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Elliott Horowitz: Reckless Rites

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Introduction

BETWEEN REPHIDIM AND JERUSALEM

IN the spring of 2004, as this book was slouching toward completion, Jeffrey Goldberg reported in the *New Yorker* about a series of disturbing interviews he had recently conducted with Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Gaza. “The Palestinians are Amalek,” he was told by Benzi Lieberman, chairman of the Council of Settlements. “We will destroy them,” Lieberman continued. “We won’t kill them all. But we will destroy their ability to think as a nation. We will destroy Palestinian nationalism.” And Moshe Feiglin, a leading Likud activist, told Goldberg: “The Arabs engage in typical Amalek behavior. I can’t prove this genetically, but this is the behavior of Amalek.”

Goldberg explained to his readers that the Amalekites were a “mysterious Canaanite tribe that the Bible calls Israel’s enemy.” In the book of Exodus, he added, “the Amalekites attacked the Children of Israel on their journey to the land of Israel. For this sin, God damned the Amalekites, commanding the Jews to wage a holy war against them.” Although the *New Yorker’s* legendary fact-checking staff allowed no flagrant errors to enter this thumbnail portrait, I would like to make clear to my own readers that in the Bible the Amalekites are neither Canaanites nor particularly mysterious. They are desert-dwelling descendants of Esau, the elder son of Isaac, through his own eldest son Eliphaz (Gen. 36:12). And although it would not be incorrect to say that they “attacked the Children of Israel on their journey to the land of Israel,” the book of Deuteronomy chose rather to stress that the attack, at Rephidim, occurred as the “faint and weary” Israelites “came forth out of Egypt” (25:17–18).

The Amalekites, their distant cousins, were the first enemy they encountered in their forty-year trek through the desert. Although by the battle’s end the militarily inexperienced Israelites, led by Joshua (with Moses looking on from a hilltop), somehow “mowed down Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword” (in the mellifluous rendition of the Revised Standard Version [RSV]), enough Amalekites survived for God to vow that He would continue to wage war with Amalek “from generation

to generation” (Exod. 17:8–17). In the book of Exodus the perpetual struggle with Amalek is described as God’s war, but in Deuteronomy the Israelites themselves are commanded to “blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.”

In his *New Yorker* article Goldberg gallantly came to the defense of the Jewish tradition, asserting—again not quite accurately—that the commandment to exterminate the Amalekites “is perhaps the most widely ignored command in the Bible.” He did not mean that it was ignored in the Bible itself but that “the rabbis who shaped Judaism,” who, according to Goldberg, “could barely bring themselves to endorse the death penalty for murder, much less endorse genocide,” solved the moral problem by ruling “that the Amalekites no longer existed.”¹ This, however, is patently false. Not only did the “rabbis who shaped Judaism,” that is, the Talmudic sages, never make such an assertion, but even Maimonides, in his great twelfth-century code, clearly suggested—as many commentators noted—that unlike the “seven nations” of ancient Canaan, who were also doomed to extermination by biblical command, the Amalekites were still alive and kicking.²

How seriously the command to “utterly destroy” Amalek was taken in biblical religion may perhaps best be seen from the account, in the first book of Samuel, of Saul’s ill-fated war against the Amalekites. Saul, Israel’s first king, was commanded in God’s name by the prophet Samuel, again following the RSV,³ to “go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass” (1 Sam. 15:2–3). Although Saul and his army did indeed defeat the Amalekites, whom they “utterly destroyed . . . with the edge of the sword” (1 Sam. 15:8—an intertextual allusion to Exod. 17:13) they spared both King Agag, who was taken captive, and “the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fatlings,” purportedly in order to sacrifice them to God (1 Sam. 15:9). Samuel powerfully expressed God’s ire at this partial fulfilment of His command and then dramatically executed the Amalekite king in the presence of his belatedly repentant Israelite counterpart (1 Sam. 15:22–33).

What does this have to do with relations between Israelis and Palestinians in the twenty-first century? Very little or a great deal, depending on how one defines the term “Amalekite.” If it is defined genealogically, the

¹ Jeffrey Goldberg, “Among the Settlers: Will They Destroy Israel?” *New Yorker* (May 31, 2004).

² Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings, 5:4–5.

³ Hereafter I will sometimes follow the Revised Standard Version (1946–1952), sometimes the new translation of the Jewish Publication Society published under the title *Tanakh* (1985), and sometimes an eclectic combination of the two.

Palestinians, as Arabs and descendants, in biblical terms, of Ishmael (Isaac's half-brother), have no relation to Amalek, the grandson of Isaac's elder son, Esau. In fact, for centuries, as we shall see, Amalek was associated by Jews with the Roman Empire and its medieval Christian inheritors. If, however, Amalek is seen as a moral or metaphysical category—a notion that first merged in Jewish thought, as we shall see, in the Middle Ages—Palestinians may be classified as Amalekites. This is evidently what the Australian-born Feiglin meant when he told Jeffrey Goldberg that although he could not link the Arabs with Amalek “genetically,” their “behavior” was “typical” of Amalek. Indeed, the association of Arabs with Amalekites has become widespread enough for at least one Israeli-Arab journalist to have developed the habit of referring to himself, with some measure of irony, as an Amalekite.⁴ Not surprisingly, after the death of Yasser Arafat, in November of 2004, “Pikuach Nefesh,” an association of some two hundred rabbis who oppose territorial concessions on the part of Israel, announced that “the day of Arafat's death should be a day of rejoicing,” since the Palestinian leader was “the Amalek and the Hitler of our generation.”⁵

Several months earlier Goldberg had published a short piece in the Op-Ed section of the *New York Times* (“Protect Sharon from the Right,” August 5, 2004) that began with the description of a circumcision ceremony he had recently attended. The ceremony had taken place in a trailer that served as the synagogue of an outpost outside one of the Jewish settlements on the West Bank. Like other Jewish outposts in the area, many of which are technically illegal, this one too was home to a handful of families who belonged to what Goldberg aptly described as “the avant-garde of radical Jewish nationalism, the flannel-wearing, rifle-carrying children of their parents' mainstream settlements, which they denigrate for their bourgeois affectations . . . and their misplaced fealty to the dictates of the government in Jerusalem.”

Not surprisingly, the young father—a goat farmer—found occasion, when he rose to speak, to raise the (to him) timely subject of Amalek. “I am looking at our life today, and what Amalek wants to do is swallow up the people of Israel,” he said. Then, using an image that had been first developed in the *Zohar*, he added: “This is the snake. This is the snake”—although “serpent” would arguably have been a better translation, since the Zoharic allusion is to the sly and slithering creature in the book of Genesis. Goldberg then turned to a young acquaintance seated next to him, Ayelet, a pregnant (married) teenager who wore a long skirt and carried a semiautomatic M-16, and asked her whether she thought Amalek

⁴ Sayed Kashua in *Kol ha-'Ir*, June 8, 2001; November 19, 2004.

⁵ *Haaretz*, November 12, 2004.

was alive today. “Of course,” she replied, and pointed toward one of the Arab villages in the distance. “The Amalekite spirit is everywhere,” she added, “it’s not just the Arabs.” When asked by Goldberg who else might be part of Amalek, she replied, “Sharon isn’t Amalek, but he works for Amalek.”

The teenaged Ayelet was hardly the first Jewish ideologist to suggest that misguided fellow Jews might be in league with Amalek. Ironically, in fact, this position had been advanced by such fervent opponents of Zionism as the renowned Lithuanian Talmudist Elhanan Wasserman, who early in the twentieth century asserted that Amalekites could be found among those Jews who had “cast off the burden of the Torah,” both in the Diaspora and the Holy Land. By the time Rabbi Wasserman was killed by the Nazis in 1941, the latter had become the universally recognized Amalekites of their day, temporarily blotting out the memory of all others. Yet late in the twentieth century the notion of Jewish Amalekites again gained currency, finding expression, for example, in an article by the Bar-Ilan professor and West Bank resident Hillel Weiss that appeared in *Ha-Zofeh*, the newspaper published by Israel’s National Religious Party, on Purim of 1994. On that very day Dr. Baruch Goldstein—another West bank resident—opened fire, with his army-issued semiautomatic rifle, on dozens of Muslims who were praying inside the mosque at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, killing twenty nine.⁶

At the time, I was living in Jerusalem, barely an hour’s drive north from Hebron, and was working on a Hebrew version of an article about the history of Purim violence that became the genesis of this volume.⁷ The realization, as the news came in sometimes contradictory spurts over the radio, and as I saw the raucous celebrations in the center of Jerusalem continuing unabated, that there was a clear connection between past Purims and the present one was both exhilarating and disturbing. It became clear to me that another chapter had written itself into the history of Purim—a carnivalesque holiday of reversal that celebrates the triumph of the Jews, during the days of Mordecai and Esther, over the genocidal plot of their archenemy Haman, who was hanged on the gallows that he had planned for Mordecai.

Haman is referred to repeatedly in the book of Esther as an Agagite—that is, descendant of the Amalekite king Agag. The Torah reading for the morning of Purim is taken from the account in Exodus (17:8–16) of the battle at Rephidim, after which God vowed that He would have war with Amalek “from generation to generation.” And the Sabbath before Purim, called the “Sabbath of Memory,” is even more infused with mordant

⁶ See Horowitz, “From the Generation of Moses,” 428, 454, and the sources cited there.

⁷ Horowitz, “And It Was Reversed,” 129–68.

memories of Israel's encounters with its archenemy. The special Torah reading, drawn from the book of Deuteronomy (25:17–19), from which that Sabbath draws its name, opens with the command to “remember what Amalek did” and concludes with the ringing (yet to some chilling) exhortation to “blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.” And the reading from the Prophets for the Sabbath before Purim is taken from the aforementioned account (in 1 Sam. 15) of Saul's ill-fated war against the Amalekites, from which their king alone was spared until the prophet Samuel dramatically “hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal.”

Although my article on Purim, whose treatment began in the fifth century, stretched ambitiously into the nineteenth, I decided after the Hebron massacre of 1994 to be even more ambitious and extend my story to the present. The editors of the journal *Zion*, published by the Historical Society of Israel, wisely advised me to delete the hastily written appendix, which was not sufficiently integrated with the rest of the article. A decade later, however, I feel that there is no longer any excuse for me, as a historian or as a Jew, “to keep silence at such a time as this” (Esther 4:14). I have therefore chosen, somewhat recklessly, to begin not at the beginning, but at the end, inspired, in part by the words of Esther herself (Esther 4:14), “if I perish, I perish.”

In May of 1982, shortly before I immigrated to the state of Israel, the “Karp Commission” issued its findings regarding Jewish violence on the West Bank—under Israeli control since 1967—including events that had transpired in Hebron over the (extended) holiday of Purim, 1981. Although at that point the Jewish presence in Hebron itself had not yet been renewed—most Jews had abandoned the “City of the Patriarchs” after the massacre of 1929, and the last had departed in 1947—on Friday (March 20), the first day of Purim, settlers from neighboring Kiryat Arbah came to celebrate the holiday in Beit Hadassah, which had once housed a Jewish infirmary and a synagogue. By Friday evening they had managed, allegedly through their spirited dancing, to bring the roof down over the Arab-owned upholstery shop downstairs. Since Purim in Hebron is traditionally celebrated over two days (the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar) the settlers settled down in Beit Hadassah for another day of boisterous festivity, which in 1981 coincided with the Jewish Sabbath.

The Arab upholsterer, who had closed his shop before noon on Friday as was his custom, returned the next day to find a large hole in his ceiling, and proceeded to the local (Israeli) police station, but did not file a formal complaint—hoping, he later explained to investigators, that after repairing the hole quiet could be restored. He began work on repairing the ceiling, as he had been advised by the (Arab) municipality, but his new

neighbors upstairs insisted that he stop, “on account of the sanctity of the Sabbath.” When the upholsterer returned on Saturday evening, he was forcibly prevented by the settlers from continuing with the repairs. Around midnight an officer from the (Israeli) military governor’s office arrived and saw that the entire ceiling had collapsed, and that young settlers were removing the contents of the shop. When he asked them what was going on, they replied that the shop’s ceiling had collapsed and that they were removing the cotton fabric so that it would not get soiled. When the same officer returned some two and a half hours later, after having been informed that the shop’s door was open, one of the settlers reportedly told him (in Hebrew) that he was witnessing the renewal of Hebron’s Jewish community.

On Sunday the upholsterer returned to find his shop devastated. While he was sitting at its entrance mourning his fate, three armed settlers emerged from Beit Hadassah and asked him to leave. When he replied that it was his shop, they pushed him away violently. He then returned to the police station and filed a formal complaint. The police investigation was completed nearly a year later, in February of 1982. The state attorney’s office decided the following March to close the case, both on the grounds of insufficient evidence and because the Arab upholsterer had by then received financial compensation. The Karp Report, however, found it both “highly disturbing” and worthy of note that, according to the police superintendent’s affidavit, Hebron’s military governor had instructed the commander of the local police station not to investigate the incident.⁸

On Purim of 1986, five years after the festive reconquest of Beit Hadassah, Jewish settlers paraded through Hebron carrying puppets of various images from the book of Esther, including, of course, that of Haman. When they arrived at Beit Romano, one of the other local buildings that had been owned by Jews prior to 1948, one of the settlers, as reported by *Haaretz* correspondent Uri Nir, placed a *kaffiyeh* on the effigy of Haman, which was being hung. The local Arabs, understandably, took offense, and only the timely intervention by a representative of the military government—who demanded that the settlers remove the *kaffiyeh*—prevented a violent confrontation. It is not unlikely that Dr. Baruch Goldstein, who immigrated from the United States to Kiryat Arbah in 1983—and who by 1984 already had a police record in Hebron—participated in the Purim parade of 1986.⁹

Three years later, according to the same correspondent’s report, the (by then) traditional Purim parade through Arab Hebron was even more

⁸ The Karp Report was issued by Israel’s Ministry of Justice on May 23, 1982. On the events of March 1981 in Hebron, see 8–11.

⁹ See Elimelekh Horowitz, “Hag Purim; Simha ve-Sasson oh Sinah ve-Sasson,” 324–25, in *Ha-Mishak*, ed. Emilia Peroni (Tel Aviv, 2002).

provocative. Jewish settlers carried a skeleton with a *kaffiyeh* on its head and a noose around its neck, and also burned Palestinian flags. Some Jewish children carried toy rifles, which they pointed menacingly at their Palestinian counterparts. From the city's central square the festive settlers, many in masquerade, continued to the Tomb of the Patriarchs into which they sought to introduce a Torah ark—contrary to regulations—during the time normally set aside for Muslim prayer. “The shoving match . . . continued for some time,” reported Nir, “and provided such surreal scenes as [Israeli soldiers] struggling with [Jewish] settlers dressed as Arabs, in an effort to protect the ‘real’ Arabs who were in the vicinity.”¹⁰

The following year, in 1990, the Purim parade departed from Beit Hadassah toward the Tomb of the Patriarchs, and in that year, too, Palestinian flags were burned in the streets of Arab Hebron. Some of the Jewish participants were again provocatively dressed as Palestinians, but Noam Arnon, then spokesman for the settler organization Gush Emunim, chose to wear a “Peace Now” t-shirt with a *kaffiyeh* on his head—suggesting an inner affinity between those two sartorial objects. Four years later the holiday of Purim coincided with the first Friday of Ramadan—as delicate a situation as one could imagine in the embattled city of the Patriarchs. On that fateful Friday morning Dr. Goldstein brought his semiautomatic rifle with him to Purim prayers at the Tomb of the Patriarchs and fired into the neighboring room where Muslims were at prayer. Since then, for me and for many others, Purim has never been the same.

In Hebron, however, little changed, even after the murder, in November 1995, of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by Yigal Amir, a law student at Bar-Ilan University (where I was then teaching) and an admirer of Goldstein.¹¹ On Purim of 1997, according to *Haaretz* correspondent Amira Segev, Hebron's traditional Purim parade, which by then departed from the Jewish “neighborhood” of Tel Rumeida, was headed by a Lubavitch “mitzvah tank,” and Noam Arnon, who by then had become spokesman for the Jewish community of Hebron, (cross-) dressed as the outspoken left-wing parliamentarian Shulamit Aloni, who had been a minister in Rabin's government. One young woman was dressed as Margalit Har-Shefi, a Bar-Ilan law student and West Bank resident who had been arrested in connection with her classmate's assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

In 1998 the Purim parade again stretched from Tel Rumeida to the Tomb of the Patriarchs, the site of the 1994 Purim massacre. Noam Federman, a Kahanist resident of Tel Rumeida, was dressed, according to *Haaretz* correspondent Tami Sokol, as Leah Rabin in witch's garb, with

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 325.

¹¹ On Amir's admiration for Goldstein see Michael Karpin and Ina Friedman, *Murder in the Name of God: The Plot to Kill Yitzhak Rabin* (New York, 1998), 10, 15–16.

a sticker that ominously read “Shalom, Leah”—a ghoulish allusion to Bill Clinton’s famous words of farewell to Yitzhak Rabin at the latter’s funeral. And one of the settler children was dressed as the local Jewish saint, Dr. Baruch Goldstein, wearing a stethoscope and carrying a rifle. He was apparently one of many local Jewish children that year who chose that macabre masquerade—presumably with the approval of their parents.¹²

Purim in Hebron after 1994 was like Purim in Hebron since 1981, only more so—with a new Jewish hero for Jewish children to dress up as. And in Jerusalem the fashion of categorizing fellow Jews as Amalekites reached new highs—or lows. In late February of 1996, after a bus blew up on Jaffa road, a reporter for *Ma’ariv* heard a passerby exclaim: “This is all due to the leftists of Meretz. We will take care of them. For us they are Amalek.”¹³ Four years later Israel’s controversial Education Minister Yossi Sarid, one of the founders—with the aforementioned Shulamit Aloni—of Meretz, had the distinction of being designated an Amalekite by no less an authority than Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, the founder and spiritual leader of Israel’s Shas party, and the most widely respected rabbinical figure among Oriental and Sephardic Jews throughout the world. In a public address delivered in March of 2000, shortly before the holiday of Purim, Rabbi Yosef compared the veteran left-wing politician to Haman, adding that “he is wicked and satanic and must be erased like Amalek.” The office of Israel’s attorney general pursued a criminal investigation (on grounds of possible incitement to violence) but the great rabbi was never charged.¹⁴

In contemporary Israel, it is not only Haman who is conjured, but also his stubborn nemesis Mordecai, whose refusal to bow before the evil minister has reverberated for centuries, as we shall see, both among Jews and Bible-reading Christians. In the spring of 2003 the Israeli painter Moshe Gershuni, who was to receive the coveted Israel Prize on Independence Day of that year, announced that he would not attend the ceremony in order to avoid shaking hands with Education Minister Limor Livnat, with whose government’s policies he sharply disagreed. Livnat, in response, decided to revoke the prize. Writing in *Haaretz* the conductor Itai Talgam compared the story to the book of Esther, and asked rhetorically: “Why couldn’t Ahashverosh’s chief minister abide this one exception and write off Mordechai as just an eccentric old geezer?” Talgam saw Gershuni as a contemporary Mordecai who represents “the Jewish spirit, that does not give in; and the temptation to try to break this spirit cannot be assuaged by all the pleasures and power of authority.”¹⁵

¹² Horowitz, “Hag Purim,” 327.

¹³ Horowitz, “From the Generation of Moses,” 454.

¹⁴ See Kamil, “Ovadia Yosef.”

¹⁵ *Haaretz*, April 20, 2003.

In modern America, too, the ancient book of Esther could be brought to bear upon contemporary politics. In southern California during the Watergate investigations of the 1970s, members of a left-leaning *Havura* (prayer community) accompanied the reading of the Megillah with a dramatic enactment of the Esther story. One of the participants, the local campus Hillel rabbi, chose for himself the role of Haman. Rather than merely masquerading as the biblical villain, he chose to impersonate Richard Nixon's senior aide H. R. (Bob) Haldeman—whose surname also began with an H. In addition to wearing a three-piece suit and a hat, he walked onstage carrying a briefcase on which was written H. R. “Bob” Haman, and from which audiotape trailed. Riv-Ellen Prell, the participant-observer who has described the performance, notes that the character had no spoken lines. “His entire performance was visual and succeeded because of his ability to effectively associate Haldeman with Haman and Haman with Haldeman.” Both had access to the highest corridors of power and both had been stripped of it when their evil intentions were uncovered.¹⁶ On the East Coast not long afterward members of the Jewish Defense League in Brooklyn decided, on Purim of 1977, to burn in effigy another person who had ascended to the highest corridors of power under Richard Nixon—their coreligionist Henry Kissinger!¹⁷ This, however, was not as paradoxical as might appear, for as we have already seen, it had long been claimed that Jews too could be Amalekites.

This book, however, is not only about Jewish myths and their legacies, but also about myths told and retold concerning the Jews, whether about their “passionate hostility to violence,” as Jean Paul Sartre put it, or their predilection for particularly peevish forms of predation, such as the ritual murder of children. As recently, in fact, as March 2002 the Saudi scholar Umayna Ahmad al-Jalahma revived the canard that Jews require the blood of non-Jews for their Purim pastries. But whereas in the nineteenth century, especially after the “Damascus Affair” of 1840, the claim had been made that Purim was one of the occasions for which Jews required the blood of Christians, Dr. al-Jalahma seems to have been the first to discover that Muslim blood can also be used for filling the three-cornered *Hamantaschen*.¹⁸ Both Purim and the book of Esther, as we shall

¹⁶ Riv-Ellen Prell, “Laughter That Hurts: Ritual Humor and Ritual Change in an American Jewish Community,” 214–15, in *Between Two Worlds; Ethnographic Essays on American Jewry*, ed. Jack Kugelmass (Ithaca, 1988).

¹⁷ Shifra Epstein, “From Tel-Aviv to Borough Park: Purim in the Twentieth Century,” 51, in *Purim: The Face and the Mask* (no editor stated) (New York, 1979).

¹⁸ His article “The Jewish Holiday of Purim,” published originally in *Al-Riyadh*, March 10, 2002, is quoted in Gabriel Schoenfeld, *The Return of Anti-Semitism* (San Francisco, 2004), 17–18.

frequently see, are subjects that have impelled both apologists and anti-Semites to show their true colors, as they have impelled me to show mine in this introduction.

In the fall of 2004 the local news in Israel again inserted itself into my narrative. On Sunday, October 10, when the Armenians in Jerusalem's Old City were observing the "Exaltation of the Holy Cross" (or "Holy Cross Day"), a cross was carried by the local archbishop in the traditional procession near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Natan Zvi Rosenthal, a twenty-one-year-old student at the (ultranationalist) Har Hamor yeshiva, happened to be passing by, and spat upon both the processional cross and the archbishop, who responded by slapping Rosenthal. Both were consequently questioned by the police—who decided, however, to charge only the student with assault. An editorial two days later in *Haaretz* under the title "Jerusalem's Disgrace" saw the incident as revealing "a little bit of the increasingly wild Jewish-nationalist-religious atmosphere" in the city.¹⁹

Some have suggested that it is the spatial proximity of the Armenian Quarter to that of the Jews in Jerusalem's Old City that has been responsible for Jewish attacks upon religious processions and clergymen. Yet Rosenthal, who has since apologized for his action,²⁰ encountered the Holy Cross procession neither in the Jewish Quarter nor the Armenian one, but near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, in the Christian Quarter. I would suggest, therefore, that acts of enmity toward Armenian processions and clergymen should be seen against the background of a long Jewish tradition reaching back to the tenth century, whereby Armenians were referred to, not always in a hostile manner, as "Amalekites."²¹

This tradition, which shall be examined in greater detail in chapter 5, was still very much alive in the nineteenth century. In 1839 the British missionary Joseph Wolff, who was active in both Palestine and Yemen, found it "remarkable that the Armenians, who are detested by the Jews as the supposed descendants of the *Amalekites*, are the only Christian church who have interested themselves for the protection and conversion of the Jews." Similarly, in their 1842 account of their extensive missionary efforts among Jews in both Europe and the Middle East, the Scottish missionaries Bonar and McCheyne suggested that "the peculiar hatred which

¹⁹ See Amiram Barkat in *Haaretz*, October 11, 2004, October 12, 2004.

²⁰ Barkat, *Haaretz*, October 18, 2004. See also E. J. Greenberg, "Church Flap in Jerusalem: Bad Blood—and Saliva," *Forward*, October 22, 2004. A more recent spitting incident against an Armenian priest occurred early in January 2005. See Barkat in *Haaretz*, January 7, 2005.

²¹ See Horowitz, "From the Generation of Moses," 431, 450–51.

the Jews bear to the Armenians may arise from a charge often brought against them, namely that Haman was an Armenian, and that the Armenians are the *Amalekites* of the Bible.”²²

On Saturday, March 11 1995, when a procession of Armenian priests was making its way, with a large cross, from Jerusalem’s Armenian Quarter to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Moshe Ehrenfeld, a Jewish resident of the city, spat conspicuously as the procession passed. Although newspaper reports concerning the 1995 incident—for which Ehrenfeld, who was found guilty of “interfering with a religious ritual,” was fined and given a (suspended) two-month prison sentence—failed to mention that it occurred on *Shabbat Zakhbor*, the Sabbath before Purim, there can be little doubt that Ehrenfeld himself was aware of that momentous date.²³

Moreover, the hostility to the cross that he evinced was by no means limited, even then, to a small group of fanatics. In the spring of 1992 a minor crisis had erupted in Israel when representatives of the education ministry discovered, to their horror, that a film marking five hundred years since the expulsion of Spanish Jewry that had been commissioned from Israel Television contained scenes in which some of the major figures (e.g., Ferdinand, Isabella, and Torquemada) wore crosses. What was particularly upsetting was that the film was to be shown in connection with that year’s International Bible Quiz for Youth in Jerusalem, whose dominant theme was the Spanish Expulsion. The education ministry demanded that the film be reedited and the crosses removed.²⁴ We shall return in chapter 6 to the Jewish relationship with, and history of violence against, the cross, which for centuries was commonly referred to as an “abomination.”

In its editorial on the recent spate of anti-Christian incidents in Jerusalem *Haaretz* referred to “the increasingly wild Jewish-nationalist-religious atmosphere” in the city, which, I might add, is equally true of Hebron. In both holy cities holy tombs have become sites of religious violence, and in both cities acts of violence against non-Jews have clustered around the days between *Shabbat Zakhbor* and Purim. It was over the holiday of Purim that religious settlers from Kiryat Arbah festively reconquered Beit Hadassah from an Arab upholsterer in 1981, it was on that holiday that Dr. Goldstein of Kiryat Arbah gunned down twenty-nine prostrate Muslims at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in 1994, and it was on the Sabbath before that holiday that one year later Moshe Ehrenfeld spat conspicuously in the presence of an Armenian procession in Jerusalem. It

²² See Joseph Wolff, *Journal of the Rev. Joseph Wolff* (London, 1839), 255; Bonar and McCheyne, *Narrative of a Mission*, 706.

²³ See Shahar Ilan in *Haaretz* February 21, 1997; Moshe Reinfeld, *Haaretz*, February 27, 1997.

²⁴ Avital Nitzan in *Haaretz*, March 31, 1992.

may be added that Daniel Rossing, a former advisor on Christian affairs to Israel's Religious Affairs Ministry, recently told a reporter that anti-Christian incidents tend to occur at "certain times of the year, such as during the Purim holiday." Rossing, in fact, knows Christians in Israel "who lock themselves indoors during the entire Purim holiday."²⁵ Some may derive a measure of solace from recalling that for centuries Jews in Christian countries would do the same between Good Friday and Easter.²⁶ Others may be upset that I am packing so much dirty laundry between the covers of an academic book instead of leaving it to fade on the pages of soon-to-be-forgotten newspapers or consigning it to the dreary darkness of the microfilm room. But in doing so I am following in the path of many worthy predecessors, including the biblical author of the book of Esther.

LUTHER AND HIS LEGACY

At the end of the book of Esther's seventh chapter Haman is hanged "on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordecai," and the anger of King Ahasuerus abated. Had the author abated his (or her) account there, Martin Luther would never have commented, in his infamous essay "On the Jews and Their Lies" (1543), on how much the Jews "love the book of Esther, which so well fits their bloodthirsty, vengeful, murderous greed and hope," nor would his eighteenth-century countryman Johann David Michaelis have accused Esther herself of "insatiable vindictiveness."²⁷ But that is not what the author of Esther did. He/she went on to report not only that the "Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor" (Esther 8:16), but that they "smote all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them" (Esther 9:5), with the consequence that more than seventy-five thousand of these "enemies" were slain. And not only was Haman, but also his ten sons were hanged (Esther 9:7–10), presumably because they, like their "Agagite" father, were descendants of Amalek.

Not only in his 1543 essay did Luther criticize the book of Esther, but also in his "table talk" he condemned it, together with 2 Maccabees, for being "too Jewish" (my translation) and containing "too much heathen corruption," prompting him to express the wish that both books "did not

²⁵ Barkat in *Haaretz*, October 12, 2004.

²⁶ See, among others, Parkes, *Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue*, 327, 330, 332; Guido Kisch, *The Jews in Medieval Germany* (Chicago, 1949), 183–84, 300–301; Solomon Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth Century II*, ed. K. R. Stow (New York, 1989), 162, 242, 255, 257–59, 261, 267, 270; Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, 209–12.

²⁷ See H. Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. E. W. Gritsch and R. C. Gritsch (Philadelphia, 1969), 188–89; Bickerman, *Four Strange Books*, 215–16.

exist”—a wish that continued to command respect, as we shall see, well into the twentieth century.²⁸ And the eminent bible scholar and polyhistor Michaelis, who taught at Göttingen for nearly half a century until his death in 1791, not only accused Esther of “insatiable vindictiveness,” but also complained that Haman had been put to death without trial. His attitude toward the Jewish queen was evidently colored by his rather negative stance vis-à-vis her co-religionists in eighteenth-century Germany, the granting of citizenship to whom he publicly opposed. Michaelis, whose position toward the Jews has convincingly been described as “racial antisemitism with a theological pedigree,”²⁹ was an ardent believer—like his older contemporary Montesquieu—in the impact of climate upon peoples and their cultures. As products of a “southern climate,” he argued, the Jews could never be fully assimilated into a German state. Moreover, he felt that their religious obligations prevented them from fully merging with any another nation. “As long as the Jews keep the laws of Moses, as long as for instance they do not take their meals with us,” he wrote, “or with simple folk, over a glass of beer, are not able to make friends, they will never . . . fuse with us.”³⁰

It is not clear which law of Moses, according to Michaelis, stood in the way of Jews sharing a glass of beer with “simple folk”—except, of course, during the holiday of Passover. And it is rather ironic that whereas Esther had been guilty, in his view, of “insatiable vindictiveness,” he saw her modern co-religionists as “a people that [on account of the Sabbath] cannot bear arms, and defend the state under which they live,” and therefore “can never be on a footing with other citizens, nor enjoy equal rights.”³¹

²⁸ “Ich bin dem Buch und Esther so feind, dass ich wollte sie wären gar nicht vorhanden; denn sie judenzen zu sehr und haben viel heidnische Unart” (*Tischreden*). Among the many scholars who have quoted Luther’s remarks with varying degrees of approval or disapproval, see Samuel Davidson, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: Critical, Historical, and Theological*, 3 vols. (London, 1862–63), 2: 172–73; R. H. Pfeiffer, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, (New York, 1941), 747; B. W. Anderson, S. V. “Esther” in *The Interpreter’s Bible* (New York, 1954), 3:830; Bickerman, *Four Strange Books*, 212; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 255. On Luther’s influence among modern scholars, see also Hans Bardtke, *Luther und das Buch Esther* (Tübingen, 1964); Wolfram Herrmann, *Ester im Streit der Meinungen* (Frankfurt, 1986).

²⁹ J. H. Hess, “Johann David Michaelis and the Colonial Imaginary: Orientalism and the Emergence of Racial Antisemitism in Eighteenth-Century Germany,” *JSS*, n.s. 6 (2000): 93.

³⁰ On the dispute between Michaelis and Christian Wilhelm von Dohm regarding the suitability of Jews for citizenship, see, among others, Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770–1870* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 89–94; Hess, “Johann David Michaelis,” 57–58. Both Katz and Hess quote the same passage, but I have followed the former’s translation.

³¹ He asserted furthermore: “They must be subjected to more taxes, in order to make up with their purses, for what they are not in a situation to do with their swords and their hands.”

In a later chapter we shall return to the question of European attitudes concerning the suitability of Jews for warfare, and the implications of that question for the historiography of Jewish violence.

Early in the nineteenth century W.M.L. De Wette of the University of Berlin, who is considered to have “inaugurated a new era in critical Old Testament scholarship,” wrote of Esther that it “refers nothing to the operation and direction of God, and contains no religious element.” This assertion went hand in hand with De Wette’s view that the book displayed a “blood-thirsty spirit of revenge and persecution.”³² Although he was forced in 1822, on account of his critical views, to abdicate his professorship at Berlin, De Wette’s scholarship, like that of many nineteenth-century biblical scholars, was informed by a strain of enlightened Protestant piety that posited a stark dichotomy between religiosity and revenge. A book that was full of one, he evidently believed, would necessarily be quite empty of the other. De Wette’s student Friedrich Bleek also saw the absence of God’s name as “characteristic of the untheocratic spirit” of Esther, in which a “very narrow minded and Jewish spirit of revenge and persecution” prevailed, to the extent that “no other book of the Old Testament” was “so far removed . . . from the spirit of the Gospel.”³³

In referring to the book’s “very narrow minded and Jewish spirit of revenge,” Bleek seems to have meant, by way of hendiadys, its “very narrowly minded Jewish spirit of revenge.” For many nineteenth-century German Bible scholars (and some even in the twentieth) the words “Jewish,” “narrow-minded,” and “revenge” formed an unholy trinity that characterized the reified religion of narrow legalism and rough justice that Jesus came to rectify.³⁴ And the text that was seen as most typifying this

See J. D. Michaelis, *Commentaries on the Laws of Moses*, trans. Alexander Smith, 4 vols. (Aberdeen, 1814), 3:180–81.

³² W. M. L. De Wette, *A Critical and Historical Introduction to the Canonical Scriptures of the Old Testament*, trans. Theodore Parker, 2 vols (Boston, 1843), 2:339–40, 46.

³³ Friedrich Bleek, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, ed. J. Bleek and A. Kamphausen, translated from the second German edition of 1865 by G. H. Venables, 2 vols. (London, 1875), 1:450. On De Wette (1780–1849) and his disciple Bleek (1793–1859), see Cheyne, *Founders*, 31–53, 142–48, and John Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1984), 28–49. For a broader view of De Wette as a German Romantic intellectual, see T. A. Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism* (Cambridge, 2000), 23–109.

³⁴ For two of the classic critiques of this position see Solomon Schechter, “The Law and Recent Criticism,” *JQR*, o.s. 3 (1890–1891): 754–66; Israel Abrahams, “Professor Schürer on Life under Jewish Law,” *JQR*, o.s. 11 (1898–1899): 626–42. See the discussion of both in Horowitz, “Israel Abrahams,” 143–47.

preredemptive state of Judaism was the book of Esther, which Bleek—and many others after him—explicitly contrasted with “the spirit of the Gospel.”³⁵ Later in the nineteenth century Heinrich Ewald famously remarked that in moving to Esther from the other books of the Hebrew Bible “we fall as it were, from heaven to earth”—and this acerbic comment continued to echo for decades.³⁶

Even during the Hitler years German biblical scholarship saw little reason to reconsider the harsh condemnation of Esther and its “spirit” that had become standard during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1934 Otto Eissfeldt of the University of Halle (who was an ordained Protestant minister) asserted that Esther’s inclusion into the biblical canon could only be explained by “the close connection between Jewish religion and the Jewish national spirit.”³⁷ Four years later his younger colleague Johannes Hempel, at the University of Berlin, published *Das Ethos des Alten Testaments*, in which he described the book of Esther as showing, through its “hate-inspired wish-fulfilment” (*hassdurchglühnte Wunschtraum*) how far the fantasy of pursuing vengeance could go among the Jews. In 1964 Hempel, who had been associated during the Nazi years with the infamous *Institut zur Erforschung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben* (Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Religious Life) established by the German Christian movement, published a second edition of his *Das Ethos des Alten Testaments*. Yet even in that revised edition he saw no need to change his earlier description of the book of Esther as showing, through its “hate-inspired wish-fulfilment” how far the fantasy of pursuing vengeance could go among the Jews.³⁸

In 1953, the year of my own birth, Curt Kuhl, writing in German, asserted that the book’s enthusiastic embrace by the Jews, among whom it “became a great favorite,” testified to their “narrow-minded and fanatical

³⁵ Contrast, however, Paul (formerly Selig) Cassel, a nineteenth-century Jewish convert to Christianity, who bravely wrote that “Esther and Mordecai must not be judged by the standard of the gospel, nor must we expect to find in them the tolerating spirit of Jesus Christ.” Cassel, *Esther*, xvi–xvii.

³⁶ See, for example, Driver, *Introduction*, 457; Washington Gladden, *Seven Puzzling Bible Books* (London, 1897), 94; Davies, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 293. On Ewald (1803–1875) see Cheyne, *Founders*, 66–118; Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism*, 91–103.

³⁷ O.W.H.L. Eissfeldt, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Tübingen, 1934), 566–67. On Eissfeldt (1887–1973), see G. Wallis in *DBI*, 1: 327.

³⁸ J. Hempel, *Das Ethos des Alten Testaments*, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1964 [1938]), 30, 105. On the Institut and its activities between 1939 and 1945, see Max Weinreich, *Hitler’s Professors: The Part of Scholarship in Germany’s Crimes Against the Jewish People* (New York, 1946), 62–67, and Susannah Heschel, “When Jesus Was an Aryan: The Protestant Church and Antisemitic Propaganda,” in *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust* (1999), 68–70, 83. On Hempel (1891–1964), see also C. T. Begg in *DBI*, 1:493.

nationalism.”³⁹ I had been conceived in the city of Tel-Aviv, which may well have been seen by Professor Kuhl as a different sort of testimony to the narrow-minded and fanatical nationalism of the Jews. But if not for a different nation’s narrow-minded and fanatical nationalism I probably would have been conceived and born in Germany, and perhaps even studied there. And then, had I become a Bible scholar, perhaps I too would ask rhetorically, as Werner Schmidt of the University of Bonn has recently done, “Does not the book [of Esther] emphasize too much the superiority of Judaism?” Since, however, I had the good fortune to be born and bred in New York, I regard Professor Schmidt’s narrow-minded question as akin to a Teutonic tourist asking of that city’s sometimes self-applauding residents, Do they not emphasize too much the superiority of the Yankees?

POSTBIBLICAL PURIM VIOLENCE

This book deals not only with the theme of Amalek and responses—Christian as well as Jewish—to the book of Esther over the centuries, but also with Jewish violence connected with the holiday of Purim, from the early fifth century to the late twentieth. This is a subject fraught with historiographical complexities. For Jewish scholars living in Christian countries writing about Jewish violence against Christians or abuse of Christian symbols on Purim—especially by linking the similar fates of Haman and Jesus—was, as we shall see, no simple matter.⁴⁰

Christian scholars, of course, discussed these matters more openly, and sometimes also quite enthusiastically. In his widely read *Lectures on the History of the Jewish Church*, based on lectures delivered originally in his capacity as professor of ecclesiastical history at Oxford, Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, who was appointed Dean of Westminster Abbey in 1864, referred to the “natural objection of the civilised—we may add, of the Christian—conscience, to the Book of Esther and the Feast of Purim.”⁴¹ Stanley, who acknowledged that “every Jew throughout the world felt with Mordecai, and has felt in many a time of persecution since, as he raised . . . his loud and bitter cry [Esther 4:1],” but this did prevent him from asserting that “the continuance of that bitter animosity in the Jewish nation renders the

³⁹ Kuhl also explicitly endorsed Luther’s rejection of Esther, stating categorically that the book had “nothing to say to the Protestant believer.” Curt Kuhl, *The Old Testament: Its Origins and Composition*, trans. C. T. M. Herriott (Edinburgh and London, 1961 [German original, 1953]), 271.

⁴⁰ On the connection between Haman and Jesus, see Thornton, “Crucifixion of Haman.”

⁴¹ Stanley, *Lectures*, 3:176–78. The first edition appeared between 1863–1876. On Stanley (1815–1881) see R. E. Clements in *DBI*, 2:502–3.

Feast of Purim the least pleasing of their festivals.” He noted also that Purim “was long retained in all its intensity as the natural vent” of the hatred that Jews felt towards “their heathen or Christian oppressors in each succeeding age”⁴²—anticipating, thereby, the central argument of this book, which, I suspect, the learned dean would have found more “pleasing” than the Jewish holiday upon which it focuses (although I am not sure how much that pleases me).

Both Dean Stanley and other nineteenth-century scholars who commented on Purim as the “natural vent” of Jewish hatred toward “Christian oppressors” had in mind particularly the 408 edict issued early in the reign of Theodosius II instructing the governors of all provinces in the Roman Empire to “prohibit the Jews from setting fire to Aman in memory of his past punishment, in a certain ceremony of their festival, and from burning with sacrilegious intent a form made to resemble the saint cross in contempt of the Christian faith.”⁴³ Even before it was discussed in Stanley’s *Lectures on the History of the Jewish Church*, the fifth-century edict had featured prominently in Henry Hart Milman’s treatment, in his pioneering *History of the Jews*, of Jewish-Christian relations in the Roman Empire after its Christianization under Constantine.

Both Stanley and Milman, moreover, shared similar biographies. Milman (1791–1868) had prepared for Oxford at Eton whereas the younger Stanley (1815–1881) “came up” from Rugby. Both were ecclesiastical historians as well as Anglican divines who became deans of leading cathedrals. Milman was appointed Dean of St. Paul’s in 1849 and fifteen years later, as noted above, Stanley became Dean of Westminster. It was during the decade of his tenure as professor of poetry at Oxford (1821–1831) that Milman composed his *History of the Jews*, in which he wrote memorably of the “furious collision” that occurred between Christians and Jews early in the fifth century after “great, and probably not groundless, offence” was taken by the former “at the public and tumultuous manner in which the Jews celebrated the holiday of Purim.”⁴⁴

A third polyhistoric Victorian to address the subject was the religiously eccentric though enormously learned naturalist Philip Henry Gosse (1810–1888), whose *History of the Jews* drew heavily on Milman’s popular work—though Gosse’s pungent (and ardently alliterative) prose had its own distinct character. Describing the relations between Jews and Christians

⁴² Stanley, *Lectures*, 3:177.

⁴³ I follow the translation of Linder, *Roman Imperial Legislation*, 237.

⁴⁴ Milman, *History*, 3:192–93. On Milman and his work, see most recently R. E. Clements, “The Intellectual Background of H. H. Milman’s *History of the Jews* (1829) and Its Impact on English Biblical scholarship,” 246–71, in *Biblical Studies and the Shifting of Paradigms, 1850–1914*, ed. H. G. Reventlow and W. Farmer (Sheffield, 1995).

