In 2002, the American government released a 1972 recording of a conversation that Richard Nixon, one of America’s most controversial presidents, conducted with Billy Graham, America’s most respectable evangelist in the second half of the twentieth century. The content of the audiocassette shocked many Americans. The transcripts revealed that Graham and Nixon expressed negative opinions of Jews, blaming them for the ills of the age and echoing stereotypical images of Jews as subversive liberals whose aim was to undermine Christian values and institutions. Many had already been aware of Nixon’s prejudices against Jews but were surprised that Graham shared the disgraced president’s opinions.

Remarkably, Graham’s conversation with Nixon took place in the same year that the evangelist produced a movie, *His Land*, that portrayed the state of Israel in very favorable terms. Israel’s prime minister at the time, Golda Meir, was a guest of honor at the film’s opening night. The movie was not an isolated endeavor. Graham spoke and wrote many times in favor of Israel, viewing it as playing a significant role in the unfolding of prophecy as well as regarding it as an ally in the global war against the Soviet bloc. In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, American Jewry supported Israel almost unanimously and judged pro-Israeli stands as indications of friendliness toward the Jewish people. In addition to his expressed pro-Israel sympathies, Graham spoke about Jews and Christians as overcoming prejudices together, a gesture that Jewish organizations particularly appreciated. Until the recording was made public, Jewish leaders generally looked upon Graham as a devoted friend. In 1969, the Anti-Defamation League, one of the central Jewish
organizations in America, awarded Graham the Torch of Liberty Plaque; and in 1977 the American Jewish Committee, another major Jewish group, awarded him its first Inter-Religious Award.

Other evangelical leaders were, at times, less careful than Graham, openly expressing long-held cultural stereotypes of Jews, often unaware of the sensitivities that their remarks could potentially stir. Such evangelists usually did not see any contradiction between long-held negative Christian opinions of Jews and an appreciative understanding, to which they often subscribed, of the place of the Jewish people in history. Graham’s patron and mentor, William Riley, for example, condemned the Jews for their alleged destructive political leanings at the same time that he expressed hopes for the well-being of the Jews and for their rejuvenation as a nation.

That Graham apologized in 2002 for the things he had said thirty years earlier and stated that he did not hold such views anymore illustrates that evangelical attitudes toward the Jews did not remain static, instead going through major changes and developments, especially in the late twentieth century. In general, such opinions have improved over the years, both in response to political and cultural developments and following actual encounters between evangelicals and Jews.

Making Sense of a Complex Relationship

Graham’s remarks on the negative impact of the Jews on American culture, juxtaposed with his friendly statements about Jews and support of Israel, highlight the complexity of evangelical attitudes toward the Jews. To outside observers such attitudes have seemed contradictory, but they make sense if one examines the history of evangelical-Jewish relations and evangelical theology, including the eschatological faith to which many conservative evangelicals have adhered. These attitudes have been the product of a particular kind of Christian theology and its understanding of the role of the Jews in history, coupled with long-standing Christian theological and cultural opinions about Judaism and the Jewish people. The varied and complex encounters between evangelicals
and Jews have carried to an extreme the already complicated nature of traditional Christian attitudes toward the Jews, bringing to the forefront, as never before, highly mixed Christian ideas about Jews. Demonstrating unprecedented devotion toward the Jews as God’s chosen people and as heirs and continuers of historical Israel, and offering extensive assistance to Jews as individuals and as a community, evangelicals have also criticized Jewish ways and manners that in their opinion have resulted from the Jews’ nonacceptance of the Christian faith. For the most part, evangelicals have rejected Jewish religious liturgy, piety, and biblical exegeses, except as a means to keep the Jews oriented toward the eventual arrival of the Messiah, and they have remained confident that the Jews will eventually come to recognize Jesus as their Lord and savior.

Wishing to become involved in Jewish life and to reshape Jewish priorities, evangelicals set out to evangelize the Jews, hoping that at least some Jews would adopt the Christian faith and pietistic-evangelical values. However, propagating the Christian gospel among the Jews has involved not merely bringing the Jews to convert but also instructing the Jews as to their true identity and mission in history and teaching them what to expect when this era comes to an end and the apocalyptic stage of history unfolds. In conservative evangelical minds, evangelizing the Jews has meant helping to prepare humanity for the arrival of the Messiah. Missionary work among the Jews has also offered a means of interacting with them, getting acquainted with their culture, and ultimately influencing their destiny. The extensive and energetic missionary network that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has aimed at spreading the evangelical Christian message among the Jews, regardless of the immediate numerical results in terms of actual converts. In contrast to the common Jewish perception, evangelical missionaries have viewed themselves as friends of the Jews and have often acted as their defenders. They have denounced discrimination against Jews in different parts of the world, and they have, like evangelicals holding to the messianic faith in general, lent support to Jewish causes that have seemed to them pertinent to the advancement of history, such as the return of the Jews to Palestine.
The complications in evangelical-Jewish relations go further than inherent theological and cultural ambivalences. In evaluating evangelical-Jewish relations, one must keep in mind that evangelical Christianity is not united or uniform. While there are features that most evangelicals share, evangelical Christianity is composed of numerous denominations, as well as thousands of independent churches. In a number of denominations, evangelicals are but one segment within churches that do not fully share their views. Different evangelical groups have inherited or developed varied ecclesiastical, liturgical, and theological traditions. There are noted divisions over such matters as baptism and the Lord's Supper, as well as over electionism versus predestination. Likewise, there are regional and national variations and ethnic divides even within the same geographical areas. An important line of division among evangelical Christians in the past decades has run between charismatics and noncharismatics. Evangelicals also differ in their accommodations to or critiques of the general culture. Evangelical institutions of higher learning, such as Wheaton College, Liberty University, and Bob Jones University, differ from one another not only in their academic standards but in their codes of behavior as well. Although most evangelicals throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first have adopted conservative social and political worldviews, some have been more progressive. Such variations play a role in evangelical attitudes toward the Jews: ironically, the more conservative elements have shown greater interest in and dedication to the Jews. At the same time, some theological perceptions are shared by almost all self-defined evangelical Christians. In fact, many evangelicals view their various differences and divisions as secondary in comparison to what they consider the essential elements of the evangelical Christian faith.

Evangelical theology focuses on the redemption that Jesus's sacrifice on the cross offers individuals who accept him as their savior, through inner, spiritually and morally transforming conversion experiences. Evangelicals believe that all human beings need to undergo these experiences of conversion or being born again, in which they establish personal relationships with Jesus of Nazareth and adopt him as their
personal savior. In the evangelical view, only those who have undergone such conversion experiences can obtain justification and be morally transformed, “saved,” and promised eternal life. Evangelicals are therefore committed to spreading the Christian message and to persuading the unconverted of the need to accept Jesus as their personal savior. Evangelicals also view the Christian Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, as God’s message to humanity and insist on the authenticity and integrity of the sacred Christian texts. Taking a more literal reading of the Christian sacred scriptures than liberal Christians, many evangelicals adhere to a messianic faith, expecting the second coming of Jesus to earth to occur in the near future. These theological principles—the emphasis on the need to accept Jesus as a personal savior, the commitment to universal evangelism, the more literal reading of the Christian Bible, and the messianic premillennialist faith, which expects the imminent arrival of Jesus to establish the kingdom of God on earth—have played important roles in shaping evangelical attitudes toward the Jews.

A comparative examination of different Christian groups and opinions points to a more literal reading of the Bible and to the evangelical messianic faith as the most decisive factors forming evangelical opinions on the Jews. Evangelicals do not always embrace a premillennialist messianic faith, and some of them hold to traditional Christian understandings of Judaism and its relation to Christianity. Yet messianically oriented evangelicals, who expect the imminent return of Jesus, have exercised ideological and political influences far beyond their numbers, often shaping much of the evangelical agenda toward Jews. Since the late nineteenth century, most leading evangelists and popular evangelical pastors, from Charles Spurgeon and Dwight Moody to Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell, have adhered to a premillennialist messianic faith—that is, one that expects not only a Second Coming but also Jesus’s literal and physical presence on earth during a thousand-year reign—and have helped to spread it within the larger evangelical community. Evangelical Christians with premillennialist leanings have departed from the traditional Christian claim that Christianity is the “true Israel” and the object of God’s promises to that people. Believing that the covenant God
established with Abraham is still valid, even if temporarily suspended, they view the Jews as heirs and continuers of the children of Israel and as the object of biblical prophecies about a restored kingdom of David. At the same time those evangelical Christians have insisted that the Jews, like all other people, have to accept Jesus as their savior in order to be redeemed and to gain sound moral and spiritual ground. This outlook has created a paradox. Evangelical Christians, who ardently believe that only those who have accepted Jesus as their savior are redeemed, have constructed an understanding of the Jews as a people in covenant with God who are about to resume their ancient position as God’s first nation. This complicated, double-edged theological perception stands at the heart of the evangelical relation to the Jews and has given rise to an amazing relationship between the two communities.

Some of the details of evangelical-Jewish relations have been surprising. Evangelicals called for the restoration of the Jews in Palestine and devised political initiatives for the creation of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine even before the rise of Jewish national movements in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Evangelicals supported the Zionist movement from its inception, showing much enthusiasm for the program of Jewish settlement in Palestine. Evangelical Christians reacted with approval to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, and with particular enthusiasm to the outcome of the war between Israel and its Arab neighbors in June 1967.

The War of 1967 enhanced the evangelical faith that the Jews were indeed preparing the ground for the events of the end times. Evangelicals have increasingly lent support to Israel, establishing a number of organizations intended to muster political and material support for the country and its people. Missions to the Jews have, likewise, become agencies for promoting pro-Israeli sentiments and organizing trips to that country. Millions of evangelicals, mostly from North, Central, or South America, have visited Israel as pilgrims. Tens of thousands of young evangelicals have gone as volunteers to work at kibbutzim or archaeological digs. Thousands have settled in the country. Evangelicals have also developed networks of material support for needy Israeli Jews,
becoming major sponsors of welfare programs in Israel. Since the nineteenth century, Israel, Jews, and the Holy Land have come to play central roles in evangelical preaching, conferences, theological tracts, historical studies, political analyses, novels, historical dramas and feature films, documentaries, TV programs, songs, and hymns.

Of special interest to many premillennialist evangelicals has been the prospect of rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. A number of evangelical writers and activists have considered the rebuilding of a Jewish temple to be an essential development of the apocalyptic era. Since the 1980s, conservative evangelicals and traditionalist Jews have begun unprecedented cooperation over preparations for such a project. This joint agenda has given rise to the almost surreal circumstance of evangelical Christians offering financial aid and moral support to groups of observant Jews, some of them ultra-Orthodox, intent on rebuilding the Temple.12

Such unprecedented encounters have brought members of both groups to amend their opinions of each other. Evangelical attitudes toward Jews as people have changed, with old stereotypes beginning to erode. Improvement in the image of the Jews within evangelical culture forms the background to another development that would have been unfathomable just a few decades earlier: the rise of an assertive community of Jewish evangelicals. Since the early 1970s, large numbers of Jews have converted to Christianity in its evangelical interpretation, yet have chosen to openly maintain their ethnic and cultural identities as Jews, combining Jewish rites and customs with faith in Jesus as Savior. This community, in its turn, has further influenced evangelical attitudes toward the Jews, becoming a lobby within the larger evangelical camp that argues for keeping causes such as missions to the Jews and goodwill toward that people high on the evangelical agenda. As a rule, these Jewish evangelicals adhere to a premillennialist understanding of the role of the Jews in God’s plans for humanity and have adopted a pro-Israeli view of Middle East politics.

Jews have not remained indifferent to evangelical overtures. Their early encounter with evangelical culture came by way of the extensive missionary networks that evangelicals began establishing in the nineteenth
century. Jews did not always react happily to attempts to evangelize them, although numerous Jews took advantage, as individuals, of the services the missions offered. Jewish, especially Zionist, leaders welcomed evangelical supporters as early as the nineteenth century; often they were unaware of the details of Christian evangelical theology, which differed in important ways from Jewish visions of the future of the Jews, and they ignored the missionary efforts. Those differences notwithstanding, a symbiosis developed between groups of Jews and evangelical Christians, with both communities, somewhat unwittingly, encouraging each other by offering each other reassurances that history was on their side.

The new evangelical-Jewish love affair has not been left on its own to proceed in peace without interference from grudging relatives and neighbors. The involvement of other religious groups, including liberal Christians and both Christian and Muslim Arabs, and the criticisms they have expressed are important for understanding the full meaning of evangelical-Jewish relations and for highlighting the uniqueness of conservative evangelical attitudes toward Jews. It demonstrates how different messianic visions and readings of the Bible have created various and at times diametrically opposed understandings of contemporary political and cultural realities as well as sharply different views of the Jews and their role in history. Liberal Protestants, especially since 1967, have come to view Israeli policies critically, and many nonevangelical Christians have reacted negatively to what they have considered a preferential evangelical treatment of the Jews, especially in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Liberal and Middle Eastern Christian writers have viewed evangelical support of Israel as resulting from misguided reading of the Bible, with some Christians taking exception to the evangelical departure from traditional Christian doctrines, especially replacement theology, the idea that Christians have superseded the Jews as God’s chosen people. Arabs and Palestinian sympathizers have become angry observers of the Jewish-evangelical relationship, preferring the company of liberal Christians or progressive evangelicals.

The full picture of evangelical-Jewish relations has also been complicated by the voicing of dissenting views within the evangelical and
Jewish communities. Progressive evangelicals, a minority group within the evangelical network, differ from their more conservative brothers and sisters over their vision of how the kingdom of God on earth is about to materialize and consequently take exception to much of the social and political agendas of the conservatives, including the conservatives’ position on the Israeli-Arab conflict. Jews too have become divided in their reaction to the evangelical outpouring of interest in and support for them and for Israel. Liberal Jews have, at times, felt uncomfortable with the close relationship and cooperation that has developed between conservative Christians and Jews. Such Christians, they have asserted, promote values that go against the spirit of an open, progressive society. Traditional and Zionist Jews, on the other hand, have often embraced the evangelical overtures.

This Book and Its Agenda

Until the 1970s, many saw conservative evangelicals as a secondary force in Christendom. Consequently, scholars have paid much more attention to the relations of Catholics, Greek Orthodox, or mainstream Protestants to the Jews. Virtually no histories of Zionism, Israel, and the Arab-Israeli conflict have paid much attention to evangelical support of the advancement of the Zionist plan and the Israeli state. Evangelical writers have often concentrated on missionaries and Jewish converts. In recent years, however, journalists, academics, and the larger public have begun taking more interest in the evangelical involvement in the conflict in the Middle East and have noted the political alliances that have developed between evangelical Christians and Jews. Until recently, writers have paid more attention to the British evangelical interest in the Holy Land. David Katz’s seminal work on the Puritans and their understanding of the Jews and their role in history, and Eitan Bar-Yosef’s study of the Holy Land in the English mind, provide excellent background for understanding British evangelicals’ biblical imagery and the views they promoted toward Jews and the Holy Land. Shalom Goldman and Paul Merkley have similarly explored the cultural
and religious background of the American fascination with the Holy Land and Zionism, while David Rausch was one of the first to trace the American evangelical involvement in the early history of Zionism. The books of Stephen Spector, Victoria Clark, and Motti Inbari have illuminated the dynamics of evangelical-Israeli relations and the larger political implications of evangelical support for Israel. Writing from a concerned Christian perspective, Timothy Weber and Stephen Sizer have also published important studies of evangelical attitudes toward the Jews and Middle East politics, placing such elements within the larger context of the evangelical premillennialist faith. In the last decades ethnographers such as Carol Harris-Shapiro and Shoshanah Feher have paid attention to the rise of Jewish evangelicals and their congregational life, adding important insights to this movement, while Gershon Nerel, Leonard Prager, and Jorge Quiñónez have paid attention to the literary expressions of evangelical Jewish culture.

This book does not set out to dispute previous scholarly work. Appreciating and often referring to other studies, it promotes a somewhat different agenda. The volume explores the broad range of evangelical interest in the Jews and evangelical efforts to influence the course of Jewish history and the consequences of such endeavors in a number of realms. While it draws on previous studies, it explores additional aspects of evangelical-Jewish relations, as well as drawing some overarching conclusions. The book points to the power of messianic faith, theological perceptions, and understanding of sacred scriptures to shape the attitudes and policies of members of one community of faith toward another and to affect their opinions on political and social developments relevant to the other group.

At the same time the book also demonstrates the power of an ongoing relationship between two communities, evangelicals and Jews, to influence and reshape, in its turn, opinions and attitudes. While evangelicals began interacting with Jews armed with certain hopes and assumptions, their encounters stirred a set of reactions and exchanges that in their turn affected evangelical agents’ thought and actions and by extension those of the evangelical community at large. Often unwittingly,
evangelical and Jewish attitudes and exchanges have changed and developed, at times taking unexpected forms. They have created at times borderland cultures, communities, and alliances that neither evangelicals nor Jews could have envisioned when they first set eyes on each other.

The book deals mostly with evangelical Christians who have shown interest in and set out to interact with the Jews, many of them holding a messianic faith. It focuses particularly on American evangelicals, who since the late nineteenth century have become the larger and more dynamic segment of the evangelical movement, influencing the course and character of evangelicalism worldwide. The book pays attention to pietist and evangelical precedents and parallels in other lands. But it views America as the hub of evangelical ideas and activities and as the place where it is exercising the greatest political and cultural influence, often affecting the country’s agenda. At the same time, there are global aspects to the evangelical-Jewish encounter. The focus of much of the evangelical interest in Jews is related to a territory on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, and the involvement of the evangelicals with Jewish life has spread all over the globe, both in missionary activities and in fighting anti-Jewish persecution. In evaluating Zionism, and Israel, evangelicals have constantly paid attention to other countries and political developments around the globe. As students of prophecy and believers in the imminent second arrival of Jesus, many evangelicals have been busy studying world politics and incorporating their observations into their prophetic expectations. For example, much of the resurgence of evangelical interest in Israel took place during the cold war era, and evangelicals combined their opposition to the Soviet Union and communism with their support of Israel.39

The relationship between evangelical Christians and Jews has given rise in the late modern era to unprecedented political, cultural, literary, communal, spiritual, and theological initiatives that have revolutionized the historical dynamics of Christian-Jewish relationships, creating new and unexpected meeting points between the two communities of faith. Evangelical involvements with the Jews and the Jewish responses to evangelical overtures have in their turn affected the interaction between
the two communities, both bringing about unprecedented alliances and projects and amending long-held opinions and assumptions. This book sets these innovative and unexpected encounters and initiatives within a larger historical perspective and examines their effect on developing new attitudes and interconnections as it furthers its argument that the evangelical-Jewish relationship has given birth to varied exchanges, alliances, literary venues, and even a borderland culture. It explores the beliefs, messages, language, literatures, and communities, as well as political agendas, agencies, and means, that evangelicals have created to affect the future of the Jews.

The chapters of the book follow the history, theology, literatures, institutions, and political and missionary efforts that are relevant to the understanding of evangelical-Jewish relations. The volume starts with a historical survey that provides the background for understanding the special evangelical relationship with Jews. The first chapter traces the history of Protestant interest in the Jews in the modern era and especially the precedents and inspirations that have offered a model for evangelical interaction with the Jews, while the second chapter examines the messianic faith that has served as the theological basis for, and the driving force behind, the evangelicals’ relationships with the Jews. Chapter 3 follows the thoughts and works of major evangelical writers, scholars, thinkers, conferences, publications, and institutions that have played an important part in shaping evangelical opinions of Jews. Chapter 4 deals with evangelical initiatives for the restoration of the Jews to Palestine and the building of a Jewish commonwealth there, as well as the relationships that developed between evangelical Christians and the emerging Jewish Zionist movement. Chapter 5 recounts the stories of evangelicals who built their homes in Palestine, trying to help the Jews settle there as well as positively affect the Jews’ opinions and agendas. Chapter 6 explores the extensive missionary efforts that have been a major venue for evangelicals to establish contact with and approach the Jews as well as to instruct the Jews about what they have considered to be the Jews’ true mission in history and about what to expect when this era comes to an end and the apocalyptic stage of history unfolds. The book analyzes
the extensive literatures that evangelicals have produced about and for the Jews, whether attempting to approach them or to propagate their understanding of the role of the Jews in history among fellow Christians. These writings include, as chapter 7 points out, a prolific, yet almost unknown, Yiddish evangelical literature, which evangelicals, both Jewish and non-Jewish, produced throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Chapter 8 deals with an important segment of evangelical publications on the Jews from the 1910s through the 1930s that amalgamated evangelical messianic thought, global conspiracy theories, and cultural stereotypes of Jews. The chapter explains the rise and decline of such literature within the larger context of evangelical attitudes and worldviews. Chapter 9 explores the evangelical literature on the Holocaust, much of which has lately taken the form of romance novels, the genre of choice for evangelical readers in the last two decades. Examining these diverse bodies of literature offers many insights into the development of the evangelical perceptions of the Jews in the last generation. Chapter 10 concerns evangelical interaction with the state of Israel, a country evangelicals have come to view as playing a major role in history. Evangelical activists have established a number of organizations intended to muster political and material support for Israel and its people, and evangelical missions have become agencies for promoting pro-Israeli sentiments and organizing trips to that country. The next chapter is devoted to the almost unimaginable cooperation that has developed between evangelicals and Jews around the prospect of rebuilding the Temple. This task has been of special interest to many premillennialist evangelicals, especially since the 1980s. A number of evangelical writers and activists have considered the rebuilding of a Jewish temple to be an essential event of the apocalyptic era. The 1980s saw the beginnings of efforts to prepare for that project, with conservative evangelicals offering financial aid and moral support to groups of observant Jews, some of them ultra-Orthodox, intent on rebuilding the Temple. These encounters brought both groups to amend some of their opinions of each other. The attempt to rebuild the Temple on the Temple Mount, where its former ruins are said to be located, necessarily affects Muslims, who also
have an interest in the site, so the chapter explores evangelical attitudes toward them and highlights Arab attitudes toward evangelical-Jewish rapport. The final chapter examines a development that would have also been unfathomable just a few decades ago: the rise of a vibrant and innovative community of Jewish evangelicals. While few expected to see communities of Jewish evangelicals come about in the late modern era, their creation has been a logical outcome of the relentless evangelical attempts to influence the Jewish understanding of history, as well as the new attitudes that evangelicals had developed toward the Jews. These Jewish Christian groups, in their turn, have made their mark on evangelical attitudes toward the Jews and have produced extensive literatures, which, among other goals, have helped create a new identity that is both evangelical Christian and Jewish.

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This book as a whole offers a comprehensive analysis of the roots, manifestations, and consequences of the evangelical interest in the Jews and the ways evangelicals have offered alternatives to the more conventional historical interactions between Christians and Jews, as well as the Jewish and non-Jewish reactions to these developments. The best place to begin that story is with the innovative attitudes toward the Jews brought about by the predecessors of evangelicals within the Protestant camp.