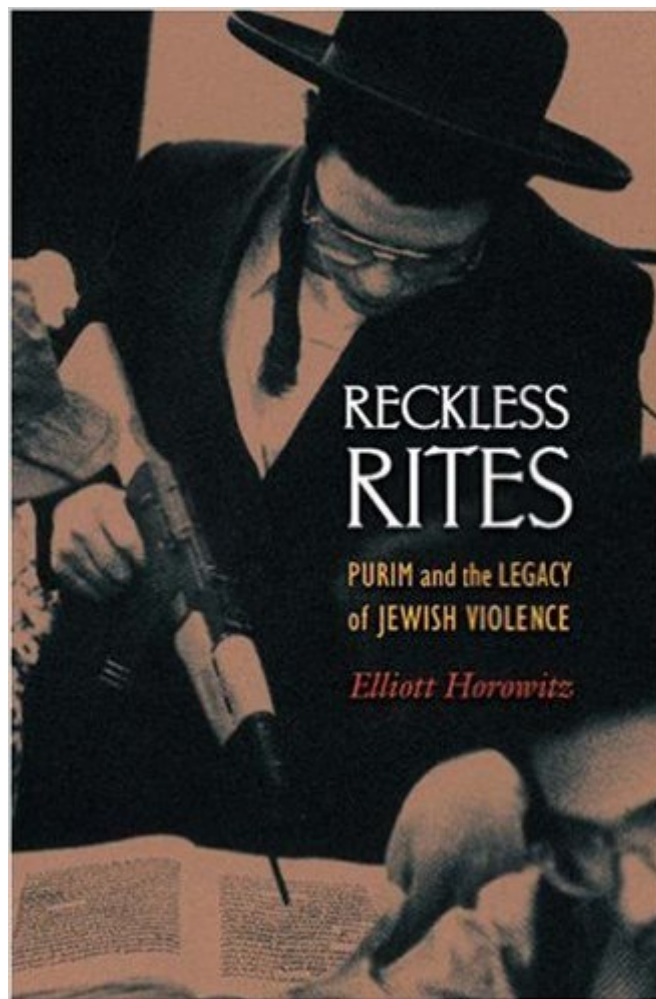


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# Reckless Rites: Purim And The Legacy Of Jewish Violence (Jews, Christians, And Muslims From The Ancient To The Modern World)



## Synopsis

Historical accounts of Jewish violence--particularly against Christians--have long been explosive material. Some historians have distorted these records for anti-Semitic purposes. Others have discounted, dismissed, or simply ignored the evidence, often for apologetic purposes. In *Reckless Rites*, Elliott Horowitz takes a new and forthright look at both the history of Jewish violence since late antiquity and the ways in which generations of historians have grappled with that history. In the process, he has written the most wide-ranging book on Jewish violence in any language, and the first to fully acknowledge and address the actual anti-Christian practices that became part of the playful, theatrical violence of the Jewish festival of Purim. He has also examined the different ways in which the book of Esther, upon which the festival is based, was used by Jews and Christians over the centuries--whether as an ancient mirror of modern tribulations or as the scriptural basis for anti-Semitic claims regarding the bloodthirstiness of the Jews. *Reckless Rites* 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. A book that calls for major changes in the way that Jewish history is written and conceptualized, *Reckless Rites* will be essential reading for scholars and students of history, religion, and Jewish-Christian relations.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Usually, all we hear is that Christians thought of Jews as responsible for deicide. Throughout this book, Horowitz makes it clear that Jews had just as much religiously-motivated animosity against Christians as Christians did against Jews. Horowitz paints the former as a defensive reaction of Jews against Christian persecution. Yet it becomes obvious from reading his book that such acts were more or less across-the-board. They occurred in places and times when Jews were not undergoing persecution, and moreover these acts were often very overt and provocative in nature. The portrayal of Christianity as Haman was very common during Purim celebrations. For instance, Horowitz writes: "In the Jewish communities of Poland and Ukraine, it was common, in the early eighteenth century, to hire a Christian to play the role of Haman in the annual Purimshpiel." (p. 86). Obviously, there was another side to Polish anti-Semitism, and Horowitz has touched upon this seldom-mentioned side. Horowitz examines the attacks on sacred Christian objects by Jews: "...we are in a better position to take Christian reports of Jewish cross-desecration seriously rather than dismissing them as anti-Semitic inventions." (p. 156). "To both Jews and Christians of their time (unlike some historians of recent generations) it was not difficult to imagine a Jew, whether naturally born or converted, urinating on a cross if given the opportunity to do so. Unlike ritual murder or host-desecration this form of hostile conduct, it may be added, was not reported exclusively by Christian sources." (p. 169). What about attacks on Holy Communion? Horowitz says the following about host-profanation: "Yet in recent decades Jewish historians have been more open to the possibility that such acts of desecration, not necessarily always premeditated, could indeed have taken place from time to time." (p. 173). Horowitz discusses Jewish violence against Christians. For instance, Jews who converted to Christianity were sometimes attacked by other Jews (pp. 202-203). A large-scale instance of Jewish violence against Christians occurred during the Persian conquest of Jerusalem in 614. The local Jews killed 90,000 Christians, though some other estimates accept a death toll of 30,000 (p. 241). Horowitz does not mention the fact that the numbers of Jews killed during the later Crusades has also been exaggerated, and is comparable to the number of Christians killed earlier by Jews during the events of 614. [For more on the large-scale Jewish massacre of Christians in Jerusalem in 614--a fact supported by multiple Christian and Jewish sources and authors--see: Horowitz, Elliott. 1998. "The Vengeance of the Jews was Stronger than their Avarice": Modern Historians and the Persian conquest of Jerusalem in 614. *JEWISH SOCIAL STUDIES, NEW SERIES* 4(2)1-39]. The author believes that the blood libel had originated as a tale told by Jewish converts to Christianity (p. 219, 226). Interestingly, some modern Muslim leaders accept the blood libel as fact (p. 9). The avoidance of discussion of Jewish violence stems from the tendency to consider Jews as victims and not victimizers. Horowitz comments: "Evenhanded

assessments of the reciprocal role of violence in Jewish-Christian relations were to become increasingly rare in post-Holocaust Jewish historiography, both in the land of Israel and in the Diaspora." (p. 235). During the Carmelite convent controversy at Auschwitz and its aftermath, the media paid attention only to those Jews who found offense in the cross, or at least felt that it was a painful reminder of past Christian persecutions of Jews. Horowitz provides a different perspective as he comments: "Yet in the heat of the fierce debates about the Auschwitz crosses, it was somehow forgotten that since the late nineteenth century such prominent Jewish artists in Europe and the United States as Samuel Hirschenberg, Joseph Budko, Marc Chagall, and Barnett Newman had appropriated both the cross and the crucifixion as symbols of Jewish suffering... Not only did Jewish artists develop an attraction to the use of the cross, so did such early twentieth century Jewish writers as Sholem Asch, Lamed Shapiro, and Uri Greenberg..." (pp. 182-183).

This book, subtitled *Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*, everything is viewed through the prism of the violence inflicted by the Jews upon their enemies at the end of Esther. While arguably, the violence at the end is only a minor part of the story for some that aspect has clouded everything about the Book of Esther and Purim. First Horowitz looks at how the Book was viewed by non-Jews. Some had a very negative view due to the Jewish revenge. They considered that motif, un-biblical (read non-Christian). Horowitz goes through each of the characters and how first non-Jews interpreted their actions. For instance, Mordechi was treated rather harshly by many of these commentators as was Esther due to her passivity. What is especially fascinating is how these non-Jewish understandings, at times, crept into Jewish thought as well. Thus, Horowitz documents Jews parroting these rather un-Jewish, at it were, interpretations. Horowitz then tackles the overarching theme of Amalek and how this has been understood throughout history. Some hold there is no obligation of destroying Amalek today while others are willing to label any perceived enemy of Jews as deserving of the harsh consequences of Amalek. Some of these examples are rather disturbing. After dealing with the Book of Esther specifically, Horowitz turns his focus to Jewish practice on Purim. Specifically, he deals with Jewish violence or violent acts on Purim directed at non-Jews. He provides a discussion of the stereotype of the "mild" (read the wimp) Jew including its origins and whether it is borne out by history. He then discusses numerous, diverse examples spanning from the 5th century until today of Jewish violence. Some is not physical violence, instead it is host desecration or general enmity of non-Jewish symbols while other, most recently Barukh Goldstein is physical violence in its worst form. In an effort to play down some of these incidents, we have Jewish historians who decided to avoid discussion of such matters, or at

times downplay their significance. However, in light of the many examples here, it is very difficult to ignore such examples. Horowitz is very convincing in the scope of this idea and how prevalent this is. It is especially telling when tracing and seeing how systematically Jews have decided to sweep under the rug these examples, it demonstrates that censorship is not limited to any one group and even amongst supposedly dispassionate scholars, they too can fall prey to their own biases. The detail and research is amazing, Horowitz leaves no stone unturned. All in all, this book sheds new light on the story of Purim, the Book of Esther and Jewish history. It provides a new way of viewing the story of Esther and Jewish ideas towards violence.

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