

MESSIANIC

SPRING HOLIDAY HELPER

MESSIANIC

SPRING HOLIDAY HELPER

edited by Margaret McKee Huey



Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

© 2010 Messianic Apologetics
edited by Margaret McKee Huey
2012 printing
first edition © 2004
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission from the author(s).

Cover photos: Istockphoto

Published by Messianic Apologetics, a division of Outreach Israel Ministries
P.O. Box 850845
Richardson, Texas 75085
(407) 933-2002

www.outreachisrael.net
www.messianicapologetics.net

originally produced by TNN Press 2010 in Kissimmee, Florida

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, The Lockman Foundation.

Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the Apocrypha are from the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV), © 1952, Division of Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

“The Message of...” chapters employ primary Scripture quotations from the *New International Version* (NIV), © 1984, published by International Bible Society.

The Liturgical Resources section employs primary Scripture quotations from the *English Standard Version* (ESV), © 2001, published by Crossway Bibles.

Table of Contents

Introduction	ix
1 A Summarization of Purim Traditions.....	1
<i>by Margaret McKee Huey and J.K. McKee</i>	
2 The Message of Esther.....	5
<i>by J.K. McKee</i>	
3 A Summarization of Passover Traditions	13
<i>by Margaret McKee Huey and J.K. McKee</i>	
4 Passover: A Sign to Remember.....	23
<i>by Mark Huey</i>	
5 The Restoration of Passover.....	33
<i>by Mark Huey</i>	
6 The Message of Exodus.....	39
<i>by J.K. McKee</i>	
7 The Song of Moses and God’s Mission for His People	53
<i>by J.K. McKee</i>	
8 “Everyone Is Wrong But Me!”.....	67
<i>by J.K. McKee</i>	
9 The Last Seder and Yeshua’s Passover Chronology	71
<i>by J.K. McKee</i>	
10 Some Features of the Ancient Passover Seder	139
11 What is the Problem With Easter?	143
<i>by J.K. McKee</i>	
12 Passover: Paradox or Outreach?	153
<i>by Mark Huey</i>	
13 Celebrating Passover Today	161
<i>by Margaret McKee Huey</i>	
14 A Summarization of Shavuot Traditions.....	167
<i>by Margaret McKee Huey and J.K. McKee</i>	
15 The Message of Ruth.....	173
<i>by J.K. McKee</i>	
16 The Gospel According to Torah: It Happened at Shavuot!	177
<i>by Margaret McKee Huey</i>	

17 The Work of the Holy Spirit: Perfection of the Heart.....	187
<i>by J.K. McKee</i>	
18 The Work of the Holy Spirit: Perfection of the Mind	197
<i>by J.K. McKee</i>	
FAQs on the Spring Holiday Season	209
KOSHER YOUR PLATE	245
Purim	247
Passover.....	248
Shavuot	252
LITURGICAL RESOURCES.....	255
The Role of Liturgy	257
Using these Liturgies.....	259
Liturgical Resources for the Spring Appointed Times.....	259
Before and After the Reading of the Megillah of Esther.....	261
A Passover Haggadah for Messianic Believers	265
Hallel for Passover.....	301
Counting the Omer to Shavuot.....	305
Hallel for Shavuot	309
About the Editor.....	313
Bibliography	317

Abbreviation Chart and Special Terms

The following is a chart of abbreviations for reference works and special terms that are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as *TWOT* for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

Special terms that may be used have been provided in this chart:

ABD: <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>	HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)
AMC: <i>Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament</i>	Heb: Hebrew
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)	HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament	ICC: <i>International Critical Commentary</i>
Ara: Aramaic	IDB: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)	IDBSup: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement</i>
b. Babylonian Talmud (<i>Talmud Bavli</i>)	ISBE: <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.	IVPBBC: <i>IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)</i>
BDAG: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)	Jastrow: <i>Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature</i> (Marcus Jastrow)
BDB: <i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>	JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)
BECNT: <i>Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament</i>	JETS: <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
BKCNT: <i>Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament</i>	KJV: King James Version
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.	Lattimore: The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore (1996)
CEV: Contemporary English Version (1995)	LITV: <i>Litral Translation of the Holy Bible</i> by Jay P. Green (1986)
CGEDNT: <i>Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words</i> (Barclay M. Newman)	LS: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (Liddell & Scott)
CHALOT: <i>Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>	LXE: <i>Septuagint with Apocrypha</i> by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)	LXX: Septuagint
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition	m. Mishnah
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls	MT: Masoretic Text
ECB: <i>Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible</i>	NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
EDB: <i>Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible</i>	NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
eisegesis: "reading meaning into," or interjecting a preconceived or foreign meaning into a Biblical text	NBCR: <i>New Bible Commentary: Revised</i>
EJ: <i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>	NEB: New English Bible (1970)
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)	Nelson: <i>Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words</i>
exegesis: "drawing meaning out of," or the process of trying to understand what a Biblical text means on its own	NETS: New English Translation of the Septuagint (2007)
EXP: <i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>	NIB: <i>New Interpreter's Bible</i>
Ger: German	NIGTC: <i>New International Greek Testament Commentary</i>
GNT: Greek New Testament	NICNT: <i>New International Commentary on the New Testament</i>
Grk: Greek	NIDB: <i>New International Dictionary of the Bible</i>
<i>halachah</i> : lit. "the way to walk," how the Torah is lived out in an individual's life or faith community	NIV: New International Version (1984)
HALOT: <i>Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Koehler and Baumgartner)	NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)
	NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)

NKJV: New King James Version (1982)
NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)
NLT: New Living Translation (1996)
NT: New Testament
orthopraxy: lit. "the right action," how the Bible or one's theology is lived out in the world
OT: Old Testament
PreachC: *The Preacher's Commentary*
REB: Revised English Bible (1989)
RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)
t. Tosefta
Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament
Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*
TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*

TEV: Today's English Version (1976)
TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)
TNTC: *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*
UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition
v(s). verse(s)
Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*
Vul: Latin Vulgate
WBC: *Word Biblical Commentary*
Yid: Yiddish
YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)

Introduction

“These are the appointed times of the LORD, holy convocations which you shall proclaim at the times appointed for them. In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight is the LORD’s Passover. Then on the fifteenth day of the same month there is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the LORD; for seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall not do any laborious work. But for seven days you shall present an offering by fire to the LORD. On the seventh day is a holy convocation; you shall not do any laborious work. Then the LORD spoke to Moses saying, ‘Speak to the sons of Israel, and say to them, “When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. And he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord for you to be accepted; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it...It is to be a perpetual statue throughout your generations in all your dwelling places”” (Leviticus 23:4-11, 14b).

One of the most exciting things that is happening in this present season of spiritual renewal, as the Messianic movement grows and expands, is the restoration of the appointed times of the Lord for *all* of His people! His festivals are being recognized by Believers all around the world to be special seasons in which all who follow the God of Israel should actively participate! It is wonderful to hear the reports of how the Father is restoring the truths found in being obedient to His Instruction, as we observe and remember our Hebraic heritage, and consider His plan of salvation history in a very real and tangible way.

Perhaps the most recognizable of the appointed times of the Lord, given to us in the Torah, occur in the Spring. Anyone who is familiar with the Bible’s account of redemption knows about the Exodus and the giving of the Ten Commandments. The plagues dispensed upon Ancient Egypt, and God’s deliverance of the Israelites via the Passover lamb and through the Red Sea, are paralleled in the Apostolic Scriptures by the sacrifice of Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) at Golgotha (Calvary), and the final atonement that He has provided—vindicated by His resurrection from the dead. In the past twenty years, evangelical Christians have been exposed to the Passover *seder* in significant numbers, and are embracing it as a very meaningful and significant part of their faith. This has helped to expand the growth of the Messianic movement, perhaps more than anything else—as **born again Believers really want to learn to do something that Jesus did!**

To help you and your family during this special season, we have included a variety of important articles on how to deal with your participation in the Spring holidays. We have included articles on Passover, the Festival of Unleavened Bread, what to do about Easter, and *Shavuot* or Pentecost. Many of these teachings come from our Virtual Spring Holiday series from over the past few years. These articles address the importance of remembering both the Exodus and the resurrection of Yeshua, and how you can properly commemorate these events with your family, focusing on the truths of the Scriptures. We have a practical guide that includes kosher recipes and a Haggadah for Passover, which you can adapt for your family or

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

congregation. And as an added bonus, we have included articles on the often overlooked holiday of *Purim*, which precedes the Passover season by a month. Common issues and controversies that can arise during the Spring holiday season—both externally *and* internally—are also addressed, as fairly as possible.

Our family believes that the restoration of the Spring holidays is a blessing to us! We, who are to walk as Messiah Yeshua walked, must reach out to others in love at this time when the Father is restoring His appointed times to His people. Yeshua told us that others would know that we are His disciples by the love that we have for one another (John 13:35). We encourage you to love your family and friends in such a way concerning these feasts that they will be drawn to us, and not repelled. Invite your family and close friends to your home, **to join you** for your Passover *seder*, or to your Messianic congregation or fellowship for a real hands on, educational experience. As you purchase various kosher items for your Passover *seder*, you will likely encounter Jewish people who do not yet know Messiah Yeshua, and this will be a unique testimony to them of your obedience to the God of Israel.

Dear friends, it is only through our unconditional love for our Christian brethren that one day they will want to know what we know about walking like the Messiah. One day they will want to know why we have become thoroughly Messianic, and what they can learn from us. Likewise, only by Jewish people witnessing Messianics obeying the statutes of God's Torah, will they be provoked to considering the claims of the gospel, and recognize Yeshua as Israel's Messiah.

Let us rejoice in the true understanding that Yeshua not only actively participated in the Spring Feasts of the Lord, but that He was indeed the Passover Lamb Himself! Let us be a positive witness to all we encounter during the Spring holiday season.

Chag Sameach!
Margaret McKee Huey

A Summarization of Purim Traditions

Margaret McKee Huey and J.K. McKee

The holiday of *Purim* (פּוּרִים) 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 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

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

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.**"

Concerning the observance of *Purim*, v. 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* (פּוּרִים) is actually derived from the Semitic (probably Akkadian) term *pur* (פּוּר),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," 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 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), 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 us. In Jewish tradition, *Purim* "is a minor festival in that work on it is permitted, but it has been joyously celebrated in Jewish communities as a reminder of God's protection of His people" (*EJ*).⁴ It is customary that *Purim* not fall on the Sabbath.

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.

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.

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* (מִגִּילָה) 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), and this has caused many Jews to think of themselves and the additional places they have been scattered throughout history. Ronald L. Eisenberg remarks,

"All too frequently, Jews have faced a variety of Hamans, but in most instances (unlike in the *Megillah*) the conclusion of the story has not been happy. The triumph of the weak over the powerful recounted in the Book of Esther has been enormously uplifting to Jews throughout their long exile."⁵

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 likewise value 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 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. However, it is more likely that "Under the influence of the Italian carnival...men [were] permitted to dress as women and women as men" (*EJ*).⁶ This would primarily have included "masquerading."⁷ 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 see in *Purim* reenactments today, as mostly children are those who play the characters with the gender roles intact.

⁵ Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 255.

⁶ Jacobs, "Purim," in *EJ*.

⁷ Eisenberg, 258.

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

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 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!*

The Message of Esther

J.K. McKee

The Book of Esther is one of the most important books in the Bible. While Esther is commonly considered during the season of *Purim*, the specific concepts it communicates often go under-appreciated. Esther is much, much more than just cheering when the name “Mordecai” is mentioned or booing to “Haman” when the story is shared in the congregation, or dressing up and participating in a play. Esther gives us a snapshot of the Diaspora Jewish community following the fall of the Babylonian Empire, the complexities of the Jews having to live under Persian rule, the antiquity of anti-Semitism long preceding the time of Yeshua, the workings of God behind the scenes through normal people, and most especially how God uses women to accomplish His tasks. Esther also tells us what happens after God’s people are spared from certain doom, and how they are to protect themselves.

The story of Esther begins during the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus or Xerxes, who reigned between 486-465 B.C.E. While Bible readers most often know this king for the role he plays in the Book of Esther, history at large knows Xerxes as the Persian king who failed to conquer Greece.¹ The account of Esther opens up when Xerxes intends to display “the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty” for “a full 180 days” (Esther 1:4). In the midst of a great banquet he holds after the time of celebration (Esther 1:5-8), the intoxicated king intends to display his wife Vashti to those gathered. Nothing is stated in the Biblical text regarding why he asks of this—only saying that Xerxes wanted to “display her beauty” (Esther 1:11)—but one can only imagine a woman walking into a crowd of drunken men and what they were thinking, perhaps wanting to rip her clothes off (if she were not already nude). Vashti, as one can only expect, refuses the request of the king who “became furious and burned with anger” (Esther 1:12).

King Xerxes consults with his closest advisors, wanting to know what is to be done with his wife (Esther 1:14-15). They tell him that if something is not done, wives all over Persia and Media will imitate Queen Vashti, and there will be gross disrespect of husbands and men in general (Esther 1:17-18). They rule that Queen Vashti not be allowed into his presence again, and specifically that “the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she” (Esther 1:19). So

¹ Duane A. Garrett, ed., et. al., *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 716; note on Esther 1:1.

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

significant was this, that “He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in his own script and to each people in its own language, proclaiming in each people’s tongue that every man should be ruler over his own household” (Esther 1:22).

After this declaration and with his own anger subsided, King Xerxes is advised, “Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king” (Esther 2:2), and commissioners are sent to the provinces of the Persian Empire to search for a new queen. In the capital city of Susa, a Jewess named Hadassah, “also known as Esther, [who] was lovely in form and features” (Esther 2:7), had been taken by her older cousin Mordecai as a daughter. The search commences, and she was found to have all the right qualities and won the favor of the leader of the king’s harem. Leaving, Mordecai tells her not to reveal her Jewish heritage (Esther 2:10). We are told that Esther “had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women...And this is how she would go to the king” (Esther 2:12, 13). Esther was the one woman who “the king was attracted to...more than any of the other virgins” (Esther 2:17), being made queen.

As these events occur at the palace, Mordecai was sitting outside at the gate (Esther 2:19). Minding his own business, perhaps wondering what is going on inside, he overhears a conversation between two of the king’s officers. These two men, Bigthana and Teresh, “became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes” (Esther 2:21). Mordecai relays the news to Esther, who reports it to the king on his behalf (Esther 2:22). As a result, the two were executed and their bodies publicly displayed or “hanged” (Esther 2:23).

Following this we are introduced to Haman, one of the Persian nobles, and a man whom the author of Esther considers to be an Agagite.² King Xerxes honors Haman, yet “Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor” (Esther 3:2). Mordecai enraged Haman, who was promptly told that “he was a Jew” (Esther 3:4). “When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged” (Esther 3:5), and rather than wanting to just do damage to Mordecai or bring him harm, “Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai’s people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes” (Esther 3:6). The scheming Haman then goes before his king, and speaks the insidious words,

“There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of other people who do not obey the king’s laws; it is not in the king’s best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business” (Esther 3:8-9).

King Xerxes promptly gives Haman his signet ring in approval (Esther 3:10). Ironically enough, it was not the style of the Persians to exterminate people, as the Persians were widely known for their tolerant attitudes, unlike the Assyrians or Babylonians who had preceded them. Haman receiving Xerxes’ immediate approval is a testament to his ability to connive and manipulate with lies, some of the distinct qualities of (state) anti-Semitism seen throughout later history. We are told, “Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and little

² Agag was the deposed king of the Amalakites, whom King Saul let live (1 Samuel 15).

children...A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so that they would be ready for that day” (Esther 3:13-14).

Upon hearing about this genocidal plot against his people, Mordecai “tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly” (Esther 4:1). It is also recorded, “In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing” (Esther 4:3). Esther herself “was in great distress” (Esther 4:4). Mordecai relays what has happened to Esther via her servant, and how Haman was at the center of the plot to kill all the Jews in Persia. Mordecai “urge[d] her to go into the king’s presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people” (Esther 4:8).

Just going before the king of Persia was not an easy thing to do, even for his queen. Esther relays the message to Mordecai, “All the king’s officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life” (Esther 4:11). Esther knows the gravity of going before King Xerxes. Yet, Mordecai is sure that she is told: “if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. **And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?**” (Esther 4:14, emphasis mine). Mordecai is confident that the Jewish people will not be exterminated, but if Esther fails to act there will be a price to pay as her family will die. Esther asks Mordecai for the Jews in Susa to fast for her, as she contemplates what is to be done.

After three days, Esther “stood...in front of the king’s hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne...When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter” (Esther 5:1-2). Esther was indeed in the right place at the right time, and King Xerxes is so happy to see her, that he says, “What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you” (Esther 5:3). Rather than telling the king right then and there the problem her people were facing, she asks if she can hold a banquet for the king and Haman (Esther 5:5), and it is granted.

During this banquet, both King Xerxes and Haman are found drinking wine. The king once again asks Esther what her request is, and she asks them if they can have another banquet the following day (Esther 5:7). As he leaves, “Haman...went out in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king’s gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage. Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home” (Esther 5:9-10). When he arrived home, Haman “boasted...about his vast wealth” and specifically “all the ways the king had honored him and how he had elevated him above the other nobles and officials” (Esther 5:11). Even more interesting, Haman specifically says, “I’m the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave” (Esther 5:12). Yet this is followed by the perturbed remark, “all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king’s gate” (Esther 5:13). Haman’s wife asks that they build a structure³ up to seventy-five

³ In v. 14 Zeresh says “Have a gallows built,” yet the Hebrew source text reads *ya’asu etz* or “Let them prepare a tree” (YLT), or “wood.”

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

cubits high on which to display Mordecai's corpse. We are told: "This suggestion delighted Haman" (Esther 5:14, emphasis mine).

While Haman continues in his schemes to destroy the Jews, King Xerxes could not sleep. As a sure remedy, "he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bithgana and Teresh...who had conspired to assassinate him" (Esther 6:1-2). The king asks what kind of honor had been bestowed upon Mordecai for his act of preservation, and is told that nothing had yet been done (Esther 6:3-4). While this is happening, "Haman is standing in the court" (Esther 6:5), and upon entering the king asks him, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?" (Esther 6:6a). And as it is said, "Haman thought to himself, 'Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?'" (Esther 6:6b). Haman was so self-consumed that it was only natural that any reward dispensed by the leader of the Persian Empire could go to *him*. Haman tells the king,

"For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'" (Esther 6:7-9).

Perhaps thinking that he will be paraded around the city in the Fifth Century B.C.E equivalent of a ticker-tape parade, King Xerxes tells Haman, "Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended" (Esther 6:10). In a twist of complete irony, rather than having this honor done to *himself*, Haman must parade the man he hates with a passion—Mordecai—around the city on horseback. He has to proclaim to the city: "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!" (Esther 6:11). Humiliated, Haman rushes home and reports what has taken place (Esther 6:12). Haman's wife gives him some sound advice: "you cannot stand against [Mordecai]—you will surely come to ruin!" (Esther 6:13), and following this Haman is prepared to go to Esther's second banquet.

As King Xerxes "and Haman went to dine with Queen Esther...the king again asked, 'Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you?'" (Esther 7:1). With her husband and Haman right there, and with Haman likely unsure of what is going on, having had some wine, Esther is direct with her response:

"If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king" (Esther 7:3-4).

The king is naturally astonished, asking Esther, "Who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?" (Esther 7:5). Esther's answer is to the point: "The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman" (Esther 7:6).

Haman probably did not know what to do, and we can only imagine the kinds of bodily reactions he had when signaled out as the culprit against Esther and her people. Did he vomit? Did his stomach churn? Did he lose his voice or get a sudden headache? One thing is certain, as King Xerxes ran out of the banquet furious, "Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind

to beg Queen Esther for his life” (Esther 7:7b). Returning to address Haman, the king sees him in a prostrated position before Esther. All he has to say is, “Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?” (Esther 7:8b). Upon saying this, one of the king’s eunuchs informs him that a structure seventy-five cubits high has been built on which Mordecai’s corpse was supposed to be displayed (Esther 7:9). The king’s words are direct: “Hang him on it!” (Esther 7:10). And so “the king’s fury subsided” (Esther 7:10).

This is normally where the common *Purim* play ends the story—with the death of Haman. Yet the Book of Esther still has three more chapters, each of which tells us more about what happened. After Esther has just pleaded for her life, Mordecai is brought in before King Xerxes, is formally introduced, and is given Haman’s estate (Esther 8:1-2). Esther, having been saved, pleads for the lives of all the Jews throughout the Persian Empire (Esther 8:3-5), telling him “For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?” (Esther 8:6). Having just called for the death of Haman, the king is moved to make another ruling:

“Now write another decree in the king’s name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king’s signet ring—for no document written in the king’s name and sealed with his ring can be revoked” (Esther 8:8).

A new ruling in favor of the Jews was sent throughout the empire—“Mordecai’s orders to the Jews, and to the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush⁴” (Esther 8:9). Mordecai’s ruling was sent in the languages of all, with the direct approval and signet stamp of King Xerxes (Esther 8:9b-10). The Jews were given permission to defend themselves against any aggression, and a set date was given “so that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies” (Esther 8:13). Far be it from the Jewish people in the empire being the victims; they are now authorized to go and root out potential foes. As a consequence, the text tells us “many people of other nationalities became Jews⁵ because fear of the Jews had seized them” (Esther 8:17). Somehow, these people realized that the Jewish people were going to take the decree seriously, and whether or not they “converted,” they certainly did their best to *blend in*.

This edict was to be carried out on the 13th of Adar, and although “the enemies of the Jews...hoped to overpower them...the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them” (Esther 9:1). “The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those seeking their destruction. No one could stand against them, because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them” (Esther 9:2). In the day of the Jews’ vengeance, the administrators of Persia actually helped them because Mordecai had replaced Haman in Xerxes’ government (Esther 9:3-4)! “The Jews struck down all

⁴ Or, Ethiopia.

⁵ Heb. *yahad*.

The verb *yahad* is rendered with *Ioudaizō* in the Septuagint, employed in Paul’s rebuke of Peter in Galatians 2:14. Peter’s behavior in separating to the conservative Jews from Jerusalem, dividing the assembly in Antioch, would require the non-Jews to undergo ritual proselyte conversion in order for unity to be restored. Paul would have nothing of this, as unity and inclusion in the assembly are to be based on the work of Yeshua for all people.

For a further discussion, consult the article “The Message of Galatians” and the commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*, by J.K. McKee.

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those who hated them” (Esther 9:5), and we are specifically told that the ten sons of Haman met their death (Esther 9:6) and whose corpses were displayed (Esther 9:13-14). A great number of the Jews’ enemies were killed during this day.⁶

On the day following, the 14th of Adar, the Jewish people throughout the Persian Empire “rested and made it a day of feasting and joy” (Esther 9:17). The Jews had been saved from complete obliteration, and their enemies had been routed out. The people could now live in peace, wherever they were located, and could remember how Queen Esther was placed by God in the Persian court. This festival was to be “a day for giving presents to each other” (Esther 9:19), and was recorded for posterity by Mordecai (Esther 9:20). It was to be celebrated “annually...as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies” (Esther 9:22). It was called *Purim*, as Haman had “cast the *pur* (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction” (Esther 9:23). However, the Jews throughout the empire had been delivered, and were specifically admonished to remember this time of deliverance “every year...at the time appointed” (Esther 9:27).⁷ As it was decreed:

“These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never cease to be celebrated by the Jews, nor should the memory of them die out among their descendants” (Esther 9:28).

The Biblical text is very clear on the need to celebrate Purim *b'kol dor v'dor* or “in all generation and generation” (my translation). “Esther’s decree confirmed these regulations about Purim, and it was written down in the records” (Esther 9:32).

Mordecai is attested to have been alongside King Xerxes (Ahasuerus) in “all his acts of power and might,” and he is listed “in the book of the annals of the kings of Media and Persia” (Esther 10:2). He, as Jew who was once designated for execution, “was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews” (Esther 10:3).

The narrative of Esther when taken as a whole has much more to teach us than the common *Purim* play does it justice. Far be it from Esther being some kind of ironic comedy, the Book of Esther adroitly displays themes common to the human condition such as: love, oppression, goodness, evil, and justice for those who would harm others. While there is no direct mention of God in the account, one can certainly see how the Lord works through the various characters with the Jewish people in the end being saved from certain extinction. As Mordecai clearly told Esther, “perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis” (Esther 4:14, NJPS). You may have used this sort of expression before and did not know where it came from. Better yet, perhaps you have been in the right place at the right time, and have been able to be used by God for some kind of important service.

⁶ Esther 9:16 specifically says that seventy-five thousand were killed, but this could obviously be a rounded number. Furthermore, it is not improbable that being aided by the Persian government, the Persians themselves were responsible for eliminating the Jews’ enemies and any other criminal elements that plagued them.

⁷ Heb. *v'kizmanam b'kol shanah v'shanah*, “according to their season, in every year and year” (YLT).