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Pondering Purim: A Case for Fancy Dress?

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Sunset on March 9, 2009, marked the beginning of the Jewish holiday known as Purim. A two-day festival commemorated on the 14th and 15th of Adar (according to the Hebrew calendar) Purim dates back to the events recorded in the biblical book of Esther. As this book is read in synagogues around the globe, audience participation is at an all-time high: Purim provides an opportunity for fancy dress and partying in a manner unequalled by other Jewish festivals. It is interesting that this festival falls exactly a month before [the Passover](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/passover-easter/1054.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/passover-easter/1054.aspx>), which is the 14th day of Nisan, and the two observances share a number of similarities.

Both festivals are not just related to rescue from threats of national captivity but also from annihilation; through infanticide in the case of Passover, and through genocide at Purim. In both instances, an Israelite becomes part of the royal household, and the victory is given to Israel at the expense of those who had sought to destroy its population. The end result of the deliverance, in each case, was the salvation of the heirs of Abraham.

However, Purim differs from Passover in one significant respect. Whereas the events leading up to the Passover were outlined and orchestrated by the God of Israel, He is conspicuously absent from the events relating to Purim. And because there is no direct reference to God within the book of Esther, some have sought to locate the name encoded into

the Hebrew text, while others have followed the lead of [Martin Luther](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-martin-luther/579.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-martin-luther/579.aspx>) and raised questions about whether the Book of Esther should be part of the biblical canon.

Notwithstanding the absence of God's name, His presence is extant throughout the book. Esther and her uncle Mordecai, the principle Jewish characters, conduct themselves in a way that is reflective of the God of Israel. Their behavior acknowledges the existence of their God. Haman, the Persian king's chief minister, and the villain of the piece, expects to be worshiped as a god. Mordecai's refusal to do so is frequently missed in the English translations where the worship of Haman is described merely as a matter of paying homage (Esther 3:2). The term in the Hebrew is much stronger than that of simply bowing, and a similar usage is found in the decalogue where the Israelites were told they were not to prostrate themselves before other gods (Exodus 20:5).

In further acknowledgement of the influence of God within the book, Esther fasts for three days and nights before attempting the life-threatening action of going unbidden before the king. Surviving this, she is offered half of the kingdom by the king, but declines the gift in a Solomonesque gesture, asking rather for the lives of her people.

The festivities ordered by Mordecai and Esther at the end of the account provide another interesting insight into the character of these people. They require that provision be made for those who lack means, in other words, the marginalized are to be included in the celebration. Once again, Mordecai and Esther show themselves to be observant followers of their God.

The God of Israel may not be mentioned in the text, but the principal roles are played by Torah-observant people represented by both Mordecai and Esther. The moral of the account is that the God of Israel provides the victory over the enemies of His people when they live according to His standards. So their relationship was not an exterior show, but a deep internal commitment to a way of life they knew had to be lived. Considering this, perhaps the external show of fancy dress is inappropriate for Purim—unless one is playing the part of the villain, Haman!