

**REVIEW**

Yaacov Ariel

***An Unusual Relationship:  
Evangelical Christians and Jews***

(New York University Press, 2013), hardcover, x + 307 pp.

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Describing evangelicals' "unusual" relationship with Jews and Judaism, historian Yaacov Ariel notes that "in no other instance have members of one community of faith considered another group to hold a special role in the divine course of human redemption and to be their God's first nation" (p. 245). As Ariel shows, the resulting relationship can be contradictory, at times surprising, and thoroughly enthralling. He weaves together various strands of this story from the United States, England, and Israel, synthesizing more than a hundred years of history in lucid and readable prose.

General audiences and scholars not already familiar with evangelical-Jewish relations will find *An Unusual Relationship* especially helpful. Over the last ten or so years, there have been a number of studies of Christian Zionism and premillennial theology, including books by Shalom Goldman, Paul Merkley, Stephen Spector, Donald M. Lewis, and Robert O. Smith. Ariel draws on this work, especially in his sections on Israel, Zionism, and evangelical political activism, where he does an admirable job of reiterating its main points and bringing together Anglo-Protestants on both sides of the Atlantic. For example, the Earl of Shaftesbury and William Blackstone, nineteenth-century proponents of Zionism in England and America respectively, share the spotlight in Chapter 4.

Ariel's book does not challenge the current scholarship on evangelicals' relationship to Jews, but it does widen its scope by including topics often overlooked. In his discussion of early

Christian Zionists, for example, Ariel includes the often overlooked Spafford family, Holiness Christians who started Jerusalem's "American Colony" in 1881. Another chapter, on contemporary evangelical views of the Holocaust, is especially welcome. Ariel focuses on a novelistic genre epitomized by Corrie ten Boom's *The Hiding Place* (1971); it seems a natural place to begin since her book is rarely mentioned in scholarship, though it is enormously popular among evangelicals. Ariel's insightful analysis contextualizes *The Hiding Place* within a discourse that solidified during the 1980s, which absolves "true" Christians of guilt (viewing Nazis as not Christians; Ariel leaves out the anti-Catholic gloss such statements often imply). Further—and here Ariel is admirably even-handed on a controversial issue—evangelicals have come to view the Holocaust as an impetus to evangelism: the more people accept Christ as their personal saviour, the less likely that humankind will perpetrate such an atrocity again (p. 169). Future research would do well to build on Ariel's discussion in order to clarify how this genre of Holocaust literature fits into evangelicals' broader discourse about victimhood, including the perception of themselves as victims in "secular" America.

Ariel's careful attention to Protestant missions also moves this book beyond the usual accounts of Christian Zionism. This theme will come as no surprise to readers already familiar with Ariel's work; indeed, a fair amount of Chapter 6 summarizes material from his award-winning *Evangelizing the Chosen People* (2000). The two most innovative chapters on missions (chapters six and seven) cover Yiddish missionary literature and Messianic Judaism ("Jewish evangelicals"). The Yiddish sources, dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, comprise a wonderful archive that has all but been ignored. That said, at times Ariel overstates the case, calling its production "amazing" and "remarkable" (and even as rich and creative as non-Christian Jewish Yiddish literature [p. 126]). In fact, this output is not surprising, given the proliferation of missions to the Jews in this period and the importance that Protestant missionaries place on producing vernacular translations of scripture and tracts. Where these sources offer

especially valuable insight is the role of Jewish converts as translators and go-betweens. Also interesting are Ariel's descriptions of the competition between different missions about which translations to promote, as well as the fact that at least some Jewish scholars were aware of, and praised, the New Testament translations (p. 139).

Ariel's chapter on Messianic Judaism, mainly a review of his earlier work on the topic, builds on the key mediating role of Jewish converts as missionaries, translators, and defenders of the "Jewish race" against their (often) anti-Semitic co-congregants. Ariel's description of Messianic Judaism as a movement is not especially comprehensive; rather, it reflects a particular vision put forward in the writings of its leaders. Indeed, *An Unusual Relationship* is fundamentally a book about religious leaders, most of whom are men, and the ideas they espouse or the cultural products they create. It is also, despite some mention in the conclusion of mutuality and exchange, a book about Christians' views of and sometimes encounters with Jews. Jewish people may react and even shape the encounter to some extent. However, Ariel focuses on the "beliefs, messages, language, literatures, and communities, as well as the political agendas, agencies and means, that *evangelicals have created to affect the future of the Jews*" (p. 12, emphasis added). This focus in no way makes *An Unusual Relationship* any less compelling; it does, however, signal many avenues for future research.