



Easter & Passover: Comparing the Holidays

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It's that time of year again which means spring is on its way and many will be celebrating either Easter or Passover. It's easy to be confused about the holidays, especially when pop culture has slipped non-religious elements in. But fear not. Today I'll be breaking down Easter, which is celebrated by Catholics and Passover, which is celebrated by Hebrews, so you're never confused again.

Easter is defined as the most important and oldest festival of the Catholic Church. It celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ and is held (in the Western Church) between March 21 and April 25, on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the northern spring equinox. Many believe Christmas is the most important holiday to Catholics because it signifies the birth of Jesus. However, his death and resurrection have more meaning. Catholics believe Jesus died on the cross to absolve them from their sins. On the third day he was resurrected from the dead. This day is commonly celebrated as Easter Sunday.

The Easter bunny actually has nothing to do with Catholicism though it should be noted that rabbits are prolific procreators and an ancient symbol of fertility and new life. When German immigrants settled in America in the 1700s, they brought over an egg laying hare. Their children made nests for the hare to lay its eggs, which you can probably guess, were colored eggs.

Eventually, the custom spread across the U.S. and expanded to include chocolate and candy gifts from the Easter bunny, often in colored plastic eggs, and decorated baskets.

As Catholics prepare for Easter, they participate in something called “lent” for 40 days. Lent is a period of fasting in which most give up something they enjoy, or add something spiritual in. You could give up chocolate or French fries. You can also add in something for Christ, like going to weekly mass or praying more. There is a loophole, not everyone follows and/or knows about. Technically, you can eat what you’ve given up on Sundays after you’ve gone to mass. During this 40 day period, meat cannot be eaten on Friday as Jesus died on Friday. Jesus fasted in the desert for 40 days and was tempted by Satan during this time. 40 also signifies the 40 years the Israelites spent wandering after the Exodus of Egypt, aka when Moses freed them from slavery in Egypt.

Passover is defined as the major Jewish spring festival which commemorates the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, lasting seven or eight days from the 15th day of Nisan. It is one of the most sacred holidays in the Jewish religion. This weeklong festival is filled with traditions designed to remember the painful and triumphant history of the Israelites. Before we get into that, to understand exactly what “Passover” means, let’s go back in time.

For many years, the Israelites or the Hebrews (Jewish people) were enslaved by the Egyptians. A particularly ruthless pharaoh ordered the drowning of every Israelite’s firstborn son. One of these infants, Moses, is rescued by the pharaoh’s daughter and raised in royalty. Once he becomes an adult, he’s made aware of his true identity as an Israelite. He escapes to the Sinai Peninsula to live a humble life as a shepherd for 40 years until he receives a command from God to return to Egypt and set his people free.

Moses informs the pharaoh of God's plan and he refuses to peacefully let the Hebrews go. God then unleashes 10 plagues on the Egyptians and sends an avenging angel to kill the firstborn son of the Egyptians. The Hebrews are instructed to mark the doorframes of their homes with lamb's blood so that the angel of death will recognize and "pass over" each Jewish household. After the slaves are freed, they spend 40 years wandering before reaching their ancestral home of Canaan.

One important tradition during Passover is to eat matzo, a flatbread, instead of regular leavened bread. When the Hebrews quickly fled from Egypt, there was no time for their bread to rise. It's also possible they chose matzo because it was lighter, and easier to carry through the desert. Point is, as the Jewish people celebrate Passover, one of the first orders of business is to remove all leavened food products from their home.

Next tradition is the Seder meal, which I have participated in. This occurs on the first two nights of Passover. The story of exodus from Egypt is read aloud with foods that are significant of the exodus story. For example, bitter herbs symbolize the unpleasant years of slavery and vegetables dipped in salt water represent the tears the Jews shed during slavery. From my experience, the meal is deeply enriching and spiritual but the food was not too appetizing.

For whatever you celebrate or don't, I hope you're no longer confused.

Resources:

<https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/Passover>

<https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-lent-700774>

<https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/easter-symbols>