JESUS CELEBRATED PURIM

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Purim is one of the most festive and joyous holidays on the Jewish calendar. The book of Esther commands that it be celebrated on the 14th and 15th days of Adar (February or March) and was to be a time of “feasting and joy, of sending presents to one another and gifts to the poor” (Esther 9:22). This holiday commemorates the victory of the Jewish people over their enemies that tried to slaughter them as a result of the decree by the Persian Prime Minister, Haman, in the book of Esther. Today the Jewish people still celebrate this festival and remember the past anti-Semitic individuals who tried to exterminate them as well as the present ones.

Hitler and Purim

Adolph Hitler knew about this holiday and its significance in Jewish history. In 1941, Hitler banned the Jewish community in Poland from the observance of Purim. They were forbidden to read the Scroll of Esther and the synagogues were closed on that day (Goodman 1980:374).

On January 30, 1944, Hitler addressed the German people on the occasion of the 11th anniversary of the Nazi party coming to power. In this anti-Semitic diatribe, he blamed all the ills of Europe and Germany on “international Jewry” (his words). He went on to predict that if the Russians defeated Germany then “Jewry could then celebrate the destruction of Europe by a second triumphant Purim festival.” (New York Times, Jan. 31, 1944, p. 5) Fortunately, just over a year later, Hitler committed suicide and the Nazi regime came to an end.

The story is told of Hitler giving one of his fiery speeches in the large hall in Munich early in his rise to power. In this oration he called for the destruction of the Jewish people. In the front row sat a man, who on occasion, would make faces and laugh at the Fuhrer. After the meeting Hitler inquired as to who this man was and why he made faces and laughed at him. The man explained that he was Jewish and said to Hitler, “You should be aware that you are not the first antisemite who sought to destroy us. You may recall that the great Pharaoh of Egypt sought to enslave the Jews. To commemorate his defeat and our redemption, we eat tasty Mazot and observe the festival of Passover. Haman was another enemy of ours who brought about his own downfall. The delicious Hamantashen we eat and the jolly festival of Purim recall our deliverance from him. While listening to your venomous diatribe, I wondered what kind of delicacy would the Jews invent and what kind of holiday would be established to celebrate your downfall” (Goodman 1980:384,385).

In an ironic twist, Hitler attempted to carry out his diabolical plan to exterminate the Jewish people. Today, however, the Jewish people do not celebrate the downfall of Hitler, but rather, they commemorate the tragic event of the Holocaust by remembering the six million Jews who were slaughtered in the concentration camps of Europe. This memorial day is called Yom HaShoah and is observed on the 27th of Nisan. Some Jewish people even fast on this day.

Hitler also saw evangelical Christians as a threat to his scheme of world conquest and had plans to eliminate them as well. Recently released documents show his plans to “subvert and destroy German Christianity” (New York Times, January 13, 2002, p. 7).

The Celebration of Purim

On Purim, a Jewish person goes to the synagogue for the reading of the Megillah, the scroll of Esther (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 1a). The first year I studied in Israel, I had a class in Biblical Hebrew. In the spring semester we were translating the book of Esther. One of our class assignments was to visit a synagogue for the reading of the Megillah at Purim. What an experience that was! When the cantor came to the name Mordecai, the protagonist in the story, the people shouted, “Blessed be Mordecai.” When the name Haman, the antagonist, was read, everybody stomped their feet on the floor, made noise with their noisemakers called groggers, and shouted, “Cursed be Haman.”

I did not participate in another Purim custom. The rabbis say that a man should “mellow himself [with wine] on Purim until he cannot tell the difference between ‘cursed be Haman’ and ‘blessed be Mordecai’” (BT Megillah 7b). In other words, this was the only day they were permitted to get drunk!

Children, and even adults, get dressed up in costumes and have a Purim party or parade. Usually the costumes are of the Biblical characters such as Esther, Mordecai, Ahasuerus or Haman. Today people will dress up or wear masks of modern day anti-Semitic people who would like to exterminate the Jewish people, such as Yasser Arafat, Osama bin Laden, or Saddam Hussein. This holiday is sort of like a Jewish Halloween and New Years all rolled into one, but without the occultic overtones.

Jesus and Purim

Most people are unaware of this, but Jesus celebrated the feast of Purim! In John 5, the Lord Jesus is up in Jerusalem for an unnamed feast. Scholars have debated whether the feast was Passover, Purim, Succoth or even Pentecost (Bowman 1971). Some have objected to Purim because it is a “minor” feast and not one of the three “major” pilgrimage festivals (Deut. 16:16). That argument is irrelevant because Jesus also celebrated another “minor” holiday, Hanukkah (John 10:22; Franz 1998:25,26). Chronologically, the only feast that makes sense is Purim in AD 28. The feast of John 5 fell on a Sabbath (5:9). The only feast day to fall on a Sabbath between AD 25 and AD 35 was Purim of AD 28 (Faulstich 1986). The Spirit of God intentionally left out the name of the feast because the Lord’s name was
Did Jesus get dressed up in a Purim costume? Did He dress like Mordecai or Ahasuerus? Or perhaps a "modern day" Haman like Herod the Great, Archelaus, Pontius Pilate or some other contemporary anti-Semite? I do not know if He did. Did Jesus get drunk? No, even though He was accused of being a "winebibber" (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34). Did He eat the "Haman's ears"? I do not know. But He did observe the commandment to give gifts to the poor. I'm sure He also attended the reading of the Scroll of Esther in one of the 480 synagogues of Jerusalem (PT Megillah 3:1; BT Megillah 5b; Fine 1996:9). Did He stomp His feet and say, "Blessed be Mordecai" or "Cursed be Haman" when their respective names were read? I do not know. Yet I'm sure He contemplated the message of the book of Esther. The theme of the book is this: "God's preservation of His unbelieving people, and the celebration of that event in the feast of Purim" (Shepperson 1975:26).

The Theme of the Book of Esther

This theme is crucial for understanding the book of Esther and why John included this "sign" in his gospel. This theme explains why the Name of God is not mentioned in the book and why prayer is never mentioned. Also why Mordecai is still in Susa on the 13th of Nisan when he should have been back in Jerusalem for Passover on the 14th (Esther 3:12; Lev. 23:5; Deut. 16:16). It also addresses why there is a "lack of spiritual awareness in Esther and Mordecai, and the vengeful spirit so apparent at the end of the book" (Shepperson 1975:25).

Esther and Mordecai were out of the will of God and in unbelief. The expression of faith for an Israelite (Mordecai was from the tribe of Benjamin, Esther 2:5) was for them to "Flee the Chaldeans" (Isa. 48:20,21; 55:7-12; Deut. 28:64-67) and return to Zion when Cyrus made the decree for the people to return to Zion (Ezra 1:1-4). Yet a large number of Israelites and Judeans chose to remain outside the Land of Israel, in Babylon and Susa, rather than return to Zion and the hardships that existed there. When a person is out of God's will, the last Person they want to talk about is the Lord. Thus the Name of God is not mentioned. Sometimes a person in unbelief or out of the will of God will perform religious rituals, just as the Jewish people did in Susa. They fulfilled their religious ritual by fasting for three days, but they did not pray to Him who should have been the LORD their God (Esther 4:16,17; cf. Isa. 58:1-7). They were still part of God's covenant people, but they were in unbelief.

The Lord used Mordecai and Esther, outside Eretz Israel in unbelief, in order to preserve the Messianic line that had already returned to the Yehud Province in faith during the First Aliyah (return). The Messianic line returned in the person of Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; Matt. 1:12,13 or Luke 3:27). Haman's decree to annihilate all the Jews affected the Jews living in the land of Judah (Esther 3:12,13; 4:3; 8:5,9,13). This was God's hand of providence at work.

Another example of God's providence using an unbeliever to fulfill His purposes is the decree by Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1-4). This decree moved Joseph and Mary from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judah in order to fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5:2. "But you, Bethlehem Ephratha, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."

Jesus at the Pool of Bethesda

The Lord Jesus took advantage of the Feast of Purim to teach His disciples about Himself and to fulfill the commandment to give gifts to the poor.

John tells us that by the Sheep Pools is a place called Bethesda. The word "Bethesda" is made up of two Hebrew words, "beit" and "hesed", meaning "house of mercy." The two words give the distinct impression that there was a "house" or temple where merciful acts were carried out. Archaeological excavations in the area of the St. Anne's Church north of the Temple Mount have demonstrated that there was a healing shrine to the Greek god of healing, Asclepius (Jeremias 1966; Benoit 1968:48-57; Wilkinson 1978:95-97; Franz 1989).

In the shadows of this shrine, there was a sick man who had been lying on his bed for thirty-eight years. The Lord Jesus approached him and asked, "Do you want to be made well" (John 5:6)? The man responded in the affirmative but he added that he had nobody to place him into the pool when the water was stirred up (5:7). The Lord Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk" (5:8). The man accepted the gift and he was healed instantly.

The Significance of this "Sign"

Why does John include this sign in his gospel? John tells us why he wrote his gospel. "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (20:30,31). John's two-fold purpose is to present the deity of the Lord Jesus and the condition for salvation, faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

In the account in John 5, there is a confrontation between deities. Who really is God? Is it Asclepius or the Lord Jesus Christ? The Lord Jesus won this confrontation "hands down". He did not need a shrine to heal this man. He did not need an "angel" (probably a demonic being, Matt. 25:41; II Cor. 11:13-15; Rev. 19:20) or the superstition of the "stirring of the water" (John 5:4). All He did was speak the word and the man was healed.
When Mordecai found out about Haman's decree to annihilate all the Jews (Esther 3:12,13; 4:3), he forced Esther to go into the courts of Ahasuerus to plead for her people. Up until this point in the story, Esther had not revealed to Ahasuerus that she was Jewish (Esther 7:3,4). Mordecai had instructed her to keep this a secret (Esther 2:10,20). Mordecai blackmailed her by saying, "Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this" (Esther 4:13,14)? What Mordecai is saying is this, "Esther, if you do not go in and plead with the king, I will rat on you and tell him you are Jewish. You would be included in Hanan's decree. If you are silent, we will deliver ourselves some other way, perhaps by relying on some pagan deity or our own resources." Esther suggested a religious ritual, fasting for three days, and then gave her fatalistic statement, "If I perish, I perish" (4:16)! There is no expression of trust in the LORD in either Mordecai or Esther's statements.

The sick man that was lying at the "House of Mercy" was hoping for a cure from Asclepius, but not the LORD. Likewise, Mordecai and Esther were relying on other means for deliverance, but not the LORD.

The Significance of the "thirty-eight years"

Why does the Lord Jesus go into this pagan shrine and pick out one man to heal? Why doesn't He just heal everybody? I believe that Jesus selected this man because He was using him as an object lesson.

The Lord Jesus, in John's gospel, refers to the Wilderness Wanderings several times. In John 3 He refers to the serpent in the Wilderness (3:14-16; cf. Num. 21:9). In His conversation with Nicodemus He likens Himself to the serpent in the Wilderness. As the Israelites looked at the serpent and lived, so any individual who looks to the Lord Jesus in faith has eternal life. In John 6 He refers to the manna in the Wilderness (6:31-40; cf. Ex. 16:15; Num. 11:7; I Cor. 10:3). In this passage He likens Himself to the manna as bread come down from heaven. At the end of His discussion with the religious leaders, the Lord Jesus said that Moses wrote of Him (John 5:45-47).

Using my "sanctified imagination" I would like to think that Jesus explained the significance of this miracle this fashion. The number thirty-eight is used only one other place, by implication, in the Scriptures. The children of Israel wandered for forty years in the Wilderness. It took them two years to go from Egypt to Kadesh Barnea. At Kadesh Barnea, Moses sent twelve spies into the Land of Canaan. When they came back, they all gave an accurate report of what the Land of Canaan was like. However, ten of them said it was impossible to take the Land. The other two, Joshua and Caleb, said "God has given this Land to us, let's go in and take it" (Num. 12 and 13). The Israelites looked at the major report and God said, by implication, "Because of your unbelief, you will wander for thirty-eight more years" (Num. 14:29,30). They were to wander in the Wilderness for a total of forty years, one year for each day the spies were in the Land (Num. 14:33,34). However, at this point in their wanderings, they had already been in the Wilderness for two years (Num. 10:11). They had thirty-eight more years to go. In Hebrews 4:19 it says that that generation did not enter into the Land because of unbelief!

The over-riding theme of the gospel of John is faith and unbelief. Over 90 times John uses the word "believe" or "faith" to describe the condition for salvation. John selects certain miracles and shows the reaction of the people. Do they trust the Lord Jesus or reject Him? This is clearly demonstrated in John 11 after the Lord Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Many Jewish people believed on the Lord Jesus, but the religious establishment sought to kill Him (John 11:45-53).

In the account in John 5, the sick man was a picture of the nation of Israel. They had a decision to make. Would they trust the Lord Jesus as their Messiah, or reject Him? This man trusted the Lord Jesus and he was healed and his sins were forgiven (John 5:14). The religious leaders, on the other hand, rebuked the man for carrying his bed on the Sabbath (John 5:10). They were so caught up in the ritual of Sabbath keeping that they could not rejoice with this man when the Lord healed him. Remember Mordecai and Esther's ritual of fasting?

The Lord Jesus pointed out to the man that he had the infirmity because of sin in his life, and warned him that a worst thing would come upon him if he continued in his ways (5:14). Judah had gone into the Babylonian captivity because of sins (II Chron. 36:14-21; Lev. 26:33-35).

In the conversation the Lord Jesus had with the religious leaders after He healed the infirm man, He says "I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me" (5:43a). Mordecai and Esther did not receive the Father so they did not mention His name in the book of Esther. However, in the thirteenth century AD, Rabbi Bahya ben Asher discovered the name YHWH hidden in the book in acrostic form in Esther 5:4. Each letter of the LORD's name begins the first letter of each word. The Hebrew says, "Yavoh Ha-melekh V'ha-man Ha-yom" ("Let the king and Haman come today"). There are at least three other places in the book of Esther where the LORD's name appears in acrostic form (Esther 1:20; 5:13; 7:7; Fox 1990: 184). Like Mordecai and Esther, the religious leaders did not accept the Father's name.

God's Purim Gift to Us
On Purim, Jewish people are commanded to give gifts to the poor. The Lord Jesus gave this poor sick man the gift of physical health and presumably eternal life. What great Purim presents to receive!

Several months earlier, the Lord Jesus had a conversation with a Samaritan woman by a well near Sychar. In this conversation He describes the “gift of God” as “everlasting life” (John 4:10,14). The Lord Jesus offered the man at Bethesda healing shrine more than the gift of physical health; He also offered him eternal life.

Each individual who has ever lived, or will ever live, is a poor sinner before a Holy God. The Bible says that the “wages of sin in death [separation from God for all eternity in Hell], but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). The gift that God gives to poor sinners is not limited to just Purim, but is offered “24-7”, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, every week of the year, from the eternity past to eternity future. The only thing a person has to do, in fact, the only thing a person can do is to trust the Lord Jesus Christ as the One who died for their sins and rose again from the dead. There is no righteous deeds, good works, or rituals that we can do to please a Holy God, the only thing that does is faith in His Son, the Lord Jesus (Isa. 64:6; Hab. 2:4; Rom. 5:15-18; Eph. 2:8,9).

God, in love, sent His Son to die on the Cross to pay for all our sins and offers us His righteousness, by faith in His Son, so we can stand before a Holy God forgiven of all our sins (John 3:16; Rom. 5:6-8; Phil. 3:9).

The Apostle Paul spoke about giving in another context. In it he said, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (II Cor. 8:9). He goes on to describe the Lord Jesus as an "indescribable gift" (II Cor. 9:15). Have you accepted God's Purim gift to you, His Beloved Son? It is the most important decision you will ever make. Trust Him today.

Bibliography


