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EVANGELIZING *the* CHOSEN PEOPLE

Introduction

It was August 1993. I was doing research at the archives of Jews for Jesus, the best-known and most visible mission to the Jews in America. I tried to make the most of my stay and remained in the archives, which were located in the Haight-Ashbury section of San Francisco, until it was time for me to go to the airport, at which point I ordered a cab. The cabbie, noticing the sign on the door of the building, began cursing. When we introduced ourselves, I learned that he was Jewish, secular, and unaffiliated with any form of Jewish religious life. He knew very little about missions to the Jews, their character and motivation. Nevertheless, for him, Jews for Jesus was an enemy group, out to capture Jewish souls and destroy the Jewish people. The cabbie's reaction was typical of Jewish attitudes toward the attempts to evangelize Jews. Not only cab drivers but also community leaders and scholars have depicted missionaries in unfavorable terms. Jews have tended to look upon the modern missionary movement as a continuation of the centuries-long intolerant stand of the non-Jewish world and its attempts to do away with the Jews: assimilate or annihilate them.¹ The movement signified a delegitimization of Judaism as a vital religious community alongside Christianity. Discussing the issue with the cabbie, I explained that I was not a member of the missionary organization but had come as a scholar to research it and that, in my opinion, the only way to understand it was to treat it seriously and respectfully, studying and judging it on its own terms.

My interest in missions began in early childhood when I encountered American missionaries in the neighborhood of Jerusalem in which I grew up: a poor section on the dividing line between the Israeli and Jordanian parts of the city, inhabited by newly arrived immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East. One unforgettable missionary was Uga ("Cake" in Hebrew), who earned her name by offering the neighborhood children "cakes" (in actuality, cookies) as a means of approaching them and gaining their trust. Uga was an unusual person; an independent missionary, she lived in a room she subtlet from a poor North African family and rode bicycles—an unusual habit that no other elderly female ventured to do in Jerusalem in those days. Another visible missionary presence in the neighborhood was that of the A. N. Dugger's Church of God, which organized activities for children. The mission handed out pamphlets on street corners, some of which I still keep. My interest in the topic was aroused again years later, when I examined American Protestant attitudes toward the Jewish people. I came to the realization that the biblical, premillennialist messianic image of the Jews and the zeal to convert that people were strongly connected—one motivating the other.

Missions to the Jews have played an important role in American religious history and stood high on the agenda of conservative Protestants who sponsored the missionary activity and of the Jewish community that defended against it. The missionizing efforts stirred strong emotions in both religious communities and stood at the center of the encounter between Christians and Jews in America. By the late twentieth century, the movement had even formed a new subdivision in American Christianity: Messianic Judaism, which aims to combine the Christian faith with Jewish ethnic loyalties.

Curiously, virtually no academic books have been published on the history of missions to the Jews in America. Most works on the subject have been hagiographic accounts by members of the missionary community, or antagonistic Jewish ones that vehemently attacked the missions' work.² Neither genre does justice to the complex history of the movement. In this book, I offer a different point of view. I wish neither to canonize nor to condemn. Rather, the book explores the history of the movement to evangelize the Jews, aiming, in the words of a leading historian of American missions, to cut a balance between appreciation and criticism.³ I endeavored to study the missions and the missionaries on their own ground, trying to reconstruct their world and understand their motivation. Similarly, the book analyzes other participants in the missionary drama—the converts, as well as the Jewish leadership and laypersons who reacted to the missionary activity—on their own terms, without praising or condemning.

American Protestants first began to evangelize Jews in 1816. During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, Protestants continued their attempts to convert American Jews: this shaped Jewish-Christian relations, provoking Jewish resentment and left its mark on the Jewish social agenda.⁴ Until the 1880s, however, the missionary enterprises were small and sporadic.⁵ Before that time, mainline Protestant churches had not yet embraced the premillennialist messianic belief, which usually brought with it an increased interest in the Jews and the prospect of their conversion and national restoration. The premillennialist movements of antebellum America—such as the Mormons or Millerites—operated outside the mainstream of American Christianity.⁶ Only after the Civil War did large numbers of mainline Protestants endorse the belief in the Second Coming of Jesus and his reign on earth for a thousand years.

The driving force for a strong movement of American Christians laboring at missionizing the Jews has been a new school of premillennialist hope: dispensationalism. This conviction focused much attention on the Jews and has served as the most decisive motivation for those who have evangelized Jews in the United States. John Darby and the Plymouth Brethren crystallized this school of Christian eschatology in Britain in the 1830s.⁷ Dispensationalists have seen the Jews as heirs of historical Israel and the object of the biblical prophecies about a restored Davidic kingdom in the Land of Israel, which they identified with the messianic

commonwealth. According to the dispensationalist eschatological narrative, the Jews would return to Palestine to build an independent political state, thereby preparing the way for the arrival of the Messiah. By the time Jesus came to establish his righteous kingdom, the Jews would welcome him and recognize him as their Savior. From the widespread acceptance of this belief in America during the 1870s, its adherents took great interest in the Jewish people, the prospect of their national restoration, and religious conversion. Dispensationalist literature has highlighted the Jews and their central role in the eschatological events.⁸ And in the late nineteenth century, American Protestants influenced by premillennialist ideas had come up with initiatives that aimed at restoring the Jews to the Land of Israel.

In the late 1870s, only one mission labored among the Jews in America. By the 1910s, dozens had sprung up, employing hundreds of missionaries in a wide and aggressive movement of evangelism directed specifically at Jews. The messianic hope also shaped the missions' character. The names of the missions, their mottoes, the literature they distributed among supporters and prospective converts, and the reasoning they used in propagating the Christian gospel among the Jews were all marked by a dispensationalist messianic understanding of history's course and the Jewish role in it. The Protestant missionary efforts, motivated by the dispensationalist messianic understanding of that nation and its role in history, have continued uninterrupted throughout the twentieth century.

The theological motivation for evangelizing the Jews remained the same, whereas the techniques used to approach them changed from one generation to another. The movement to evangelize the Jews proved resourceful, adapting skillfully to prospective converts' changing interests and needs. As the Jewish community and its cultural context shifted, so did the missions: During the first period of the premillennialist missions to the Jews, from the 1880s to the 1910s, Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe crowded into poor neighborhoods in major American cities. Missions operated in the immigrants' quarters, concentrating on newly arrived young people who were trying to build homes and find work in America. Missions offered immigrants a variety of social services in an attempt to gain trust and open doors.

A second phase began in the 1920s. Jewish life in America changed considerably: the 1924 legal restrictions put a stop to the large influx of Jewish immigrants, and the proportion of American-born Jews grew considerably. Accordingly, missions began directing their attention to the second generation, the sons and daughters of immigrants. Those young Jews had attended American schools and were much more at home in American society and culture than their parents were. Many missionary agencies moved from storefront missions in the immigrant quarters to the middle-class Jewish neighborhoods to which many Jews had moved. Missions adapted their techniques to the hopes and aspirations of

the new generation. In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, missions faced new social realities: the coming of age of the third generation of American Jewish immigrants, the Jewish baby boomers, who were mostly raised in middle-class families. This generation was fully at home in America and strongly influenced by the turmoil of the Vietnam War era. Again, the movement to evangelize the Jews altered its techniques in accordance with the values and tastes of the new generation. This period witnessed the rise of Jews for Jesus, a missionary group that split from an older established mission. Adopting the young people's style in dress, hair, and music, the new mission proved successful with the new generation. Messianic Judaism also emerged during that era as a movement of Jewish converts to evangelical Christianity who wished to retain their Jewish identity while they practiced the Christian faith. The Messianic Jewish movement, which arose out of the missionary efforts, became a major arm of the movement to evangelize the Jews. Messianic Jews established their own congregations, which then became centers for propagating the Christian gospel among unconverted Jews.

Ironically, missions have become part of Jewish life in America. Jews were bound to encounter missionaries, very often on sidewalks as the latter were distributing their tracts and inviting people to prayer meetings or as the former were passing by mission houses. Many visited these centers either out of curiosity or as recipients of various services. In later years, Jews encountered missions through ads in newspapers and magazines and on the World Wide Web.

At any given time during the twentieth century, dozens of American missions employing hundreds of missionaries focused on Jews. Whereas almost all missions shared the same theology and sense of purpose, they still competed with one another for support, power, and prestige. Rivalries and disagreements broke out, factions arose and schisms took place, and the status of different missionary agencies that constituted the wider movement changed throughout the years. New ascending missions often introduced new methods and sparked enthusiasm, becoming leaders of the movement.

The decision to evangelize the Jews, or to condemn such activity, expressed dramatically different Christian beliefs and values. The missions' base of support shifted throughout the years. Some mainline denominations that supported missionary activity in the earlier periods abandoned it by the 1960s. The more conservative evangelical churches, however, pursued Jewish evangelization wholeheartedly. Unimpressed by the new trends of interfaith dialogue, conservative Christians have continued to view evangelism as a manifestation of goodwill and positive intentions. Influenced by a biblical premillennialist outlook, many in this camp have continued to view the Jews as God's covenant nation, who, while blinded to their true destiny in our age, were still destined to return to their former glory in the messianic age. As viewers of such televangelists as Pat Robert-

son know, evangelizing the Jews has remained high on the evangelical agenda. As it did a hundred years before, missions continue to arouse heated reactions in the Jewish community.

The missionary movement, I suggest, played an important role in the history of Christian-Jewish relations in America. Understandably, the missionary agenda of large segments of American Christianity influenced the relations between the two religious communities. Jewish leaders protested the missionary presence and described it as an obstacle to a good relationship based on mutual respect. Amazingly, the Jewish reaction has influenced the missionary enterprise. Missionaries took notice of Jewish complaints and accusations and anticipated those objections in their own apologetic tracts and evangelization strategy.

The book is divided into three sections, corresponding to the three main periods in the history of the missions to the Jews in America. Although the sections are organized chronologically, chapters within them are arranged thematically, dealing with the theology and activity of the missions, as well as with the converts and the reaction of the Jewish community. The chapters pay special attention to institutions, organizations, conferences, publications, and individuals that shape the missionary agenda or respond to it.

Missions to the Jews have become more relevant toward the end of the twentieth century than ever before, as the number of converts swells to perhaps the largest voluntary movement of Jewish converts to Christianity in the history of Jewish-Christian contact. It serves as a striking demonstration of the success of the missionary movement to convert large numbers of Jews and its ongoing vitality. It also points to the need to explore the rich and lively history of the missions, which stands in the background to the rise of the current movement of converts.