Covenant Brothers: Evangelicals, Jews, and U.S.-Israeli Relations

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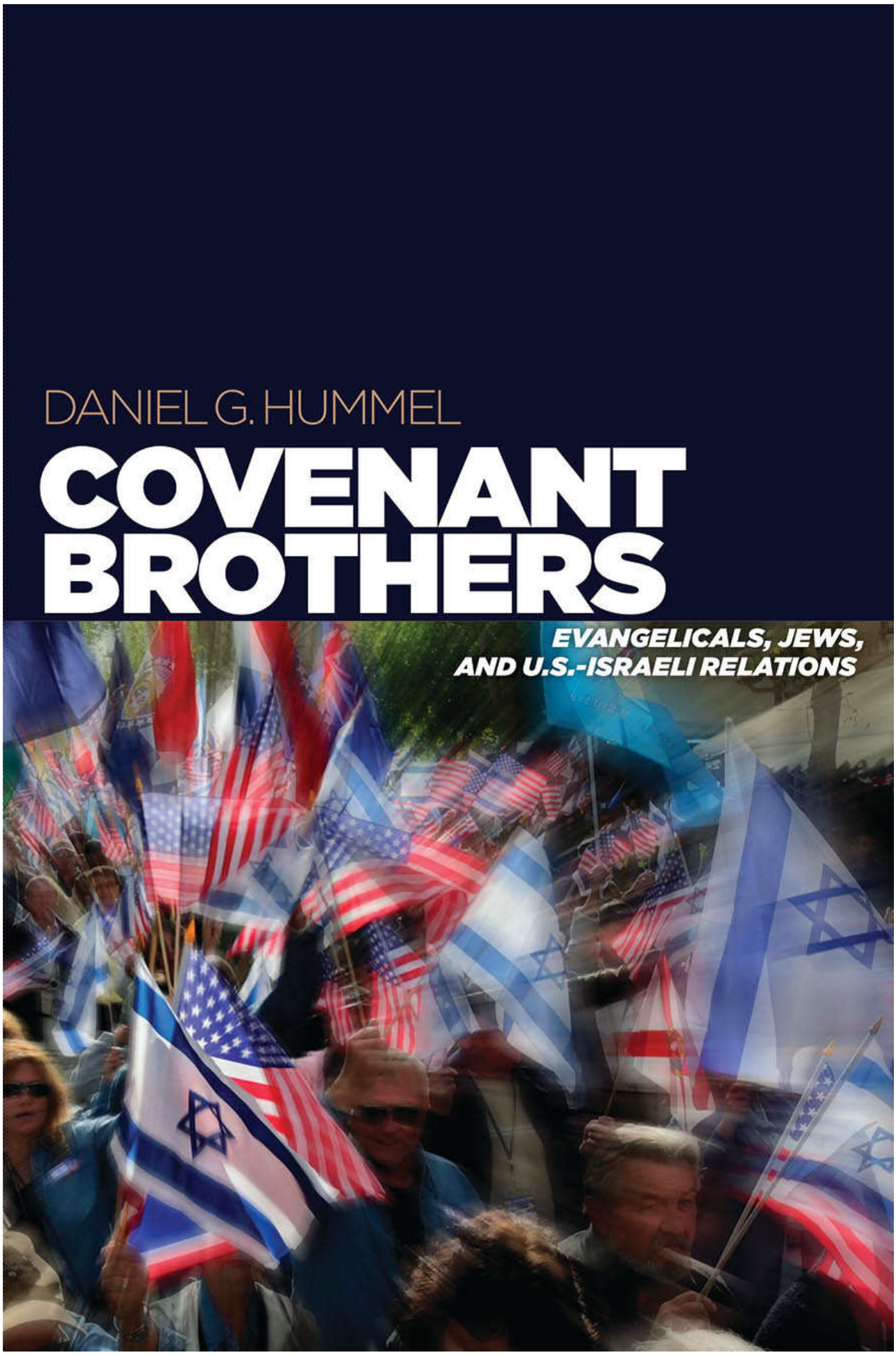
DANIEL G. HUMMEL
COVENANT BROTHERS
EVANGELICALS, JEWS, AND U.S.-ISRAELI RELATIONS

Over the last several decades, as American evangelical support for Israel has come to political prominence, scholarship on American Christian Zionism has proliferated. Most of it—at least those studies concentrating on evangelicals—has prioritized the role that Judeo-centric interpretations of the Bible have (or have not) played in underpinning American Christian support for Israel. Of particular interest to scholars has been the system of biblical interpretation and eschatology called premillennial dispensationalism, which holds that biblical covenants between God and the people of Israel have not wholly transferred to the church—Jews remain God's chosen people and the Land of Israel their promised land—and that prophecy points to the return of the Jewish people to their land as part of God's plan for history.

Early studies of Christian Zionism argued that the spread of these ideas among American evangelicals and fundamentalists in the twentieth century provided the theological basis for the political support for Israel that emerged in the late 1970s. And while subsequent studies have challenged this emphasis on dispensationalism in a variety of ways—arguing that it is not the whole story, or only part of the story, or only a small part of the story—scholars have struggled to reset the historiographical conversation with a cohesive alternate framework. That is, until Daniel G. Hummel's *Covenant Brothers*, which offers a compelling, thoroughly researched argument that Christian Zionism has been first and foremost a Christian-Jewish reconciliation movement, with Israel at its center.

The backdrop for Hummel's work is the post-World War II evangelical movement that emerged from early twentieth-century fundamentalism. Led by the likes of Billy Graham, the "new evangelicals" had much theologically in common with the fundamentalists. They proclaimed the authority of the Bible. They preached the necessity of evangelism. And many were dispensationalists—or at least dispensational*ish*. However, the postwar evangelicals distinguished themselves from fundamentalists by an optimistic desire to transform American culture rather than retreat from it. They were temperamentally cooperative and intellectually engaged. They wanted to be taken seriously.

Hummel finds the origins of Christian Zionism at the periphery of this postwar evangelicalism—in Israel itself—where Southern Baptist missionaries confronted the practical difficulties of working in a Jewish state and wrestled with the theological significance of the Holocaust and Israeli statehood. Led by Robert Lindsey, the Baptist missionaries recast their role in terms of "witness"—downplaying evangelism while claiming their place in Israeli society through expressions of solidarity with the Jewish people and cooperation with the Israeli state. They emphasized the Jewishness of Christianity, condemned antisemitism, and combatted supersessionist theology that claimed God's covenantal favor had passed from Jews to Christians. Most significantly, they did so through building real relationships with Israeli Jewish scholars and government officials. Although a tiny, peripheral group, the Baptist missionaries' approach nonetheless penetrated American evangelicalism through international meetings like the 1966 World Congress on Evangelism organized by Billy Graham. It was no accident that when Graham himself visited Israel in the 1960s and 1970s, he sounded a lot like the Baptist missionaries—and not just because Robert Lindsey was his translator.

The missionaries' turn to witness came as Americans more broadly were embracing the concept of Judeo-Christianity in seeking to explain what made the United States great—and what made it different from the Soviet Union. Hummel argues that evangelicals had their own version of the Judeo-Christian concept that stitched together ideas derived from biblical archaeology, which confirmed for them the authority of the Bible and suggested an ultimate continuity between the Old and New Testaments, and dispensationalism, which held that Jews and Christians alike were bound to God through covenant. Although less inclusive than the Judeo-Christian civic religion identified by Will Herberg in his 1955 *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, the evangelical conception nonetheless suggested a sort of covenantal narrative, stretching from the Bible into the twentieth century, in which God-fearing Americans and Israelis alike might have a role.

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These intellectual and cultural developments had the potential to transform the relationship between evangelicals and Jews. However, it took the work of G. Douglas Young, who founded the Israel-American Institute of Biblical Studies (later the American Institute of Holy Land Studies) in 1958, to build that potential into a movement, charge it with a pro-Israel political valence, and give it an institutional center. Ostensibly a graduate school for biblical archaeology, Young's institute came to be more broadly committed to evangelical-Jewish reconciliation and cooperation. Drawing on the witness theology of the Baptist missionaries, on the evangelical conception of Judeo-Christianity, on his own understanding of dispensationalism, and on the priorities of Israeli public diplomacy (*hasbara*), Young worked to convince evangelicals of their biblical duty to the Jewish people and state of Israel and to facilitate connections between Israelis and his growing network of American students and patrons. Forswearing evangelism and idle prophetic speculation, Young preached action. "Are you helping the new nation of Israel?" he asked of his evangelical supporters, "Are you helping them in material and physical ways?" (p. 76).

In forging relationships with the Israeli government, in building institutions to reach American evangelicals, in theologically reframing the relationship of Christianity and Judaism, and in facilitating contacts between American evangelicals and Jews and Israelis, Israel-based evangelicals like Lindsey and Young set the terms and built the infrastructure of an evangelical-Jewish reconciliation movement with Israel at its center. According to Hummel, this postwar evangelical Zionism reached its peak in the decade following the 1967 Six-Day War, as leaders within the movement like Young and even Billy Graham himself collaborated with Israeli officials and American Jewish organizations—most especially Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee (AJC)—in managing evangelical-Jewish controversies over missions and evangelism, developing evangelical tourism in Israel, and coordinating a series of formal evangelical-Jewish dialogues.

While the efforts of Young and Graham prepared the way for the Christian Right Zionism of the 1980s, Hummel is clear in noting that Jerry Falwell's rise as a Christian Zionist leader was nonetheless something of a departure from them. The Christian Zionism of G. Douglas Young had grown within the relatively moderate postwar evangelical movement and, while undeniably political, had prioritized "theological reform, interreligious reconciliation, and evangelical internationalism" (p. 160). Falwell, an Independent Baptist and fundamentalist who had been exposed to evangelical Christian Zionism on trips to Israel in the 1970s, folded support for Israel into the Christian Right's aggressively conservative political agenda and moved its institutional center into multi-issue organizations like his own Moral Majority. In doing so, he was aided by the new Likud government under Menachem Begin, which deliberately shifted *hasbara* efforts towards this politically promising and more ideologically congruent constituency.

This emerging alliance troubled many American Jews—including veterans of evangelical-Jewish dialogue like the AJC's A. James Rudin—who were especially concerned over the Christian Right's domestic agenda. Others, though, bought in. Especially eager was the Anti-Defamation League's (ADL) co-director of interreligious affairs, Yechiel Eckstein, who worked to push the ADL towards greater cooperation with politically conservative evangelicals before leaving to form the organization that would become the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews in 1983. Even more willing to look past concerns with the Christian Right's domestic agenda were the pro-Israel lobbying organizations—especially AIPAC—which began to surpass the self-defense organizations in coordinating with Christian Zionists.

The rise of Christian Right Zionism gave the movement a broader base and a greater political potency than it had enjoyed in the 1970s. As Hummel shows, though, this growth made it difficult for the center to hold. The kind of discipline that movement leaders had maintained in the 1970s was impossible among a rapidly proliferating number of grassroots organizations. Some, like the Jerusalem Temple Foundation, proved quite radical, seeking to alter the status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem and building relationships with like-minded Jewish

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organizations outside the conventional channels that the postwar evangelicals and even Christian Right leadership had maintained. By the mid-1990s, amid the decline of the major Christian Right organizations and the tumult of the peace process, there were many Christian Zionists—and even many letterheads for Christian Zionist organizations—but there was no institutional center guiding the movement.

However, Hummel argues that out of this fragmentation emerged a “Spirit-centered” Christian Zionism led by Pentecostal and charismatic Christians—most especially John Hagee, who after years of pro-Israel activism founded Christians United for Israel in 2006. Often loosely categorized as evangelicals, Spirit-centered Christians are distinct in their emphasis on the activity of the Holy Spirit in the world (evidenced by practices like speaking in tongues and faith healing), and, often, prosperity teachings holding that the Holy Spirit will both spiritually and materially reward the faithful. While Hagee certainly built on the evangelical and Christian Right Zionism of the 1970s and 1980s, his Spirit-centered variation has been distinguished by the promotion of an almost transactional, prosperity-based interpretation of biblical passages like Genesis 12:3—the idea that the nations and even individuals that “bless” Israel will reap material blessings. Most importantly, Hagee has succeeded in organizing around this message, building Christians United for Israel into a nationwide organization, providing American Christian Zionism with a new institutional center, and in many ways defining the movement for the current era.

As Hummel notes, the Spirit-centered Zionism that has come to predominate among American Christian supporters of Israel “would have struck evangelical Christian Zionists of an earlier era as alien” (p. 207). Indeed, there is a lot of distance—geographically and otherwise—between the institute that G. Douglas Young founded in 1958 and, say, the ballrooms of Mar-a-Lago, where the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews held a 2018 gala fundraiser. But it is one of the strengths of *Covenant Brothers* that Hummel’s focus on Christian Zionism as a religious and political reconciliation movement helps clarify both what has unified Christian Zionism over the decades and what has shaped its distinctive forms.

The emphasis on movement is key. For by focusing on the institution building and networking and all-around activity that the word implies, Hummel is able to clarify what has distinguished Christian Zionists from Christians interested in Zionism—to clarify the difference, in other words, between someone who protests a United Nations resolution and someone who simply buys Hal Lindsey and Carole C. Carlson's 1970 book *The Late, Great Planet Earth*. This, in turn, allows Hummel to present a clearer picture of how the movement itself has changed over time. The Spirit-centered Zionism of Hagee, the Christian Right Zionism of Falwell, and the postwar evangelical Zionism of Graham share a lot of genetic material but have each been characterized by distinct emphases and institutional arrangements. Truly, one of the great contributions of *Covenant Brothers* to the field is that it simply provides a vocabulary for articulating distinctions that can be hard to identify when all parties involved are quoting the same biblical passages. Hummel’s categories will surely frame future studies.

The work’s emphasis on evangelical Christian Zionism as a movement also accounts for its focus on the post-1948 era. This makes perfect sense—this is when the infrastructure of the movement was built and when many of its organizing ideas were developed. At the same time, the focus on the post-statehood era does result in the presentation of some pre-1948 continuities as post-1948 novelties. A minor but telling example comes early in the work, where Hummel presents a Southern Baptist pamphlet as exemplary of the “new attitudes” towards Jews and Judaism forged in the post-Holocaust, post-Israeli statehood era (p. 48). That specific pamphlet, Henry Alford Porter’s *If I Were a Jew*, was originally published in the 1920s and circulated in the Southern Baptist Convention’s monthly missionary digest, *Home and Foreign Fields*—quite possibly among some of the missionaries that later found their way to Israel.[1] This is a tiny oversight, but one that nonetheless demonstrates that some of the ideas and language of reconciliation were already available to conservative evangelicals prior to the more dramatic postwar reconsideration that

Hummel so effectively documents. Indeed, a number of the reconciliationist emphases—the Christian debt to Judaism, the condemnation of antisemitism, the celebration of Judeo-Christian heritage, the emphasis on interfaith good will—can be traced not only to pre-WWII interfaith outfits like the National Conference of Christians and Jews, but to evangelicals and even fundamentalists involved in Jewish missions (and not missions of the witness variety). This is especially true of Hebrew Christians (Jewish converts who sought to maintain varying degrees of Jewish ethnic or national identity), who, though small in number, were often institutionally positioned to have an outsize influence on evangelical perceptions of Jews and Judaism and define the boundaries of both faiths. To be sure, Hummel's postwar evangelicals did innovate—in their downplaying and even forswearing of Jewish evangelism, in their substantial theological reconsiderations of Judaism as a religion, and, most especially, in their building of interfaith institutions and networks of reconciliation that built these ideas into an actual religious and political movement. Recognizing the continuities with the pre-1948 era only highlights this. For as Hummel tellingly shows, it was often Hebrew Christians and Messianic Jews who were most critical of the postwar reconciliation movement, especially its downplaying or dismissal of evangelism.

Altogether, *Covenant Brothers* is going to prove indispensable to scholars of Christian Zionism and even Jewish-Christian relations writ large. And it is certainly accessible enough for nonspecialists seeking to understand the emergence of a movement currently enjoying unprecedented political sway during the Trump presidency, as well as for those interested in glimpsing at the movement's future. As Hummel's concluding chapter, "Global Zionism," shows, that future lies outside of the United States, among a rapidly growing number of Spirit-centered Christians looking in their own ways to bless the state of Israel, and to be blessed in turn..

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[1] Henry Alford Porter, "If I Were a Jew," Home and Foreign Fields, November 1927, 12-14.

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