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Review: 'Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America, 1880–2000'

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Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America, 1880-2000. By Yaakov Ariel.

The name of the school may just be a coincidence, but each summer Messiah College hosts a large gathering of Messianic Jews. The campus, which is located in bucolic south-central Pennsylvania, is transformed by the presence of the worshipping and singing and dancing visitors, and by the sizable contingent of protesters – usually ensconced just beyond the main entrance to the college – energetically waving signs that read “Jews for Judaism.” But the excitement lasts only a few days, and then it is back to the sort of summer conferences – sans protests -- that one normally expects at an evangelical college.

As bizarre as all this may seem to the uninitiated, Yaakov Ariel makes clear in Evangelizing the Chosen People that the aforementioned event is simply part of the latest chapter in an ongoing story within American religious history. Going where no scholar has gone before, Ariel recounts the history of Protestant missions to the Jews in the United States. Making good use of missions organization records and the writings of Jewish converts, Ariel divides his narrative into three parts: evangelizing Jewish immigrants (1880-1920), evangelizing the children of Jewish immigrants (1920-1965), and evangelizing Jewish baby boomers (1965-2000). The last section is particularly compelling, as Ariel describes the emergence of Jews for Jesus – an aggressively evangelistic organization with roots in the 1960s counterculture – and Messianic Judaism, with its emphasis on “amalgamating the Christian faith with Jewish heritage.”

Ariel points out that over the past 120 years Protestants have devoted proportionately more resources to missions to the Jews than to “any other missionary field.” The author convincingly argues that dispensational premillennialism has been the driving force for much of this evangelistic effort, in that those who accept this eschatology understand the Jews as God’s chosen people who have a special role to play in the End Times (which are imminent). While in the past 50 years many Protestants and Catholics have moved away from seeking to convert the Jews to seeking to engage in interfaith dialogue, evangelicals, fundamentalists, and Pentecostals have remained committed to missions, to premillennialism, and thus to evangelizing the “chosen people.”

Ariel tells this fascinating story well, and fairly. Still, it would have behooved him to deal more substantively with the persistence of anti-Semitism in American Protestantism, and, particularly, with the argument made by Timothy Weber and others (including myself) that embedded within dispensational premillennialism is an ambivalence toward the Jews that can lead to anti-Semitism. Moreover, while the author claims that "tens of thousands" of Jews have converted to Christianity since the late 1960s, it is not clear how he comes up with this (very rough) estimate, or if these converts are all converts to evangelical Protestantism, or how this number compares with Jews who turned to, say, Buddhism. Of course, in Ariel's defense, coming up with a precise number of Jewish converts to Christianity is very difficult, especially when one considers that – as Ariel acknowledges – perhaps only 25% of all members of Messianic congregations are Jews!

All of this simply points to the fact that much work remains to be done on this remarkable topic. Yaakov Ariel has done the hard work; he has cleared out a path. We are in his debt.

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