

done a first-rate journalist's job in writing this one—the kind of journalism that we do not get often enough in our newspapers these days, though the *Sunday Times*, for which he reports, has a more honourable record than most papers in this respect. Gus John's commentary describes the situation from the point of view

of young black people: wary, disillusioned and vulnerable. The book pleads for an awakening of public opinion, both black and white, before it is too late. It is for the reader to take the analysis further, to think, to find out more and to act.

ANN DUMMETT

**THE TRIAL AND DEATH OF JESUS**, by Haim Cohn. *Weidenfeld and Nicolson*, London, 1972. 419 pp. £3.50.

The accounts of the trial of Jesus in the Gospels are notoriously inconsistent. What really happened? A Justice of the Supreme Court of Israel has now undertaken 'an independent and unbiased legal inquiry' (p. 331). He is not the first lawyer to attempt this, but all who went before him have produced only 'pseudoscientific legal scholarship' (p. 330). Now at last, it seems, the veil of prejudice is to be stripped away to disclose the truth.

There never was any dispute between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. Everybody loved him. He never said anything that the rabbis would not have endorsed. The cleansing of the temple had official approval. In any case, no Jew would ever have betrayed a brother Jew to the hated Romans. The episodes of Judas and Barabbas are pure fiction. The meeting of the Sanhedrin was not a trial but a despairing attempt to rescue Jesus from the consequences of his own indiscretion. The Romans had arrested him on suspicion of treason, and the high priest had persuaded Pilate to grant him custody of the prisoner for one night. Even Pilate did not really want to pronounce a death sentence, but his hand was forced by Jesus' persistence in pleading guilty to a capital charge, even though he knew he was actually innocent of it. All the actors upon that memorable scene were honourable men doing their sincere best to avert unnecessary tragedy. If the world has become accustomed to a more sinister story, this is entirely due to the malice of the evangelists, with Matthew as the arch conspirator.

If this rewriting of history were to gain credence, it would have the great advantage of cutting the root of much antisemitism. Jews who suffered persecution at Christian hands could be regarded as martyrs for righteousness' sake. Unfortunately for this admirable aim, the verdict is not without difficulties. It entails a Jesus who is an obstinate and eccentric nonentity, and leaves us asking how he came to be universally beloved, why the authorities thought he was worth saving, and how so trivial

a cause could give rise to such large effects.

The methods of the investigation are as disquieting as its results. It was to the interest of Christians to exculpate Rome at the expense of the Jews, therefore they may be presumed to have done so. Since the only available witnesses are Christian ones, conjecture is preferable to unacceptable evidence. There is even one piece of testimony which is described as 'an assumption against us' (p. 95). The impartial court is 'unbiased' in favour of the appellant.

Mr Justice Cohn believes that the weightiest objection to his thesis is the silence of Jewish authorities on the highly creditable part played by the Sanhedrin on that fateful night; but such references were no doubt excised from the records for fear of Christian reprisals. In fact, however, there is one Jewish authority, much earlier than any cited by Cohn, who is not silent, and on his evidence Cohn's whole enterprise founders. Paul, in one of his rare outbursts of indignation against his compatriots, says unequivocally that they 'killed the Lord Jesus' (1 Thess. 2, 15); and, as a former persecutor of the Church, he might be expected to know. Cohn dismisses this on the ground that it is exaggerated (which is true, since Roman soldiers carried out the execution) and that the verb is 'used somewhat allegorically' (which is nonsense).

The book has its usefulness as a mine of legal lore. The tragedy of it is that anyone should still feel that Jewish-Gentile understanding could be furthered by such overstatement of the Jewish case. I say 'Jewish-Gentile' rather than 'Jewish-Christian', for, whatever past crimes may lie on the Christian conscience, modern anti-Jewish feeling and action, from Hitler to El Fatah, has been non-Christian and has owed nothing to the New Testament. If this learned judge really knows more than the rest of us about a member of his race who knew how to make everybody love him, would he not serve his fellow countrymen better in their present crisis by helping them to discover their Jew's secret?

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