

## **Scholar: How evangelicals chose Israel and the Jews**

### **An unusual ‘marriage’ transcends theology, says religion professor**



Prof. Yaakov Ariel said “the marriage of convenience” between Jews, evangelical Christians, and Israel has grown to one of respect and affection. Photo by Debra Rubin

by [Debra Rubin](#)

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An Israeli-born expert on evangelical Christians and their relationship with Jews said that what began as a “marriage of convenience” has now evolved into an “unusual” and warm relationship.

Rooted in evangelical theology, that relationship has brought Christian tourists, financial backing, and unwavering support to Israel and a feeling of kinship with Jews, said Yaakov Ariel of the religious studies department of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

“Although it was a marriage of convenience it worked well, provided the goods, and became very affectionate,” he said April 9 at the Douglass College Center in New Brunswick.

Ariel was the speaker during the annual Toby and Herbert Stolzer Endowed Program of Rutgers University’s Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life.

As the relationship between evangelicals and Jews has grown, particularly with the establishment of Israel, its focus has changed from messianism to respect and appreciation for Jewish history, culture, and religion, said Ariel.

“They see the Jews as different from all other groups that are ‘unsaved,’” he explained. Rather, evangelicals believe that according to the New Testament, Jews must be “restored” to their homeland as the first step toward “the second coming of Christ.”

Convinced other Christian denominations have misinterpreted “God’s plan for humanity” in the scripture, evangelicals have forged a relationship with Israel that would have seemed “unfathomable” decades ago.

Ariel showed a photo of a smiling Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and influential evangelical pastor John Hagee warmly greeting each other with handshakes and smiles.

“John Hagee really likes Netanyahu and Israel,” said Ariel. “And when he goes he brings thousands with him.”

Such tours and meetings with Israeli leaders have become “the norm” over the last 30 years, said Ariel, whose latest book, *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America, 1880-2000*, was awarded the Albert C. Outler prize by the American Society of Church History.

His next book, *An Unusual Relationship: Evangelical Christians and Jews*, is due out in June.

While the recent relationship has blossomed, the idea of evangelicals supporting a Jewish return to Palestine is not new.

Ariel explained how the Rev. William Henry Hechler, while serving as chaplain to the British Embassy in Vienna at the turn of the 20th century, read Theodor Herzl’s *The Jewish State* and concluded that the founder of modern Zionism was a prophet.

Hechler would become one of the first Christian Zionists and a close friend and ally of Herzl, introducing him to the German elite, including Kaiser Wilhelm.

“It was the beginning of the marriage between evangelicals and Jews,” said Ariel.

In the United States, the Rev. William Blackstone’s influential 1876 book, *Jesus Is Coming*, laid out the case for restoring Zion, inspiring many Christian Zionists.

In 1891, out of concern for the plight of persecuted Russian Jewry, Blackstone petitioned President Benjamin Harrison to enlist world powers to create Palestine. His “Blackstone Memorial” petition was signed by major journalists, members of Congress, a Supreme Court justice, influential Christian and Jewish clergy, and such business giants as J.P. Morgan and John Rockefeller.

Blackstone revived his efforts during the presidency of Woodrow Wilson at the urging of Louis Brandeis, appointed by Wilson in 1916 as the first Jewish Supreme Court justice, forming an alliance with Brandeis, Rabbi Stephen Wise, and Zionist Nathan Straus.

A year later, the British government gave its blessing to a Jewish homeland in Palestine through the Balfour Declaration.

“We now know that the British needed Wilson’s permission for the Balfour Declaration,” said Ariel.

Ariel said Christian Zionism was reignited in the 1970s in the wake of two events — the 1967 Six-Day War and the movement to free Soviet Jewry. The events put to rest two negative images among evangelicals, namely that Jews were not “proponents of modernity” on the one hand, and were supporters of communism and socialism, on the other. The Soviet Jewry campaign convinced evangelicals that Jews were “true American patriots,” as did Israel’s defeat of the Soviet-backed Arab armies.

“For all their criticisms of American culture, evangelicals are patriotic,” said Ariel. “They see America as the last hope for humanity and as superior morally to all other nations.”

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