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Blaming the Jews: Politics and Delusion by Bernard Harrison
(review)

David Patterson

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Blaming the Jews: Politics and Delusion. By *Bernard Harrison*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020. 488 pages. \$38.00 (paper).

With the global proliferation of antisemitism, Bernard Harrison's *Blaming the Jews* could not be timelier. Many of the current expressions of antisemitism stem not from personal hostility to Jews on the part of this or that individual, but from a resurgence of the ancient delusion that the Jews collectively dominate world affairs and lie at the root of the world's evils. This applies both to the "Zionist entity" that is the state of Israel and to Jews and Jewish organizations in the Diaspora. In this massive volume, Harrison demonstrates his fundamental understanding of the phenomenon and what lies at its core—namely that the premise driving antisemitism is not that all Jews are evil but that all evil is Jewish. Therefore, from the perspective of the antisemite, the redemptive restoration of the world to a state of purity rests upon purging the world of every trace of the contagion of Jews and Judaism.

As far as the "new antisemitism" is concerned, Harrison notes four things that are "new" about it. First, antisemitism comes from both the Right and the Left of the political spectrum. Second, it is motivated almost entirely by "hostility to the State of Israel." Third, those who are accused of being antisemitic vehemently deny their antisemitism. And fourth, "antisemitism has ceased to be a *socially marginal* phenomenon" (3–4). Indeed, not only has antisemitism become socially acceptable, it has become ethically required: one cannot be considered a good person without opposing the existence of the Jewish state and, by extension, the existence of the Jewish people. Over the centuries, the Jewish people have endured antisemitism in many forms: the deicide charge, the blood libel, the world Jewish conspiracy, the demonizing of the Jews, and so on. In our own time, the Jewish state has been tagged with whatever the evil of the day might be: racism, colonialism, apartheid, human rights violation, COVID-19, police brutality, and so on.

Harrison brilliantly lays out this pattern of blaming the Jews in five parts. In part I, "Varieties of Antisemitism," Harrison

thoroughly explains how the historical forms of antisemitism that originated in Europe continue to provide an underpinning for modern manifestations, beginning with Islamic jihadists. First among these manifestations is Hamas. In chapter one, "Hamas Addresses the Jewish Question," Harrison lays out not only the ways in which Hamas has picked up on European antisemitic tropes but also explains how they have become the heirs to Hitler. Hamas, he says, espouses an antisemitism "differing in no significant respect from that espoused by the Nazis" (18–19). In chapter two, "'Profiting' from the Holocaust," he deftly explores ways in which today's antisemites seek to vilify the Jews by making them the purveyors of the Holocaust as a uniquely Jewish catastrophe. Here, Harrison exposes the antisemitic nature of relativizing, trivializing, and ultimately de-Judaizing the Holocaust. This leads him to "Questions of Definition" of antisemitism in chapter three, which he handles very well, particularly in the section titled "Social versus Political Antisemitism" (67ff).

In part II, "Why the Jews?" Harrison raises the most fundamental question behind antisemitism, beginning with chapter four, "The Disease Metaphor." Here, he demonstrates that the perennial antisemitic canard that the Jews are a contagion in our midst is an accusation that the contagion is Judaism, that is, the millennial teachings and tradition of Judaism (91–92). In chapter five, "An Obstinate People," then, the obstinacy of the Jewish people is to persist in their millennial testimony to the God of Abraham and the love and care for human beings, particularly the stranger. The antisemites regard as a contagion the infinite ethical responsibility of each of us for all, which is the contagion of Judaism. Thus, for Jews it is "difficult if not impossible to join, at least en masse, big battalions marching to the beat of non-Jewish drums" (123). Subsequently, efforts to convert or to assimilate the Jews invariably fail; the only option remaining to the antisemite is extermination.

In part III, "Is Israel an Illegitimate State?," Harrison applies his insights into the hatred of the Jewish people to an understanding of the world's hatred of the Jewish state. In chapter six, "Accusation and Narrative," he shows how in a postmodern time the viability

of antisemitism rests upon narrative (164ff), which smoothly transitions into chapter seven, "Narrative and Reality." Here, Harrison demonstrates that the postmodern view that there is no truth or reality but only narratives of truth and reality feeds Jew hatred: the Jews have their narrative, and the Jew haters have theirs, and in the postmodern world there is no solid ground for rejecting the narrative of the antisemites. The narratives under scrutiny here are the narratives of those who support the existence of the Jewish state and those who are bent on its destruction, beginning with the Palestinians (196ff). Following chapter eight, "The Legacy of 1967," chapter nine, "Is 'Anti-Zionism' Antisemitic?," is among the most crucial of Harrison's insights and arguments, noting as he does that "anti-Zionist discourse constantly echoes both the tone and the vocabulary of tropes and accusations characteristic of traditional antisemitism" (240). Here, he brings out the truth that not only has anti-Zionism become acceptable, it has become morally required: one cannot be considered morally upright if one does not oppose the existence of the Jewish state. The anti-Zionist movement finds its most insidious adherents not among white supremacists but on college campuses, in the halls of higher learning, as Harrison deftly demonstrates in chapter 10, "Israel, the Left, and Universities." Indeed, very few college professors openly identify as white supremacists.

In part I, "Judaism Defaced," Harrison brings to light a crucial point about antisemitism, namely that antisemitism is anti-Judaism. Antisemitism is not only Jew hatred—it is the hatred of the God of Abraham, the God of Judaism. In chapter 11, "A Primitive Religion?," he exposes the modernist opposition to the millennial testimony of the Jewish people to the God revealed at Mount Sinai. Here, Harrison identifies three "deficiencies of Judaism" cited by the antisemites: "its supposed character as a religion, its alleged defects as a system of morals, and the support it offers to what is widely perceived as Jewish tribalism" (302). The opposition is to the singled-out condition of the Jewish people as witnesses to a "system of morals" grounded in an absolute, divine commandment. In chapter 12, "Mitzvah and Moral Theory," he

shows that antisemites would set the human moral system over against the divine commandment to love not only one's neighbor but also the stranger. Here, Harrison brings out the bankruptcy of the Kantian universalist system of moral autonomy and its inherent antisemitism (338–339). This leads to the question of “What’s Wrong with Universalism?” in chapter 13. Why should the Jewish people be a people apart? Why should there be a Jewish state apart from other states? Why should the Jewish people or the Jewish state exist?

Part V, “Antisemitism as a Problem for Non-Jews,” makes it clear that what begins with the Jews never ends with the Jews. In chapter 14, “Jew Baiting on Campus,” Harrison shows that the hatred of Jews on college campuses extends to anyone who might support the state of Israel. The dangers of transference from Jew hatred to anyone who speaks on behalf of the Jewish state, he argues, “arise from the ease with which it allows believers to persuade themselves that their hatred of Israel—and Jews—arises not from any *personal* dislike of Jews but rather from moral impulses of a generously altruistic and humanistic character” (400). Calling out these deluded assumptions, chapter 15, titled “Defamation Disguised,” drives home the point that college intellectuals and left-wing pundits have devised an ingenious means of disguising Jew hatred in a discourse of moral outrage. “Political antisemitism,” Harrison observes, “exposes an entire community not only to hatred and contempt but also to personal attack for those who take it seriously. A clear line separates it, as collective defamation, from rational political discourse deserving the protection of legislation guaranteeing freedom of speech” (425). This incitement to contempt leads to a nefarious manifestation of antisemitism, as Harrison articulates in chapter 17, “Judgment Unhinged:” “The worse turn political antisemitism does to those who consciously or unconsciously acquiesce in its main doctrines is to persuade them that the Jews are the key to understanding what is going on whenever things appear to be falling apart” (449). Once again, the premise that drives antisemitism is not that all Jews are evil but that all evil is Jewish.

Bernard Harrison's book is crucial, essential, and indispensable to understanding: 1) the nature of antisemitism; 2) the imminent threat of antisemitism; and, 3) the connections between Jew hatred *for* the hatred of the other to the connections between Jew hatred *and* the hatred of the other. This book is required reading for anyone who wants to understand antisemitism.

David Patterson
The University of Texas at Dallas

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