

Easter, Eostre or Ishtar?

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Did you know that Easter Sunday always falls on the Sunday after the first full moon of the northern hemisphere spring? This full moon is known as the paschal moon and also marks Pesach, the Hebrew name for Passover. Because Jesus was crucified on a Friday and resurrected the following Sunday during the eight day Jewish holiday of Passover (the first eight days after the first full moon of spring) Christians take the paschal moon, the equinox and the Julian calendar to fix the date of Easter, which varies from year to year. Good Friday this year falls on the 21st March and Easter Sunday on the 23rd. The 2008 paschal full moon is on Easter Saturday in the sign of Libra.

The Catholic Encyclopaedia tells us that Easter is named after an Anglo-Saxon goddess, Eostre, goddess of the dawn, but in fact the real origins of Easter and its story of death and resurrection date back much further.

In 3000 BCE, Inanna the Sumerian goddess was worshipped throughout the Mesopotamian world (modern day Iraq) as the main deity. The Akkadians called her Ishtar, the word from which Easter is derived. Inanna-Ishtar's closest western equivalents are the Greek and Roman goddesses, Aphrodite and Venus. Inanna-Ishtar was worshipped as the Queen of Heaven and her principal symbols were the Moon and Venus, the morning and evening star. Eight was the number sacred to Venus, being the number of years it took the planet to return to the exact same point in the zodiac on the exact same date and the goddess was often depicted as an eight pointed star.

One of the most important myths about Inanna-Ishtar is the Sumerian story of 'Inanna's Descent to the Underworld'. According to the myth, the goddess plans to visit the underworld ruled by her dark sister Ereshkigal. After dressing in jewels and fine clothing, Inanna descends and is met by Ereshkigal's servant, who at each of the seven gates to the underworld removes one of her garments. Finally she approaches her sister naked and humiliated. An angry Ereshkigal orders that she be killed and hangs her body on a peg to rot. After three days Inanna's servant becomes worried by her absence and fashions little creatures who descend unseen to the underworld with materials to breathe life back into the goddess. They resurrect her and she reascends to heaven.

There are many variations on this myth, but its importance lies in the theme of death and rebirth. At the time of the new moon, the moon (Inanna) disappears from sight for three days as she conjuncts the Sun and is then revealed again. Similarly, the planet Venus (Inanna) disappears from sight when moving from being the Morning Star (rising before the Sun) to the Evening Star (setting after the Sun). On a physical level Inanna's rebirth heralds the coming of spring (remember these myths are set in the Northern hemisphere where Easter is in spring). On a psychological level, Inanna's descent to meet her dark sister Ereshkigal represents the encounter with our shadow side or unconscious. When we return to the light after a period of darkness, we have the opportunity to become whole. This same theme is reflected in the tarot card of the Hanged Man who voluntarily hangs upside down in an act of sacrifice as a prelude to death and transformation.

Note the similarities between the Inanna-Ishtar myth and the story of Jesus. As Ishtar descended, she was stripped and humiliated; Jesus was stripped, beaten and humbled. Ishtar was killed and hung on a stake; Jesus was hung on a cross. Ishtar was resurrected after three days; Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. Both achieved eternal life. Easter is in fact the same story as Ishtar.

For many of us festivals such as Easter and Christmas have lost their original meaning and simply become holidays or times of conspicuous consumption. We do not realise that in celebrating Easter, we are participating in an age-old ritual celebrating the return to the light after a period of darkness and death.