

## **PURIM: FEAST OF LOTS**

### **Origins**

Purim is the annual celebration commemorating the deliverance of the Jewish People of the Persian empire from the possibility of extermination which arose at the strategizing of Haman, grand vizier of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes).

Purim means literally “lots.” This name was derived from the fact Haman cast lots to select the most appropriate day for the execution of his plan. The word PURU means “lot” or “destiny” and is of Akkadian origin.

Mordecai sturdily refused the legislative decree to bow to Haman (who instigated the decree originally) who then to soothe his ruffled pride sought as vengeance the extermination of the Jewish People. Haman lied to the king insisting that the Jewish People ignored the king’s laws (3:8) in his attempt to obtain the king’s consent to massacre every Jew in the Persian Empire.

In the providence of God the Queen happened to be Jewish, though it was not previously a widely known fact. Her name was Esther and she was a cousin to Mordecai who had so boldly resisted homage to man. The name Esther probably comes for Istar (star). Her Hebrew name was Hadassah.

The ironic story of how Haman was hanged on his own gallows and the Jewish People were spared catastrophic slaughter is fully expounded in the Book of Esther which is wholly read and heard at the Purim celebration.

The origin of the Feast of Purim is not religious, that is, it was not held in the honour of Israel’s God. It was not connected with Israel’s national origins and had no counterpart in the Temple cult. It seems the origins of the feast are non-Jewish and only later obtained Jewish significance. But in general, Purim’s origins are obscure. Many

suggestions connecting Purim practice with Babylonian and Persian feasts with similar stories and customs have been made but again the recounting of these would not be important to the purpose of this dissertation.

There is much disputing as to the authenticity of the Book of Esther and numerous reasons are given for rejecting the story as genuinely historical. It is not our desire to critically analyze the Book of Esther but simply relate the biblical record of its origins though it is probable some custom was borrowed from heathen counterparts.

### *Historical Development*

Schauss holds that all the Purim customs are more ancient than the Purim story.

Purim, then, has no religious observances or ceremonies. Instead, it has many folk customs associated with it. Practically all the customs of Purim originated when it was still a heathen observance, a nature festival, before it became the festival of Jewish deliverance. The Book of Esther is newer than any of the Purim customs.<sup>1</sup>

The custom of exchanging gifts and sending food delicacies known as *shelach-monos* originated when Ezra read the Torah to the Jewish People in Jerusalem. He made it a joyous occasion and the people feasted and exchanged gifts and foods.

The custom of fasting on the day before Purim spread only after the Talmud was compiled. The first occasion of its recorded practice is found in the Eighth Century though undoubtedly the custom dates further into antiquity.

Presently only the oriental Jews practice the ancient Jewish custom of burning Haman in effigy. This custom was common among the ancient pagans and was later borrowed by Judaism and attached to Haman, Christian opposition ultimately forced Western Jews to abandon the practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Hayyim Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1938), p. 264.

As far back as the fifth century the charge was made against the Jews that they burned a cross and a figure of Jesus on Purim. This slander often led to attacks upon the Jews by their Christian neighbors. In time, under the pressure of the Christians, the custom disappeared in Christian lands.<sup>2</sup>

Whenever Jewish People have experienced persecution and deliverance, Purim has taken on a fresh new significance to them. One example is the Egyptian Purim.

A very noted local Purim is the one of Egypt, which is already more than four hundred years old. It occurred in the year 1524. The governor of Egypt, a rebellious despot, at that time rose up against his sovereign, Sultan Suleiman II. The Jews remained faithful to the sultan and the governor imprisoned many of the Jewish leaders of the Cairo community and announced that he would massacre all the Jews on a certain day. On that very day an uprising against the governor broke out and, in the end, he was the one who lost his head. This happened on the twenty-eighth day of Adar and the Jews of Egypt, since then, have observed that day as a Purim, during which they read a book, specially prepared, telling how they were saved.<sup>3</sup>

Josephus (Antiquities XI vi, 13) in the first century stated that Purim was celebrated on the Fourteenth and Fifteenth of Adar. According to rabbinical writings, the Purim ritual is described as follows:

The feast was preceded by a day's fasting, on the 13<sup>th</sup> Adar: in the evening, lamps were lit in all the houses, and everyone went to the synagogue again, to listen to the reading to the book of Esther: while the story was being read, the congregation would interrupt with curses against Aman and the wicked in general and the meeting closed with a solemn blessing of Mordochai, of Esther and of the Israelites. Apart from this reading, the feast was an occasion for the distribution of presents and of alms, and pious persons made their gifts with a religious intention; but otherwise, it was an utterly profane feast, taken up with banquets and amusements, and considerable liberty was allowed. The Rabbis allowed that anyone could go on drinking until he could no longer tell the difference between 'cursed by Aman!' and 'Blessed by Mordochai!' later, the custom of putting on disguises was introduced and the feast of Purim became the Jewish carnival.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Schauss, p. 268.

<sup>3</sup> Schauss, p. 255.

<sup>4</sup> Roland de Vaus, Ancient Israel, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), p. 515.

## *Contemporary Celebration*

### In the Home and Synagogue

The Sabbath before Purim is filled with the festival atmosphere. After noon the rabbi gives a sermon relative to Purim and interprets anew some passage in Samuel or Esther.

The day before Purim is the thirteenth of Adar—the Fast of Esther. Very few people actually fast this day except the Persian Jews. The women this day bake hamantaschen (three-cornered fruit filled cakes) and Kreplach (three-cornered pastry filled with meat). Schauss points out the significance of these two Purim delicacies:

In time the interpretation arose that the three-cornered cakes are eaten because Haman wore a three-cornered hat when he became prime-minister of Ahasuerus. The three corners were also interpreted as a symbolic sign of the three patriarchs, whose merit aided the Jews against Haman.<sup>5</sup>

Kreplach are eaten, it is said, whenever beating is done: the day before Yom Kippur, when men have themselves flogged; Hoshana Robboh, when willow branches are beaten, and Purim when Haman is beaten.<sup>6</sup>

After the evening prayers, families sit down together for the Purim feast. Especially large and decorative hallahs are placed on the table. Eating and drinking is merry.

In the later evening the entire family travels to the synagogue dressed in festive weekday, or masquerade clothing and the well-lit synagogue fills with Jewish people. During the evening when the Scroll of Esther is read, noisemakers (groggers) are

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<sup>5</sup> Schauss, p. 270.

<sup>6</sup> Schauss, p. 270.

wielded, feet are stomped, booing is loud, and so forth in accompaniment of the sounding of Haman's name.

It is an occasion of revelry and fun. It is customary to contribute three coins on Purim in honor of the half-shekel given annually to the Temple in ancient days.

No ritual has been developed to give Purim a holy day atmosphere or spiritual exaltation excepting the ancient Purim benedictions, which accompany the reading of the Book of Esther. They are as follows:

*Before reading the Book of Esther the following Blessings are said:*

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who hast hallowed us by thy commandments, and hast given us command concerning the reading of the Megillah.

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who wrought wonderful deliverance for our fathers in days of old, at this season.

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who hast kept us in life, and hast preserved us, and enabled us to reach this season.

*After reading the Book of Esther, say:*

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who dost contend for us, judge our cause, and avenge our wrong, who renderest retribution to our mortal enemies, and on our behalf dealest out punishment to our adversaries. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who on behalf of thy people Israel dealest out punishment to all their adversaries, O God, the Savior.

*The following paragraph is omitted after the reading of the Book of Esther in the morning:*

Who broughtest of the counsel of the heathen to nought, and madest the devices of the crafty of none effect, when a wicked man, an arrogant offshoot of the seed of Amalek rose up against us. Insolent in his riches, he digged himself a pit, and his own greatness laid him a snare. In his mind he thought to entrap, but was himself entrapped; he sought to destroy, but was speedily destroyed. Haman displayed the hatred of his fathers, and stirred up ancient enmity against the children, remembering not the mercy of Saul, through whose compassion for Agag the adversary was born. The wicked plotted to cut off the just, and the unclean was

caught in the hands of the pure. (Mordecai's) lovingkindness (to Esther) prevailed, but the wicked (Haman) heaped sin upon sins. In his heart he hid his cunning devices, and sold himself to do wickedness. He stretched forth his hand against God's saints; he gave his silver to cut off the remembrance of them. When Mordecai saw the wrath had gone forth, and that the decrees of Haman were issued in Shushan, he put on sackcloth and wrapped himself in mourning, ordained a fast and sat upon ashes. Who will rise up to atone for error, and obtain pardon for the sin and iniquity of our father? A flower blossometh from the palm tree, lo! Hadassah arose to awaken the merit of those that slept in the grave. Her servants hastened to make Haman drink the wine of death. He rose by his riches, but fell in his wickedness; he made him a gallows, and was himself hanged thereon. All the inhabitants of the world were amazed when the lot that Haman had cast for our destruction was turned in our favor. When the righteous was delivered out of the hand of the wicked, and the enemy was put in his stead, the Jews ordained for themselves to celebrate Purim, and to rejoice thereon every year. Thou didst regard the prayer of Mordecai and Esther: Haman and his sons thou didst hang upon the gallows.

The Jews of Shushan rejoiced and were glad when they all of them saw Mordecai in the purple. Thou hast ever been Israel's salvation, and their hope in every generation, to make known that all who hope in thee shall not be ashamed, neither shall any be confounded who put their trust in thee. Accursed be Haman who sought to destroy me; blessed be Mordecai the Jew, accursed be Zeresh, the wife of him that terrified me; blessed be Esther my protectress, and may Harboah also be remembered for good.

As the Book of Esther is recited, the children impatiently wait for the sounding of Haman's name. When it is heard, terrible tumult and deafening outbreak mock his unrighteous name. Usually the elderly are angered by all the ruckus—but no one pays them any attention on Purim. The next morning the service is repeated but things are a little quieter.

The custom of beating Haman is described as follows:

... Beating Haman is a very old custom We know that in the Middle Ages Jews would write the name of Haman or draw his likeness on two slabs of stone and then beat and run them together till the likeness or the name was entirely rubbed out. It was also a custom at one time to

write the name of Haman on the soles of one's shoes and to stamp hard every time Haman's name was mentioned.<sup>7</sup>

Schauss explains the why of such a custom originally.

The beating and noise of Purim originally had nothing to do with Haman; it comes from ancient times, when Purim was still a nature festival, bound up with the passing of winter and the approach of spring. It is an ancient belief with people that at the time when the seasons change the evil spirits have great power and strive to do mischief to all. One of the surest safeguards against these spirits was noise. The beating and noisemaking of Purim originally had the same significance, as the noisemaking on New Year's Eve at present. It was only later, when Purim attained historic significance and was bound up with the Book of Esther, that the beating was interpreted as the beating of Haman.<sup>8</sup>

The only thing that can really be considered religious about the Purim celebration is the reading of the Book of Esther. The Hallel is not chanted. Not even the kindling of the lights accompanies Purim's festivities.

Basically the Book of Esther has no "religious" content and does not have the effect of encouraging religious piety upon its readers. The Book of Esther which calls for all to celebrate Purim does not suggest any accompanying religious ceremony. The Book of Esther merely calls for observing the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar with festivity and revelry, with giving to charity and the exchange of gifts.

The Torah reading for Purim is Exodus 17:8-16 in which the war against Amalek, the traditionally held ancestor of Haman, is recorded.

After the following morning's services, hamantaschen are served for breakfast. The later luncheon consists of soup and kreplach. Business around town goes on as usual but everyone is in a festive mood. People sip liquor throughout the day and snack on Purim delicacies. General feasting of family and friends is enjoyed. The afternoon

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<sup>7</sup> Schauss, p. 264.

<sup>8</sup> Schauss, pp. 265-266.

synagogue service is conducted early so that the balance of the afternoon can be spent in festivity.

Neighbors and friends bring all their delicacies and drinks to one house, and all feast together. Wine and brandy flow like water. The men put on impromptu masquerades, wearing their coats inside out, and carrying brooms in their hands. They sing Purim songs in Hebrew and Spanish (The Sephardim) and they dance and revel far into the night.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Schauss, p. 257.

## **The Significance of Purim To the Messianic Believer In New Testament Light**

Briefly then, Purim is a happy feast commemorating the deliverance of the Jewish People from Haman's miserable hope of genocide. Admittedly the character of this holiday varies considerably from other feasts and festivals.

It nevertheless does have a message for the Messianic believers. Satan has tried over and over again to thwart the eternal plan of God by attempting to annihilate either individuals or peoples. Although on numerous occasions the results have been catastrophic in human terms, God's program cannot be defeated or altered.

We recall the early attempt on Moses' life, the efforts to destroy both David and annul the promise of God to him and his seed forever, the many endeavors to destroy the prophetic spokesmen of God, etcetera.

There have been numerous attempts to finally resolve the "Jewish problem" by totally eliminating Jewish People from among the living. Haman tried it. Even a generation ago a very serious attempt at genocide was repeated. Such is the catastrophic history of the Chosen ones of God.

But God has another people as well—the Church of Jesus the Messiah. On untold occasions Christian martyrs have met their earthly end as certain enemies of God would destroy them. Many times throughout Church history persecution has not only raged against leading Christian spokesmen for God but against large segments of the Church in general. There have been tremendous slaughterings of martyrs throughout Church history.

The believer understands that yet another very serious time of persecution will rage against both Israel and the Church. The Church shall have many martyrs slain by the one called anti-christ. But the believer can rejoice because he knows eventual and complete victory over Satan and his cohorts is forthcoming. The power of Satan will be taken away and he shall be cast into the bottomless pit. His own lust for power and destructive affliction toward others will completely backfire.

The Messiah Jesus shall rule and reign upon the earth and His Church shall reign with Him. Israel as a nation shall be exalted and finally fulfill her role as a light to the nations enjoying the peace and righteousness of God she has forever craved (see Isaiah 2:2-4 and 11:1-16).

#### *Additional Recommendations for Church Celebration*

If one is desiring to celebrate Purim in the traditional manner (although undoubtedly without the liquor), the pastor will need to explain the noise-making etcetera surrounding the name of Haman during the recitation of the Book of Esther.

Since Purim is such an occasion of revelry, perhaps a skit with various actors playing out the different characters of the Purim story would be fun. This requires little practice and the participants could even read their parts out of the Scripture. The noisemaking becomes especially funny in this kind of situation.

As a means to assuring a good attendance, an emphasis on the masquerading could be made especially for the children during the announcements in preceding weeks. The atmosphere for the celebration should be colorful and generate a very happy feeling.

Undoubtedly an accompanying sermon could not be shared during the height of festivities but should on this holiday wait until the conclusion of the celebration. A

historical sermon bringing in stories of Christian martyrs and times of serious persecution as well as the assurance of ultimate victory for Christ and all those who trust him could be very effective if properly prepared. An emphasis could be placed on prophetic events illustrating the final Messianic victory over evil.

Congregants should again prepare Purim delicacies for a later time of refreshments and fellowship. Purim could well be the best remembered event of the Church year.