

A Summarization of Purim Traditions

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The holiday of *Purim* is a relatively minor festival in the Tanach (Old Testament), yet it portrays a very important story that all of God's people need to understand. Having been dispersed into Babylonian exile in 585 B.C.E., the Jewish people now find themselves under Persian rule. While many find their new Persian rulers more tolerant than the Babylonians, the Jews are still a minority and often find themselves subject to harassment and persecution. In the Book of Esther, King Ahasuerus' (or Xerxes') grand vizier, the evil Haman, devises a plot to kill the Jews when he is not worshipped by Mordecai. But Ahasuerus' new wife, the Jewess Esther, is placed in just the right position at just the right time to see that this scheme does not come to pass. Instead, Haman is executed using the very means that he intended to use against the Jews.

As can be imagined, a great sense of relief engulfed the Jewish people in Persia when Haman's plans were thwarted. God's people were preserved from mass genocide. Esther 9:20-28 summarizes how the festival of *Purim* was instituted by Mordecai to celebrate the Jews' deliverance from Haman:

"Then Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, obliging them to celebrate the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same month, annually, because on those days the Jews rid themselves of their enemies, and *it was a month* which was turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and rejoicing and sending portions of *food* to one another and gifts to the poor. Thus the Jews undertook what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. For

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Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the adversary of all the Jews, had schemed against the Jews to destroy them and had cast Pur, that is the lot, to disturb them and destroy them. But when it came to the king's attention, he commanded by letter that his wicked scheme which he had devised against the Jews, should return on his own head and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. Therefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur. And because of the instructions in this letter, both what they had seen in this regard and what had happened to them, the Jews established and made a custom for themselves and for their descendants and for all those who allied themselves with them, so that they would not fail to celebrate these two days according to their regulation and according to their appointed time annually. **So these days were to be remembered and celebrated throughout every generation, every family, every province and every city; and these days of Purim were not to fail from among the Jews, or their memory fade from their descendants**" (NASU).

Concerning the observance of *Purim*, Esther 9:22 is most significant: "They were to observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor" (NJPS). *Purim* was to be a time of rejoicing and doing good to one another, as God's faithfulness was revealed to the Jewish people through the actions of His followers. Even though "God" or "the Lord" is not mentioned specifically in the Book of Esther, one undoubtedly sees Him work through individuals who are committed to Him.¹

The Formation of Purim

The term *Purim* is actually derived from the Semitic (probably Akkadian) term *pur*,² meaning "lot." It denotes the lots cast by Haman to determine when the mass execution of the Jews in Persia was to occur, as Esther 3:7 indicates, "In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, **Pur, that is the lot**, was cast before Haman from day to day and from month *to month*, until the twelfth month, that is the month Adar" (NASU), with the 13th of Adar chosen as the date to enact the executions (Esther 3:13). The 14th of Adar occurring immediately thereafter is designated as the day to commemorate *Purim*, although on leap years it is celebrated in the month of II Adar. *Purim* will often fall in either late February or early March on the Gregorian calendar. Although one would think that commemorating *Purim* and the almost destruction of one's people would be

¹ It is notable that God is specifically mentioned in the Apocryphal Additions to the Book of Esther, seen in the Greek Septuagint.

² Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 2:920.

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something negative, the Talmud explains, “when Adar comes, rejoicing increases” (b.*Ta’anit* 29a).³

In the Apocrypha *Purim* is called “Mordecai’s day” (2 Maccabees 15:36, RSV), indicating that it was being celebrated as an important festivity several centuries before the ministry of Yeshua the Messiah. Traditionally, *Purim* is to be a time when the Jewish community believes that a person’s joy is to increase. The tractate *Megillah* in the Mishnah details the celebration of *Purim* and some of the critical lessons it is to teach. In Jewish tradition, *Purim*, while a minor festival, is remembered to reach the Jewish people of the historical protection of God upon them.⁴ It is customary that *Purim* not fall on the Sabbath.

Assorted Customs of Purim

The main feature of *Purim* by far is the study of the Book of Esther. Some Jewish Rabbis such as Moses Maimonides afforded Esther a place in the Hebrew canon second only to the Torah. The study of Esther during *Purim* is frequently done with a special *megillah* scroll in Hebrew. Of particular interest to *Purim* is that it calls members of the Jewish community to remember the trials that they have faced and God’s faithfulness through those trials, especially the ones encountered in the Diaspora. Haman beguiled King Ahasuerus with the word, “There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom” (Esther 3:8, NASU), and this has caused many Jews to think of themselves and the additional places they have been scattered throughout history, the many despots who have wanted to destroy them, and for certain the inevitable ability of God to see that the Jewish people are not, in fact, annihilated.

Jewish theology has always considered *Purim* important because it typifies the salvation history of God, where He interjects Himself into the world of mortals and is able to act on their behalf, providing deliverance. Consequently, many Christian theologians have valued the themes of the Book of Esther, and how we see God performing these actions through normal human vessels who are called by Him and empowered by His Spirit.

A major feature of *Purim*, detailed in Esther 9:22, is the encouragement for one to give to the poor. This is partially because when one has experienced God’s deliverance, he or she should then be grateful to provide out of His abundance for those who have little or nothing. Varied Jewish

³ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

⁴ Louis Jacobs, “Purim,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. MS Windows 9x. Brooklyn: Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd, 1997.

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traditions include the giving of certain kinds of foods based on specific interpretations of the themes of *Purim*.

The centerpiece of the modern observance of *Purim* is what was originally known as the *Purim-spiel*. This custom arose in Ashkenazic Jewish communities in Europe to give a performance for one's family or community to remember the story of Esther. Over time, however, this has developed into a very elaborate "*Purim play*" or dramatic presentation, often with young girls in the community dressing up with fancy gowns and makeup in honor of Queen Esther.

Today, there are some who surmise that under the influence of the Italian Carnival in the Middle Ages, the *Purim* play came about. What is led to, more than anything else, was men dressing up as female characters, and women dressing up as male characters.⁵ In this kind of *Purim* reenactment, the gender roles may have been reversed for the play to add a comic element, with men dressing up as Queen Vashti and Esther, and women dressing up as King Ahasuerus and Haman. This is, notably, not something that we often see in *Purim* reenactments today, as mostly children are those who play the characters with the gender roles intact.

Traditional Foods

Eating is undoubtedly a major part of celebrating *Purim*, with a variety of traditional foods. One of the most common centerpieces of *Purim* are *Hamantashen* or Haman hat cookies. These are pastry cookies usually filled with fruit. Frequently, this is one of the foods that is made for and given to poor people for *Purim*.

During *Purim*, some Jewish communities observe vegetarian meals, due to the belief that Esther and Mordecai were vegetarian and did not eat from the Persian table. However, most Jews today disregard this custom.

There is some notable controversy surrounding a Rabbi Rava's teaching in the Talmud that one should get so drunk on *Purim* that he cannot tell the difference between Mordecai or Haman when their names are spoken during the reading of Esther (b. *Megillah* 7b). Following this example has led some to believe that *Purim* is not a time of seriousness, when one recalls the salvation history of God, but instead that it is a holiday of frivolity and lewdness. Thankfully, there are Jewish teachers who have led by an example of encouraging *Purim* to not be a time of drunkenness, but instead sober severity and piety (and even fasting).

When we celebrate *Purim* as Messianic Believers today, we have an opportunity to pause for a moment and consider how our Heavenly Father has worked, and continues to work, through human beings who are faithful to

⁵ Jacobs, "Purim," in *EJ*.

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Him. We get to consider that if Esther and Mordecai had not stopped Haman's rampage, that the hope of our Messiah Yeshua entering into the world through the Jewish people would not be realized. While *Purim* gives us a time to have fun with one another, it should be through that humor and irony when God is able to communicate to us in a unique way, and we recall the miracles that He has performed for us—not just in ancient times, *but also today!*