

REVIEW

Jeremy Cohen

Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion from the Bible to the Big Screen
(New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) ix + 313 pp.

Reviewed by Jeremy Sabella, Boston College

Originating in a course that Cohen has taught for twenty years, *Christ Killers* traces the myth of the Jew as Christ killer from its origins in the context of the Gospel writers through its development into the early modern period and examines its various present-day manifestations. Cohen pays particular attention to what the myth reveals about the myth-makers and aims to communicate the pervasive effect that this myth has had on Western culture into the present day (3).

Cohen divides eleven chapters into three parts: "The Myth and its Origins," "The Myth in History," and "The Myth and the Arts." The first part addresses issues surrounding interpretation of the Gospels. The Gospels in Cohen's view are not concerned with communicating events as they actually happened, but are rather interested in interpreting their meaning for the Christian community. As such, they reveal more about the values and concerns of the early Christians than they do about the facts surrounding the crucifixion. The destruction of the Temple in particular forced the Jewish community to redefine its identity. The Gospels arose out of the ensuing intra-Jewish polemic, with the Christians accepting and the Jews rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. After examining how this polemic shaped Jewish and Christian interpretations of foundational stories such as the Sacrifice of Isaac and the Passover, Cohen analyzes the first clear example of the Christ killer myth in an Easter sermon of the second century bishop, Melito of Sardis.

The second, and longest, part explores the historical development of the Christ killer myth. Augustine argued that the Jews were unaware that they were committing deicide and cannot be held responsible for the death of God. This motif of Jewish blindness dominated medieval thought and served as a basis for Jewish toleration right up through the late 11th century, when heightened awareness of the individual, the rise of universities, and the onset of the Crusades contributed to an awakened curiosity in the status of the Jews in Christendom. This led to the reconsideration and restructuring of the Christ killer myth: in the 12th and 13th centuries Peter Lombard argued that the Jews killed Jesus out of envy, and Aquinas conspicuously parted ways with Augustine in maintaining that Jewish ignorance was willful. What caused this shift? In short, European Christendom became aware of Talmudic Judaism. The Jews were not simply adhering to the Old Testament because they were blind to the truth of the New Testament; rather, they embraced Talmudic tradition over and against the New Testament. Thus, they could no longer be protected on the basis of their ignorance. In accepting the Talmud, they intentionally rejected Christ. This notion of Jewish intentionality altered the attitudes of all of Christendom. Currents in Medieval piety, such as the Crusades, the popularity of Passion meditations, and increased fascination with the Eucharist, fueled pervasive anti-Jewish antagonism throughout Europe. Beginning in the 13th Century, Jews were increasingly accused of ritual murder, blood libel, and cannibalism. These accusations continue in jarring and unsettling ways.

The chapter titled “Myth and Counter-myth” offers an illuminating analysis of Jewish responses to the charge of deicide and Jewish appropriations of the Passion narrative. Rather than disputing the historicity of events surrounding the crucifixion, certain thinkers used the inner logic of the narrative to argue for the injustice of the Christ killer motif. Cohen also examines the ways in which Jewish intellectuals have identified various aspects of Jewish tradition and experience with the sufferings of Christ, from themes of death and resurrection in Talmudic interpretations of the Isaac story to 20th century Jewish art depicting Jesus on the cross. Cohen then analyses *Nostra Aetate*, the watershed Vatican II document considered to be a “major breakthrough in Jewish/Christian relations” (168). Cohen remains critical of how this document has been received: while its interpreters have softened the charge of Christ killer, they have by no means removed it.

The final part examines the Christ killer myth as it has appeared in religious art, passion plays, and cinema. Passion art from the 11th to 16th centuries portrayed the Jews in increasingly negative terms: the relatively benign early portrayals of *synagoga* at the foot of the cross gave way to depicting Christ’s executioners as Jews rather than as Roman soldiers. The Jews were further demonized through artistic depictions of blood libel, cannibalism, ritual murder and the *Judensau* motif. Cohen’s Passion play analysis focuses on the German town of Oberammergau, where there have been continuous Passion play productions roughly once every decade since 1634, and pays particular attention to changes in the play since Vatican II. His cinema analysis examines various films, from Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 1964 film *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* and Martin Scorsese’s *Last Temptation of Christ* to Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*. Saving his treatment of Judas Iscariot for the conclusion, Cohen points out that the Passion narrative cannot function without a villain. He leaves the reader to ponder: who ultimately betrayed whom?

Cohen’s stated objective in this book is, at the risk of understatement, ambitious: to trace the Christ killer myth from its origins to the present day, through history and through art, in a style that is accessible and useful to academics and non-academics, Christians and Jews, religious and secular audiences. Cohen is uniquely equipped for this task. Drawing upon authors and themes covered at length in works such as *Living Letters of the Law* and *The Friars and the Jews*, Cohen is exceptional at discerning which of the myriad instantiations of the Christ killer myth to investigate and how to do so in clear, simple, and concise terms. Any study of this scope, succinctness, and coherence must, however, emphasize certain aspects of a narrative over others. Consequently there are points where the informed reader will question what Cohen leaves out. For example, as background to his treatment of *Nostra Aetate*, Cohen devotes a single paragraph to the Catechism of the Council of Trent, which was published in 1566 and disseminated throughout the Catholic world. The Catechism clearly and explicitly states that through sinfulness all participate in killing Christ (169). Expressing the Christ Killer myth in universal terms that imprecate all of humanity, rather than in historical terms that place exclusive blame on the Jews (169), marks an enormous paradigm shift whereby the Christian and the Jew are together held accountable for the crucifixion. Even in this most general and selective of surveys, I am puzzled by the fact that Cohen neglects to examine this statement and its subsequent effect in greater detail. I was left with questions as to why this shift had such an apparently minimal effect despite being contained in a widely disseminated and influential document that was foundational to educating Catholics in their faith.

Occasional questions concerning what Cohen leaves out, however, do not obscure the many merits of this work. He connects sources Jewish and Christian, ancient and modern, artistic and literary in a way that even the uninformed reader can follow. Specialists will benefit from seeing how Cohen connects their topics of interest to the broader Jewish/Christian narrative and should

find his chapter-by-chapter suggestions for further reading helpful. He also gracefully manages the delicate task of being at once charitable toward and critical of the Christian tradition: while he praises the progress made in Jewish/Christian relations, he makes it clear that the Christ killer myth is alive and well and that more work needs to be done to eradicate it. In short, this is a valuable book for virtually anyone with an interest in Jewish/Christian relations.