

Purim and Christmas

Some believers claim that the Esther account of the Jewish institution of an annual feast to celebrate their deliverance from the evil machinations of Haman gives them the warrant to set up special events to celebrate Christmas.¹ I wish to probe this claim.

The Jews certainly experienced a most remarkable, sovereign deliverance by God from Haman's vile schemes, and, wishing to preserve a sense of perpetual gratitude to God in all following generations of Jews, they established an annual celebration of the event – Purim. This is beyond dispute. As the relevant passage in Esther tells us:

Mordecai recorded these things [that is, the deliverance] and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur (that is, cast lots), to crush and to destroy them. But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that 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 term Pur. Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days according

¹ See, for example, Alan Hill: 'The Feast of Purim and the Feast of Christmas' (*Evangelical Times*, 26th Nov. 2021).

to what was written and at the time appointed every year, that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan, province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring, with regard to their fasts and their lamenting. The command of Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing (Esth. 9:20-32).

God did not institute this annual feast of Purim; it was Mordecai's idea, and it was confirmed by Queen Esther. But God nowhere rebuked the Jews for what they did. And, of course, the whole episode is set out in Scripture. Naturally, therefore, it really does appear that the Jews were perfectly in order to set up this annual celebration feast of remembrance. And I can see how easy it is to move from that to say that believers can do something similar today. It seems but a little step from the Jewish institution and annual observance of Purim, to Christendom and the observance of Christmas.

But shouldn't we pause and ask a few questions before we jump? Even the world knows that we are well-advised to look before we leap, not leap then look. Alas, of course, as far as Christmas goes, Christendom long ago leapt in. Talk about spilt milk and bottles!

This leap from Purim to Christmas smacks – to me, at least – of the frequent mistake evangelicals make when they move blithely from the old to new covenant; namely, in their bland confidence, they either conveniently forget or ignore – or is it that they are ignorant of? – the plain, indisputable fact that because Christ has fulfilled the old covenant, rendered it obsolete, and brought in the

new,² there is a gaping discontinuity between the two Testaments. For whatever reason, this massive discontinuity often goes out of the window. Of course, I recognise that – in accordance with Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; 6:19; 9:1-18; 10:1-33; 14:20-22 and Hebrews, for instance – the new covenant does frequently draw on the old covenant to find spiritual instruction for believers, and it undoubtedly gives us warrant to do the same – *but it must be done with due care, and be properly nuanced.*³ I further note, that, in accordance with those passages just cited, this use of the old covenant is not so that believers can copy an old-covenant practice, or on that basis set up something new in the life of the *ekklēsia*. Indeed, as it seems to me at least, new-covenant references to the old covenant often wear the mantle of warnings, warnings as to what should be avoided by believers, warnings as to the consequences of disobedience to plain new-covenant instruction. The classic statement must be:

All Scripture⁴ is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

I am convinced that none of this should be treated lightly; it must not be brushed aside, ignored. What I am saying is this: when believers turn to the old covenant, they should always – always – keep firmly in mind this big – massive – picture of the change of covenants, and the consequences of the discontinuity thereby introduced. This, alas, is far from always being the case. And that’s putting it mildly! What’s more, the consequences of

² See many of my works, including *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law*; ‘A Disaster Averted: Romans 14:5-6’ on my sermonaudio.com page.

³ See, for instance, my ‘Separation Essential: No Mixture! Deut. 22:9-11’ on my sermonaudio.com page.

⁴ By the time Paul wrote this letter, some parts of what would become the New Testament were coming into use, but ‘all Scripture’ would still be mainly the Old Testament, primarily the Septuagint.

ignoring the covenant-discontinuity introduced by Christ are far from trivial.⁵

Incidentally, is it not significant that Christ promised that the Spirit would lead the apostles – not the Fathers, not the Christendom engineers, but the apostles – into all – not some, not most, but all – truth? He most certainly did:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you... The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you...

I break in to highlight Christ's promise, Christ's categorical assurance, by stressing his own specific, clear limit or condition: 'The Holy Spirit... will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you'. On the basis of Christ's words, is it not fair to say that whatever the apostles might later claim, whatever they might lay out as definitive truth, must have some connection – however tenuous, fleeting or flimsy (for fairness in argument, I am stretching this piece of elastic to breaking point) – with the plain teaching of the Master? 'All that I have said to you' certainly implies as much. Let me hasten to add – if it is not clear by what I have said – that I am persuaded that the condition is far more rigorous than I have allowed.

Christ went on:

When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will

⁵ As a case in point, look at the way the Reformed so-called 'threefold division of the law' allows them to play fast and loose with the old covenant to make it fit into their system of theology. And with devastating results. See my series *New-Covenant Articles* for examples. Again, those who sing only psalms must have some awkward moments – unless they take full account of the covenantal discontinuity (see, for instance, Ps. 18:20-24; 69:22-28; 109:6-15; 137:8-9; 139:19-22; 150:1-6).

bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning...

I break in again. Christ was not making a pedantic point about dates: 'You have been with me since 1st October', or whatever. Far from it. 'You have been with me from the start; you have seen, you have heard, you have witnessed every aspect of my ministry and teaching. Make sure what you teach, what you set up, bears unmistakable evidence of being strictly in line with what you have seen in me'. It cannot be denied that that is what Christ's words amount to. Here again we have a clear link between the teaching of the apostles and the teaching of Christ.

Christ continued:

I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 14:16-26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15).

I quite understand, of course, that if, like Roman Catholics, one believes that this means that the Church (however it may be defined) is here given warrant to develop truth in accordance with a claimed-revelation from the Spirit through popes, councils, moderators, bishops, pastors, committees, conferences, or whatever, then Christendom has been handed a blank cheque, made out to 'cash'. Which too often just about sums up the present state of affairs! But think! What happens when Church 'A' says the bread in the Lord's supper becomes the actual body of Christ, and Church 'B' says that it does not...? That's just one

example. Which Church are we talking about?⁶ And what do we do when a Church changes its mind?⁷

If, however, you are convinced that the cumulative weight of the above Scripture passages leaves no room for the slightest doubt, but that Christ promised that the apostles, by the Spirit, would deliver his final and definitive word to his people for this entire age – and that is my position – your feet are fixed on very different ground. The first ground is shifting sand, at the changing whim of men; the second is solid rock, granite, immovable.

The consequence is clear: whoever devises any scheme, any scheme whatsoever, on whatever specious ground, if it is not absolutely in accord with the apostolic revelation, that teaching must be rejected, refused, and treated as a defection from ‘the faith [the system, the gospel] that was once for all delivered to the saints’ by the Spirit through the apostles (Jude 3). Instead of compromising that ‘faith’ – compromising it by accommodating it to pagan ideas, playing with ‘the faith’, tinkering with it, adding to it – we have ‘to contend for’ it (Jude 3), even ‘earnestly contend’ for it.⁸ ‘Contending for the faith’ cannot easily be understood as ‘add bits and pieces to it as you wish’, or ‘pull it into any shape you think fit’.

This is no idle, academic debate, a pleasant diversion for the fun of it. The least straying from the gospel is straying, and taking that slippery path has every prospect of being fatal.⁹ To tinker with the apostolic revelation is nothing short of sin. It has the smack of the ‘itching ears’ so much disliked by Paul (2 Tim. 4:1-5).

Moreover, whereas the Jews set up their feast of Purim from scratch, off their own bat, so to speak, when it came to Christmas,

⁶ When Cyprian (echoed by Calvin) said there is no salvation outside the Church, which Church did he (and Calvin) mean? And which is it today?

⁷ Church Councils have been contradicted by later Councils. One pope has contradicted another.

⁸ The preposition, *epi*, in *epagōnizomai*, is intensive.

⁹ See my *False Brothers: Paul and Today*.

Christendom went to a pagan festival, adapted and adopted it to form their 'custom'. For this reason alone, to claim that Christendom is warranted to argue on the basis of the Jews' behaviour over Purim seems to me to be, at the very least, doubtful; the link seems tenuous, and the leap a large one over a yawning gap. Christmas was entirely a pagan mid-winter festival which, as is Christendom's wont, Christendom found, liked, adapted – 'Christendomised', is the proper word – and adopted to become a major Christendom festival, heavily laced – overloaded – with pagan excess. Is it fair, therefore, to link Purim and Christmas? Is it right?

The believers' observance of Christmas is not remotely as a result of a scriptural command or new-covenant practice. Indeed, it is a custom, tradition, invented by Christendom, pure and simple. Let's not kid ourselves. Christmas, fundamentally, has nothing to do with the Bible – in particular, the teaching of Christ or the apostles – but everything to do with the machinations of Christendom's political and philosophical engineers and managers. Those clever gentlemen invented Christmas¹⁰ when they 'Christendomised' the pagan Saturnalia; that is the unvarnished truth, pure and simple. Having done that, the theologians had to get to work, hunting for some sort of scriptural – or, rather, theological, philosophical – justification for the new idea. As always, they found a way.¹¹

In any case, were the Jews to be commended for setting up this annual commemoration? This is always assumed: but on what grounds? Because it is recorded in Scripture? If so, that opens the door to any amount of abuse!

¹⁰ When did Christendom start to call on Purim for justification? In my *Infant Baptism Tested*, I showed that the infant-baptism use of Christ and the children (Mark 10:13-16) to justify their practice was a very late development.

¹¹ Infant baptism is a classic. See my *Infant*.

Again, did Christ observe Purim in his day? I know of no written evidence which shows that he did. I don't say that he did not; I just don't know.¹²

The implication is that although they had no command from God, the Jews were perfectly right to establish such a feast. But playing with a knife is a risky pastime. It could, with equal weight, be said: 'It is significant that there is no commendation from God for this addition of a feast day to the Jewish calendar'; that is to say, the Jews were acting out of order. I don't see that the reference to Purim takes us any further. True enough, Scripture tells us what the Jews did, but I know of no scripture which commends them for what they did.

Moreover, Scripture is full of such things.

Sometimes, God intervened to set up memorials (Num. 16:36-40; Josh. 4:1-7, 19-24, for instance). But not with Purim!

Sometimes, events just happened.

Joshua accepted the Gibeonite lies, and Israel had to live with the painful consequences (Josh. 9:1-16; 2 Sam. 21:1). Scripture records it. Why? As something for us to adapt and use for our purposes? Or does it serve as a warning?

The Eastern tribes built an altar of witness and the Western tribes accepted it (Josh. 22:10-34). All the ramifications of the episode are recorded – but for our emulation? Or what?

Israel preserved the bronze serpent of the wilderness by which, under God's command, promise and power, many were delivered during a time of widespread death by poisonous snakes (Num. 21:4-9) – Nehushtan. They not only preserved the artefact; they

¹² Take Hannukah (the Feast of Dedication). This annual festival was established in the inter-testamental period when the Maccabees re-dedicated the temple after its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes. We know that 'the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon' (John 10:22-23). But did he observe the feast? What lesson should we draw?

even worshipped it – until Hezekiah stepped in and destroyed it (2 Kings 18:4). Which aspect of that episode should believers follow – if any? Christ used the actual deliverance to speak of the gospel:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life (John 3:14-15).

But was Christ putting his seal of approval on the subsequent way the Jews behaved over the brass serpent? Of course he wasn't!

Israel desired to have a king to be like the pagans (Deut. 17:14-20; 28:36; 1 Sam. 8:19-22) – which led to the Davidic dynasty. How should we apply this today? Were the Israelites right to want to ape the pagans? Of course not. Such behaviour was forbidden countless times by Moses and the prophets.¹³ Yet God made major use of the concept of the kingdom. The question is: how are we to interpret and apply Israel's desire? Let's have a pope! What a good idea! Save us all the trouble of thinking for ourselves – just listen to the talking head! Get it straight from the horse's mouth – even though the latest horse might contradict a previous occupant of the stable. Really?

David dedicated pagan gold and bronze to God's use (2 Sam. 8:11; 1 Chron. 18:8-11). He took a jewel from the pagan's crown to add to his own royal gems (2 Sam. 12:30). What application – if any – should we make of this today? Should we follow this practice in the *ekklēsia*?

David erected a separate tent – apart from the tabernacle, and in Jerusalem not Gibeon – in which to house the ark of the covenant (2 Chron. 1:3-6), until Solomon reunited both tents in the newly-constructed temple (2 Chron. 5:2-14). Yet Moses had been commanded to erect the tabernacle (with its inner tent) precisely as God commanded him (Heb. 8:5). Was David right? Is this erection of a second tent recorded so that we might act in a similar way, and make changes over dipping or the supper, for instance?

¹³ See my *Evangelicals Warned: Isaiah 30 Speaks Today*.

Something similar can be said of the new rules for the priests and levites introduced by David and Solomon, enforced by Josiah (2 Chron. 35:4-6). And what about Jeremiah's lament for Josiah (2 Chron. 35:25)?

Think of James' odd behaviour and Paul's acceptance of it (Acts 21).¹⁴

Think of Paul's appeal to Rome (Acts 25:10-11) and all the consequences. Good? Bad? Indifferent?

And so on.

Are these recorded simply as facts, warnings or role models? And if the latter, do they give us a blank cheque to set up any observance, practice or ritual that we like?

Indeed, while the parallel, I admit, is not exact, surely there is at least a whiff of a hint of warning in the shenanigans of Jeroboam son of Nebat. I refer, of course, to these events:

Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and lived there. And he went out from there and built Penuel. And Jeroboam said in his heart: 'Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah'. So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people: 'You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt'. And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one. He also made temples on high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the levites. And Jeroboam appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the feast that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of

¹⁴ See my 'Does Acts 21 Confirm Sabbath Keeping for Believers?' in my *New-Covenant Articles Volume Eleven*. James, unwittingly or not, played his part in the débacle over the law at Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14).

the high places that he had made. He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month that he had devised from his own heart. And he instituted a feast for the people of Israel and went up to the altar to make offerings.

And behold, a man of God came out of Judah by the word of the LORD to Bethel. Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make offerings. And the man cried against the altar by the word of the LORD and said: 'O altar, altar, thus says the LORD: "Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name, and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who make offerings on you, and human bones shall be burned on you"'. And he gave a sign the same day, saying: 'This is the sign that the LORD has spoken: "Behold, the altar shall be torn down, and the ashes that are on it shall be poured out"'. And when the king heard the saying of the man of God, which he cried against the altar at Bethel, Jeroboam stretched out his hand from the altar, saying: 'Seize him'. And his hand, which he stretched out against him, dried up, so that he could not draw it back to himself. The altar also was torn down, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign that the man of God had given by the word of the LORD (1 Kings 12:25-33; 13:1-5).

Following the strange affair of the intervention of 'an old prophet [who] lived in Bethel', which led to the death of the original 'man of God' by a lion (1 Kings 13:11-31), the 'old prophet' prophesied that...

...the saying that [the man of God] called out by the word of the LORD against the altar in Bethel and against all the houses of the high places that are in the cities of Samaria shall surely come to pass (1 Kings 13:32).

The upshot? Just this:

After this thing Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way, but made priests for the high places again from among all the people. Any who would, he ordained to be priests of the high places. And this thing became sin to the house of Jeroboam, so as to cut it off and to destroy it from the face of the earth (1 Kings 13:33-34).

Something to take onboard, in the present discussion, don't you think?

Moreover, the actual Jewish Purim-celebration, as much as I have witnessed it, provides a signally bad role model for believers – overt, crude hatred which smacks of a kind of reversed Nazi-rejoicing over the Jewish genocide and barbarity, is my impression – Jewish hilarity at the wholesale slaughter of pagans. Mordecai and Esther might well think again if they knew that in making Purim a Jewish obligation, later generations would re-engineer it into a virtual obligation for carnality.

It goes without saying that it is always dangerous to argue from silence, but if Christmas (and Easter) celebration, and the like, is such a good thing for believers, is it not odd that neither Christ or any apostle instituted it – especially while remembering that Christ did institute dipping and the Supper. This takes us back to the question of authority. Christmas: is it Scripture or Saturnalia? The foolishness and carnality of Christmas bespeak its origin.

* * *

In light of all the above concerning Purim, is Christendom warranted to adopt the pagan mid-winter festival and turn it into a major event in the ‘Christian’ calendar?

I know my answer. Reader, what’s yours?