

REVIEW

Elliott Horowitz

Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence

(Princeton University Press, 2006), paper, 356 pp.

Reviewed by Edward Kessler, Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations, Cambridge

Elliott Horowitz has produced a challenging and thought-provoking work, which examines both negative Jewish views of Christianity and Jewish violence against Christians. Horowitz, professor of Jewish History at Bar-Ilan University and co-editor of the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, argues that “the legacy of Jewish violence” can be uncovered particularly at Purim and successfully demonstrates that Christian contempt of Jews and Judaism was mirrored by Jewish antipathy towards Christians and Christianity.

One of the significant differences between Horowitz's book and Ariel Toaff's controversial volume *Pasque di sangue*, is that Horowitz does not aim to be sensationalist and is thorough and rigorous in his examination of the texts. In contrast Toaff offers tendentious generalizations such as his portrait of Ashkenazi Jews living in an almost wholly enclosed world (which goes against the evidence that there were Christians on good terms with these Jews who even helped them in their time of trial). Horowitz does not take the contemporary evidence at face value but considers their accuracy as should an historian.

The festival of Purim marks the deliverance of Persian Jews from the attempt by Haman to massacre them. It celebrates their vengeance and victory over their non-Jewish enemies, as related in the biblical book of Esther. The holiday has been traditionally popular at the Jewish communal level but has often been the cause of controversy in Jewish-Christian relations. The villainous figure of Haman became an epithet for any persecutor of Jews.

Feelings of animosity towards Christianity were generally hidden but came to the surface at Purim, when revelry was at its height. According to BT Megillah 7a, it is a duty to drink sufficient quantities of wine that it is not possible to tell the difference between “cursed be Haman and blessed be Mordecai.” Consequently, celebration of Purim was accompanied by riotous and wild behavior. Horowitz shows how for long periods, Purim provided a vent for anger that Jews felt towards their Christian oppressors of each succeeding age.

Reckless Rites is well written and easy to read. Although this reader is not convinced that there is evidence of a *widespread* pattern of Jewish violence in the Middle Ages, sufficient material exists to show the presence of a Jewish *adversus christianos* tradition (paralleling Christian *adversus iudaeos* writings).

Historical accounts of Jewish violence against Christians is a controversial subject but Horowitz takes a brave and forthright look at its history and should be commended for demonstrating how anti-Christian practices became part of the carnival at Purim. As Leon Wieseltier has written in his endorsement of the book, “*Reckless Rites* is a model of the lost art of troublemaking scholarship.”

Of particular interest to *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, is Horowitz's detailed study (81-106) of the polemical use of Haman, whose death on a gallows was conflated with crucifixion. The LXX, followed by Jerome, rendered Haman's execution by hanging as a crucifixion (LXX Est 7:9 and 16:17-18). It is therefore unsurprising that a raucous celebration of Purim sometimes ended with a performance of the crucifixion (or hanging), which was interpreted as an allusion to Jesus, who the Talmud describes as being hanged on the eve of Passover (b.Sanhedrin 43a).

Thus, it seems likely that the celebration of Purim at times evolved into a demonstration of anti-Christian feeling during which the cursing of the crucified Haman led to the cursing of the crucified Jesus. This outpouring of anti-Christian feeling demonstrates that the festival of Purim served not only as a means of encouraging people during periods of oppression but also cultivated a contempt and a desire for vengeance over Christians and Christianity. In other words, Horowitz shows that Purim and its characteristic rituals enabled Jews to direct hostility towards the symbols of what they saw as an oppressive and threatening Christian environment.

Reckless Rites courageously reassesses the historical interpretation of Jewish violence – from the alleged massacre of thousands of Christians in seventh-century Jerusalem to later medieval attacks on Christian symbols such as the crucifix, transgressions that were often committed in full knowledge that their likely consequence would be death. It is essential reading for scholars and students of Jewish-Christian relations.

Horowitz's study demonstrates a danger for Jews when they are burdened by memories of a history of persecution, especially when committed by Christians. Yet, this is a distortion of the historical record, not only in terms of exaggeration, but in the general picture it suggests. As James Parkes famously wrote, "good theology cannot be built on bad history."¹

¹ "A Reappraisal of the Christian Attitude to Judaism," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 29:4 (1961): 301.