

Prof. Elliott Horowitz (Oxford)

Perpetual Hostility: Amalek as Ultimate Enemy for Early Modern Jews and Christians

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In cooperation with the Martin Buber Chair for in Jewish Thought and Philosophy at Goethe University & Jewish Museum (Frankfurt)

Commentator: Dr. Iris Idelson-Shein (Frankfurt)

Abstract

Both Jews and Christians, in dealing with their real and perceived enemies, drew upon the biblical category of Amalek- a people descended from Isaac's less-favored son Esau, who attacked the Israelites from behind in the desert, and whose total decimation was commanded in the book of Deuteronomy. King Saul was reprimanded for allowing the Amalekite king Agag to survive, and later Haman, the enemy of the Jews in the book of Esther, is described as an “Agagite”. As the Anglican divine Joseph Hall wrote early in the seventeenth century, “the Amalekites, of whose royal line Haman was descended, were the nation with which God had sworn perpetual hostility, and whose memory he had straitly charged his people to root out from under heaven.” Both Jews and Christians considered themselves God's people, and were therefore commanded to destroy the enemy against whom he had sworn perpetual hostility. But who were the Amalekites, and how might this be done?

Although Jews had for centuries associated Amalek with the domain of Christendom – which they called *Edom* (the other biblical name for Esau) – they were not particularly eager to translate their hostility toward Christian oppressors as a call to arms against their military superiors. It was therefore left to the rabbis to determine whether any Amalekites still existed, or whether the commandment still applied when no king sat on Israel's throne (as in the days of Saul). Among early modern Christians, however, particularly those in the Protestant denominations, the category of Amalek was often given practical significance – whether to justify violence against “Romish Amalek” in Europe or against American Indians in the New World.

The former tendency was particularly strong in seventeenth-century England, after the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, and from there spread to the American colonies, where it was directed against hostile natives. Samuel Appleton, the leader of the colonial forces arrayed against the Narragansett tribe wrote in 1675: “By the prayer of God's people, our Israel...may prevail over this cursed Amalek; against whom I believe the Lord will have war forever until he have destroyed him.”

Biography

Elliott Horowitz is currently an Oliver Smithies Visiting Fellow at Balliol College, Oxford University (UK). A native of New York City, Elliott Horowitz was educated at Princeton and Yale and has for over three decades taught at several Israeli universities. A specialist on the social and cultural history of Jews in early-modern



Europe, Elliott Horowitz is co-editor of the *Jewish Quarterly Review*. His publications include

- *Reckless Rites. Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton 2006, 2nd edition 2008).
- How Early Did We Become Modern?, in: *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 104:2 (2014)
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- The “Jewish Contribution” to Christianity, in: Jeremy Cohen and Richard I. Cohen (eds.), *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization: Reassessing an Idea* (Oxford 2008) The Early Eighteenth Century Confronts the Beard: Kabbalah and Jewish Self Fashioning, in: *Jewish History* 8:1/2 (1994).

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