

Mordechai Inbari and Kirill Bumin
*Christian Zionism in the
Twenty-First Century:
American Evangelical Opinion on Israel*

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 240pp.

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Any scholar researching the modern history of Christian Zionism in America will soon enough come across an important text from 1978 titled *American Fundamentalism and Israel: The Relation of Fundamentalist Churches to Zionism and the State of Israel*, published by the Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The author, Yona Malachy, was an Israeli scholar of American religion who was able to conduct a months-long tour of so-called fundamentalist seminaries, churches, and ministries in 1968. He then spent years producing an analysis of these Christians' attitudes toward Zionism and the state of Israel. At his untimely death in 1972, the forty-three-year-old Malachy had grouped four case studies into a manuscript. He observed that "it is precisely this conservative element of American Protestantism which has adopted a clear stand on 'the Jewish question' in general, and on the Jewish national renaissance and the establishment of the State of Israel in particular."

Malachy's on-the-ground observations, as well as the extensive research he conducted to contextualize his subjects, were groundbreaking and anticipated the next wave of scholarship on Christian Zionism in the 1980s by Yaakov Ariel, Timothy Weber, and Paul Boyer, among others. Yet Malachy was not just a scholar. He was also a mid-level official in Israel's Ministry of Religious Affairs, tasked with focusing on "American fundamentalists" in light of public responses to the June 1967 War and shifting Christian attitudes toward Israel. His scholarly insights were no less insightful given his additional motive to understand Christian opinion for the benefit of Israeli public diplomacy.

Inbari and Bumin's timely new book, *Christian Zionism in the Twenty-First Century*, reminded me of this combination. Inbari and Bumin have academic appointments at US universities. There are no explicit prescriptions for improving Israeli public diplomacy. (There are no such passages in Malachy's book either.) This book is published by Oxford University Press and, as such, was written to

contribute to the scholarly understanding of, as its subtitle delineates, “American evangelical opinion on Israel.” Yet there is an urgency to the volume’s central findings that will draw the attention of Israeli policymakers, Christian Zionist activists, and others concerned with the contemporary political and diplomatic stakes and prospects of American evangelical pro-Israel support. The relevance of their scholarship to contemporary politics is apparent in their acknowledgments. Their work is funded in part by the Academic Engagement Network, a pro-Israel independent non-profit based in Washington D.C. The data gathered for this book has been used for reports by the Jewish People Policy Institute, a Jerusalem-based Israeli think tank, among others. Inbari and Bumin partnered with Chosen People Ministries (a leading organization of the Messianic Jewish community) and collaborated with LifeWay Christian Resources (a division of the Southern Baptist Convention) to compile data and conduct three original surveys in 2018, 2020, and 2021. They focus on lay evangelicals and evangelical pastors, giving special attention to the views of lay evangelicals aged 18-29.

Inbari and Bumin’s central finding is that evangelical support for Israel rests on fragile theological, demographic, generational, and cultural views that, their polling indicates, is cracking and will possibly break in the future. Thus, Christian Zionism is “a movement in crisis” (16). It requires “a rich and nuanced analysis of evangelical public opinion” (168) in order to understand why some evangelicals are adopting different theological beliefs, attending different churches, and, especially among younger evangelicals, questioning evangelicals’ traditionally positive views on Israel. The mix of survey data, quantitative analysis, interviews, background research, and secondary literature review outmatches any other sociological study of contemporary evangelical Christian Zionism to date.

The results of their surveys, which structure all five chapters of the book, are worth consulting on their own. There is no shortage of polling around this issue, but no previous work has so closely sought to study and correlate the influence on evangelicals’ views of the level of theological education, whether they are clergy or laity, holding of particular theological views, rate of church attendance, age, and political assessments of Israel. Thus, for example, we now have polling on how evangelical pastors’ support for supersessionism (defined here as agreeing to the statement “The Christian church has fulfilled or replaced the nation of Israel in God’s plans” [83]) correlates with eschatological views (amillennial, postmillennial or premillennial). It may not be that surprising that resistance to supersessionism is strongest among premillennial pastors (only 25.8% of respondents agreed to the statement) because premillennialists, many of them influenced by the theology of dispensationalism, believe that Israel’s covenant with God remains unchanged. However, it is important to note that premillennial pastors skew older and that resistance to supersessionism is lower among younger evangelical pastors who are more likely to be amillennialist in their eschatology (75.8% agreed to the statement). Because of these variables of age and theological views and the role that supersessionism plays in theological attitudes toward the state of Israel, the authors conclude that “a significant change in the evangelical movement is potentially brewing” (84). This could lead to a shift in how evangelicals view Israel.

The story of evangelical pastors is indicative for Inbari and Bumin of larger shifts that presage a sea change in evangelical eschatological attitudes that could ultimately imperil evangelical support for Israel. Their 2021 study found that only 21% of 18–29-year-old evangelicals identified as premillennialists. This is a strikingly low number. Just a decade earlier, in 2011, the National Association of Evangelicals reported that 65% of all evangelicals subscribed to premillennialism. If the younger numbers become a trend, the numerical majority of premillennialism in American fundamentalism and evangelicalism, which has been a fixture since the turn of the twentieth century, may be passing. Scholars have credited a vast array of attitudes toward society, culture, politics, and diplomacy on, in part, the prevalence of premillennialism and postmillennialism in various eras of American history. With premillennialism’s waning influence among young evangelicals, a next chapter of that history seems to be emerging.

Indeed, fragmenting eschatologies and views on Israel mirror the fracturing of evangelicalism writ large in the 2020s, a phenomenon attested to by dozens of journalists and scholars. “This religious movement is rapidly evolving and fragmenting,” the authors write, “from a fairly monolithic, white, conservative, pro-Israel bloc from the 1950s through the 1990s to one which manifests almost evenly split loyalties on the Israeli-Palestinian question and considerable levels of eschatological, racial / ethnic, generational, and political diversity” (142). Here, Inbari and Bumin supply some more hard data to help us understand the extent of generational shifts. Nonetheless, it remains unclear why demographic factors like age have such strong correlations to shifting views while other factors like race and ethnicity seem to have minimal impacts. It remains to be explained what ideological forces are investing certain factors, such as regular church attendance (which correlates to more positive views of Israel), with more explanatory power than other factors.

Inbari and Bumin warn more than once that none of the trends they are documenting are set in stone. Young evangelicals may develop attitudes more similar to their parents in coming years. A new Cold War or a new regional war involving Israel may reignite interest in premillennialism. (This book was written prior to the conflict between Israel and Hamas that broke out on Oct. 7, 2023.) However, the book also contains clear implications to politically interested parties—both those who have an interest in encouraging more evangelical support for Israel and those who see in these trends encouraging signs of change. Here the legacy of Malachy is evident again, given the potential influence of evangelical views and whether they remain weighted toward Israel or whether they change, on the massive political and cultural relationship that has been built between evangelicals and Israel in the half-century since 1978. And like Malachy’s book, *Christian Zionism in the Twenty-First Century* is a valuable study for the present situation and will be an important reference for the next era of scholarship on this subject.