later), Mark 14:12 ("pascall" lamb and "ester" lamb in the same verse), and John 18:28 ("paschall" lamb). Tyndale translated the NT before translating the OT, and although the church in general at that time (and prior) thought of the Jewish "Passover" and the Christian "Easter" as basically synonyms, Tyndale invented a new English word "Passover" when translating the OT, since "Easter" was somewhat of an anachronism since Christ's crucifixion and resurrection hadn't occurred until the NT. After Tyndale's translation, English translations began using "Passover" more and "Easter" less although it was still common to think of them as referring to the same time. For example, the 1539 Great Bible has "Easter" 15 times, and the 1568 Bishops' Bible (of which the KJV is a revision) only has "Easter" twice (John 11:55 and here in Acts 12:4).



William Tyndale solemnly demonstrates his new "wrist support" invention, more commonly known as a "book".

Side note: Luther's German Bible ("the word of God in German" according to many KJV-only supporters) has "Oster" (Easter) and related words in all places, with the exception of Heb 11:28 ("Passa"). Conversely, the Reina-Valera ("the word of God in Spanish") has "Pascua" (Passover) in all 29 places (including Acts 12:4), *as well as* in Luke 23:54, John 19:31 and John 19:42.

It is my position that "Easter" in Acts 12:4 in the KJV is *not* an error, if understood that from the early church until relatively recently "Passover" and "Easter" were basically synonyms and used interchangeably. The event referred to in Acts 12:4 is the Jewish week-long feast of unleavened bread (not the Christian commemoration of Christ's resurrection, nor a pagan festival), and to refer to it as "Easter" was common, even though it is no longer so. Where I *do* think that great error exists is in the KJV-only arguments as to why "Easter" is correct while "Passover" is wrong. Let's look at some of those arguments, comparing to what scripture says:

Basic Definitions vs. KJV-only Arguments

Most people know "Passover" is a Jewish feast associated with when the angel of the Lord "passed over" the houses of the captive Jews in Egypt (Exodus 12), but many people are fuzzy or confused on the details, so we'll start with a basic, Biblical definition of "Passover".

Lev 23:5-6 (KJV) "In the fourteenth *day* of the first month at even *is* the LORD'S passover. [6] And on the fifteenth day of the same month *is* the feast of unleavened bread unto the LORD: seven days ye must eat unleavened bread."

Num 28:16-17 (KJV) "And in the fourteenth day of the first month *is* the passover of the LORD. [17] And in the fifteenth day of this month *is* the feast: seven days shall unleavened bread be eaten."

2 Chron 35:17 (KJV) "And the children of Israel that were present kept the passover at that time, and the feast of unleavened bread seven days."

Looking at those verses, it seems pretty clear that "Passover" is the 14th, and the "Feast of Unleavened Bread" starts on the 15th and lasts for 7 days (until the 21st):

14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Passover	Feast of Unleavened Bread						

Many KJV-only authors and supporters then argue that since Passover precedes the Feast of Unleavened Bread, then when Herod took Peter (Acts 12:3) right before or during the "days of unleavened bread", then Herod could not have been waiting for "Passover" since it was already past, and thus the correct translation cannot be "Passover" but instead must be "Easter" (and understood a pagan holiday, not the Christian commemoration of Christ's resurrection)³.

KJV-only supporters who use the above line of argumentation need to do a little more study. There are two serious flaws in their thinking. First, they have forgotten that although for non-Jews days start and end at midnight, for Jews **days start and end at sundown**. This is crucial! Yes, the 14th is "the Passover" because that's when the Passover Lamb is sacrificed, but it is not until **later that night** that the Passover Feast (the eating of the lamb)

takes place - in other words, **the Passover *Sacrifice* is at the end of the 14th while the Passover *Feast* is on the beginning of the 15th:**

Exodus 12:8 (KJV) "And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter herbs they shall eat it."

Deut 16:6b-7 (KJV) "there thou shalt sacrifice the passover at even, at the going down of the sun, at the season that thou camest forth out of Egypt. [7] And thou shalt roast and eat *it* in the place which the LORD thy God shall choose: and thou shalt turn in the morning, and go unto thy tents." (the sacrifice takes place as the sun is going down (the afternoon, as the day is ending), then it is roasted and eaten later in the evening (when the new day has started))

As such, we now see there are at least *two* days associated with "Passover" in scripture. The 14th (the "Day of Preparation") when the Passover Lamb is sacrificed, and the 15th when it is eaten. Both appear to be the same "day" to us (for we think of days as ending Midnight), but on the Jewish calendar, it is two different days: the preparation/sacrifice day and the feast day.

14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Day of Preparation	Feast of Unleavened Bread						
Passover lamb prepared (killed)	Passover lamb eaten (feast)						

The black/white patten in the top row indicates time of day, the center of the black being midnight and the center of the white being noon.

The second flaw in the above KJV-only line of argumentation flows from the first. Because of forgetting that to the Jews, a "day" starts and ends at sundown, it is erroneously believed that the feast happens on the same day as the sacrifice and thus it is then claimed that "Passover" can only refer to the 14th and cannot be applied to the entire time in general⁴ - *for if could be shown that the entire week could also be referred to as "Passover", their arguments fall flat.* Since we see from the above information that the Passover **Feast** happens on the 15th, and the "**Feast** of Unleavened Bread" is on the 15th, it becomes clear that these "two" feast are one in the same! The Passover Feast is the feast on the 15th, and starts the week-long "feast" of eating unleavened bread. Does scripture confirm this, by ever using the term "Passover" to apply to the "Feast of Unleavened Bread"? It sure does!

Eze 45:21 (KJV) "In the first month, in the fourteenth day of the month, ye shall have the passover, a feast of seven days; unleavened bread shall be eaten."

Luke 22:1 (KJV) "Now the feast of unleavened bread drew nigh, which is called the Passover."

We now see that "Passover" can mean only the day of the 14th, the event of sacrificing and eating spanning the 14th and 15th, or even the entire week of unleavened bread which starts with the sacrifice and meal. So when we read in Acts 12:4 that Herod captured Peter during the "days of unleavened bread" and wanted to wait until after "pascha" to deal with him (to please the Jews, by not having a man killed during the week-long holiday), we see that translating "pascha" as "Passover" is correct, and the KJV-only arguments as to why "Passover" is wrong are based on faulty premises and misunderstanding of both Scripture and the Jewish calendar.

About Astarte/Ishtar

In my main comments above, I explained why "Passover" is a correct translation "pascha" in Acts 12:4. However, I did not address the common secondary argument common in KJV-only discussions of this verse. I will briefly address it here:

"Easter comes from the ancient pagan festival of Astarte/Ishtar, and Herod as a pagan was waiting for that event."

There are several problems with this argument:

- First, the idea that Easter is derived from Astarte/Ishtar⁵ seems to come first- or second-hand 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 claim⁶. 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.⁷, 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"⁸ (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).
- Second, there is not a shred of evidence that Herod was waiting for *any* pagan festival - it is **pure, unsupported speculation** in an attempt to make "Passover" into a bad translation. Instead, the passage tells us that Herod took Peter because "it pleased the Jews" - I think waiting for a *pagan* festival would have the opposite effect, as would killing Peter during the Holy week of *Passover*. For that matter, so would waiting to observe the Christian commemoration of Christ's resurrection.
- Third, to the KJV translators, "Easter" was not a pagan holiday, but a Christian one. They observed Easter and many of the calendar charts in the front of a 1611 KJV are based on Easter⁹. If "Easter" is a pagan holiday, the KJV translators were pagan.
- Forth, the 1828 Webster's dictionary, which many KJV-only supporters claim is the dictionary to use to define words in the KJV, gives the definition of "Easter" as "A festival of the christian church observed in commemoration of our Savior's resurrection. It answers to the pascha or passover of the Hebrews, and most nations still give it this name, pascha, pask, paque."

Footnotes

¹ The 29 instances are in Matt 26:2,17,18,19, Mark 14:1,12(twice),14,16, Luke 2:41, Luke 22:1,7,8,11,13,15, John 2:13,23, John 6:4, John 11:55(twice), John 12:1, John 13:1, John 18:28,39, John 19:14, Acts 12:4, 1 Cor 5:7 and Heb 11:28.

² Wycliffe's and Tyndale's translations, as well as many other translations, can be searched and read in their original spelling at <http://www.studylight.org>

³ For example, see Jack Moorman's booklet *Conies, Brass & Easter* where he says "Therefore, as the passover had already been observed, and the days of unleavened bread were in progress, and yet Herod was still waiting for "after pascha"; we can only conclude that the word must be taken in a broader sense. History in fact does indicate a pagan and Christian interchange with the word through the translation "Easter."" Similarly, in *The Answer Book*, Samuel Gipp states "The passover (April 14th) had already come and gone. Herod could not possibly have been referring to the passover in his statement concerning Easter. The next Passover was a year away! But the pagan holiday of Easter was just a few days away."

⁴ For example, Moorman says "The argument that the translation "Passover" should have been used as it is intended to refer to the entire period, is ruled out by the inclusion of "these were the days of unleavened bread." Scripture does not use the word "Passover" to refer to the entire period." Likewise, Gipp says "It must also be noted that whenever the passover is mentioned in the New Testament, the reference is always to the meal, to be eaten on the night of April 14th not the entire week. The days of unleavened bread are NEVER referred to as the Passover."

⁵ "Astarte" is the Greek name of the Babylonian "Ishtar", goddess of fertility, sexual love, and war. In Hebrew, her name is "Asherah" (Judges 3:7, 1 Kings 14:23, 2 Chron 34:7 and dozens of others, translated "groves" in the KJV).

⁶ Even KJV-only supporter Scott Jones, in his article [Easter or Passover?](#) previously reached this same conclusion, and says Hislop's claim that Astart is the origin of Easter is "an assertion that neither he nor anybody else has ever provided a SHRED of evidence for". However, Jones' unusual conclusion is that "Easter" is correct and "Passover" is wrong because the "Authorised Version proclaims the "NEW pascha" in a post-resurrection context in Acts 12:4. Yea, the Authorised Version proclaims the *RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST*.", but doesn't provide a scintilla of an explanation why pagan Herod would be waiting for this "new pascha" of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Perhaps his confusion stems from his claim that "In summary, the English word **Easter** means - and has **always** meant - *RESURRECTION* - specifically, the *RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST*", when in fact we have dozens of examples of "Easter" being the word to refer to the Jewish Passover, both before and after Christ's resurrection. There are several other problems with Jones' article, but addressing each one here is beyond the scope of this article.

⁷ Hislop wrote of "Easter": "That festival agreed originally with the time of the Jewish Passover, when Christ was crucified, a period which, in the days of Tertullian, at the end of the second century, was believed to have been the 23rd of March. That festival was not idolatrous, and it was preceded by no Lent. "It ought to be known," said Cassianus, the monk of Marseilles, writing in the fifth century, and contrasting the primitive Church with the Church in his day, "that the observance of the forty days had no existence, so long as the perfection of that primitive Church remained inviolate." Whence, then, came this observance? The forty days' abstinence of Lent was directly borrowed from the worshippers of the Babylonian goddess."

⁸ The Venerable Bede, an 8th century Christian monk and scholar who produced some of the only Old English fragmentary translations of scripture, wrote (translated from Latin) "Eostur-month, which is now interpreted as the paschal month, was formerly named after the goddess Eostre, and has given its name to the festival."

⁹ For example, see [this link](#)

