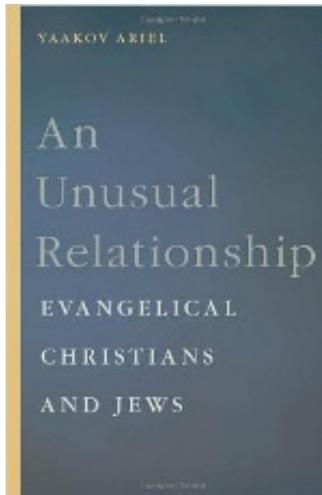




Evangelical Christians and Jews: A Match Made in Heaven?



Book review

Motti Inbari | 01.06.2014

Yaakov Ariel:

An Unusual Relationship: Evangelical Christians and Jews.

Goldstein-Goren Series in American Jewish History.

New York: New York University Press, 2013.

307 pp. \$39.00 (cloth)

Yaakov Ariel's new book is an important work of scholarship regarding the attitude of evangelical Christians in America toward Jews and the State of Israel. The book offers a panoramic examination of its subject and draws wide-ranging conclusions. Ariel's study offers a discussion of the ideas, actions, and popular literature of conservative evangelicals regarding Jews. The book's major contribution to the field lies in its emphasis on the power of messianic faith in shaping evangelical attitudes. A good deal of research has been done in recent years on conservative Christians in America but most of it has been produced by social scientists or historians who are not much interested in the core religious texts and concepts that motivate evangelists. And yet, without understanding these texts and concepts, it is difficult to truly penetrate their world and understand its inner logic. Ariel is one of the few academically trained scholars who has been able to tackle this material, and he has done so with immense skill and with no bias for or against them.

The first chapter discusses the Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, concentrating on the changing attitudes toward the Jews among the leadership of this new movement. The Reformers showed an ambivalent attitude toward the Jews: on the one hand appreciation and sympathy, but on the other anger at their refusal to accept Jesus. The Puritans and other pietist groups in America played an important role in the development of a positive approach toward Jews. Their literalist reading of scripture led them to claim that Jews still enjoy God's blessing, in contradiction to the traditional teaching that the church replaced the Jews as the object of these blessings. At the same time, they founded a strong mission among the Jews due to their belief that salvation can come only through Christ. In their efforts to reach out to Jews, they emphasized areas of common ground, such as messianic beliefs and the shared belief in the sacred scriptures.

The second chapter explains the premillennial and Dispensational nature of evangelical messianic beliefs, which drew in particular on the teachings of the Irish preacher John Nelson Derby. The central concept of Dispensationalism is that the Second Coming of Christ will take place in two stages. In the first, Jesus will reappear in heaven but will not descend to earth. In heaven, he will meet the true believers--those who were born again and adopted Christ as their personal savior--who will be drawn to him from earth in an act known as the Rapture of the Saints. The true believers will remain in the air with their Savior for seven years, during which period the earth will undergo the great tribulation. For the Jews, this will be "a time of trouble for Jacob" (Jer. 30:7). Even if they return to their homeland prior to or during this period, they will be found lacking in faith because of their refusal to accept Christ as their Messiah. They will establish a state, but far from being the desired Kingdom of God this will merely be a stage in the events that will precede the coming of the Messiah. During the period of the great tribulation there will arise a Jewish ruler--the Antichrist--who will pretend to be the true Messiah. The Jews will welcome him as the Redeemer, and he will then proceed to rebuild the Temple, reinstate the sacrifices, and institute a reign of terror. This period will end with the return of Christ to earth, together with the true believers, to establish his kingdom. He will defeat the Antichrist, establish a regime of justice throughout the world, and make Jerusalem his capital.

The next chapter demonstrates how these ideas were disseminated by popular nineteenth-century writers, such as James Brookes and Dwight Moody. Brookes's *Maranatha: Or the Lord Cometh* (1874), predicting the immanent Second Coming, was his most widely circulated book. Moody, Ariel tells us, was the leading evangelist in America during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and he referred extensively to the Jewish people in his preaching. The highly popular *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) was also published during this period. This Bible commentary supported the Dispensationalist eschatological understanding of God's plan for humanity. Ariel also shows that the growing interest in the Jews developed alongside the rise of a conservative fundamentalist movement that was highly critical of secular American culture.

The fourth chapter describes the involvement of evangelical Christians in Europe and the United States in attempts to settle Jews in the land of Israel during the nineteenth century and through the end of the First World War. The chapter covers the initiatives of Lord Ashley Cooper of England, whose belief in the imminent arrival of the Messiah led him in 1840 to appeal to the monarchs of Europe to restore Palestine to the Jews. Another practical attempt to help Jews came with the support that was offered by George Gawler, a retired officer and former governor of South Australia, to Moses Montefiore for his housing projects for the Jews of Jerusalem. William Blackstone, one of the most important evangelists of the time, initiated a plan to resettle persecuted Russian Jews in Palestine and launched two public appeals on this matter to different American presidents. The German Reverend William Hechler assisted Theodore Herzl by opening many doors for Herzl's Zionist ideas.

After the Holy Land became accessible to tourism, evangelicals began to visit the country. Ariel's fifth chapter tells the story of the American Colony, founded in 1840 by a community of believers who came to Jerusalem from Chicago and Sweden in order to witness the Second Coming. Their intense messianic tension did not survive to the following generations. Today, what is left of the colony is a splendid hotel.

The sixth chapter explores the mission to the Jews. Ariel argues that since the eighteenth century, missionary work among the Jews has occupied a central place on the agenda of evangelical Christians. Propagating Christianity among the Jews has meant teaching the Jewish people about their role and purpose in history. Ariel explains that until the 1920s, the missions directed much of their message and activities toward poor and needy Jewish immigrants and their children in working-class neighborhoods in America. From the 1930s, they started approaching more prosperous Jewish communities, while from the 1970s missionaries targeted the children of well-integrated middle-class Jews, as well as intermarried Jews and their children. Since the 1970s, the mainline churches have

stopped missionary work among the Jews and moved into the field of dialogue and recognition. Only conservative Christians are still active in missionary outreach to Jews.

One product of the mission to the Jews was a Yiddish literary subculture. The seventh chapter presents this rich and interesting phenomenon, which produced hundreds of books, journals, newspapers, and Bible commentaries. The most ambitious project was Henry Einspruch's translation of the New Testament into Yiddish titled *Der Bris Hadosheh* (1941). However, the translation was published just as Yiddish was ceasing to be the main language of the Jewish masses.

The eighth chapter discusses the changing attitudes of evangelical preachers toward conspiracy theories and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Ariel shows that in the early 1930s there was widespread acceptance among evangelical preachers that the Protocols were an authentic document, and many accepted the allegations of a Jewish conspiracy to rule the world. However, the rise of Nazi Germany, its antireligious character and its racial ideology, together with the persecution of Jews and converts to Christianity, led to a change of attitude. From the outbreak of the Second World War, evangelical preachers stopped quoting the *Protocols* and the idea of a Jewish conspiracy became markedly less prevalent.

The following chapter discusses the evangelical response to the Holocaust, including a review of the narrative of several novels published in the 1970s on this topic. Ariel argues that historical novels have become the main tool for expressing evangelical ideas in the modern era.^[1] The main argument behind these novels was that the Nazi atrocities were committed by non-Christians. Indeed, they argue, Nazi transgressions were carried out by anti-Christians, even if they were members of churches. These novels also commemorated the actions of Christian true believers who resisted the Nazi regime while endangering their lives, thus transforming themselves into modern-day martyrs. After reading the chapter, I was fascinated to learn more about the real-time evangelical response to the Holocaust and evangelicals' actions during the war. Although evangelicals were very vocal and active before and after the war in promoting the well-being of Jews, during the war their voices seem to have fallen silent. This question remains open for future research.

The tenth chapter examines the evangelical attitude toward the State of Israel. Evangelists saw the establishment of the State of Israel as clear proof of their messianic beliefs and as a sign of the imminent return of Jesus. In particular, the Israeli victory of 1967 had a powerful effect on evangelicals. Since the 1970s, there has been a dramatic increase in the power of evangelicals in American politics; Ariel demonstrates that their supportive attitude toward Israel has influenced several American presidents from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush. The evangelical presence in Israel has become far more prominent since the establishment in 1980 of the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, which organizes annual festivals in Jerusalem and provides tens of millions of dollars a year for charitable activities in the country. An interesting aspect is Ariel's discussion of the Israeli response: Israelis were glad to discover unexpected yet devoted Christian friends and came to welcome evangelical support, although they were at times unhappy about the missionary presence.

The following chapter sheds light on evangelical support for the efforts of small groups of Orthodox Jews to construct the Third Temple. Since the 1970s, a number of evangelical and Jewish groups have worked toward the declared goal of rebuilding the Temple, and some have begun preparations for the reinstatement of the ancient Temple rituals. According to premillennial and Dispensational belief, the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple is associated with the End of Days. Accordingly, evangelicals strongly admire Jewish movements with a similar agenda, particularly the Temple Institute and the Temple Mount Faithful. Ariel discusses the fear that Jewish nationalists or evangelical premillennialists may become involved in a plot to bomb the mosques on the Temple Mount as part of the reconstruction of the Jewish Temple. He emphasizes that such concerns relate to the extreme margins of the movements, but acknowledges that this is a genuine threat. Beyond these concerns, Ariel rightly notes that this alliance is unprecedented in the history of religions, and

it is difficult to imagine that it could have emerged in other times or locations.

In his final chapter, Ariel examines the rise of the hybrid movement of evangelical Jews or Jewish believers in Jesus. The movement was created to promote the idea that Jews who had embraced the Christian faith could maintain some or all of their Jewish characteristics. A theological innovation within this movement was the abandonment of the idea that the church replaced the Jews as the recipient of God's blessings--a position that eventually became dominant among all evangelicals. In the 1970s, the term "Messianic Jews" came into widespread use by people who viewed themselves as fully Christian and fully Jews. As time went by, the movement became more independent from the established churches. Currently, Ariel tells us, this movement has hundreds of congregations, including several in Israel. The movement had edited its own prayer book and Passover Haggadah, since the celebration of Passover has become fashionable among evangelical churches. Ariel concludes that "the evangelical Jewish movement has signaled a new openness on the part of evangelical Christianity" (p. 244).

Many observers regard the State of Israel and evangelist Christians as strange bedfellows. Some feel that the evangelists' messianic agenda is tantamount to anti-Semitism. Ariel shows that such assessments represent an extreme interpretation of evangelist beliefs. Their theological position regarding Judaism and the Jews is complex and even paradoxical. Ariel's study convinced me that Israelis and Jews should prefer their enthusiasm and engagement over the indifference or even hostility shown by some other Christian denominations.

I believe this book could become a textbook for all those interested in this topic. The chapters are short and readable and the focus on evangelical literature offers fresh perspectives. The author illustrates clearly that a new stage in Christian-Jewish relations has begun in which conservative Christians support Jews and are concerned for their well-being. This comes as a break with the old patterns of suspicions and animosity. This study makes an excellent contribution toward our understanding of contemporary Christianity in America and its attitude toward the Jews--an unusual relationship indeed.

Footnotes

[1] Ariel analyzes several novels, including Tim LaHaye and Grant Jeffrey's *Left Behind* series, 16 vols. (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1995-2007); Corrie ten Boom, with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (Washington Depot: Chosen Books, 1971); Maria Anne Hirschmann, *Hansi's New Life* (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1980); and Jan Markell, *Angels in the Camp: A Remarkable Story of Peace in the Midst of the Holocaust* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1979).

Editorial remarks

Motti Inbari is an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. Dr. Inbari focuses his research on Jewish fundamentalism in Israel. He earned his PhD at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry (currently part of the Department of Modern Jewish History) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His first book *Jewish Fundamentalism and the Temple Mount* was published by the State University of New York Press in English (2009) and by Magnes Press in Hebrew (2008). The book earned the AICE best publication award in Israel Studies in 2009. His second book - *Messianic Religious Zionism Confronts Israeli Territorial Compromises* - was published by Cambridge University Press in 2012.

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