His Land and the Origins of the Jewish-Evangelical Israel Lobby

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The 1970 release of His Land, a religious documentary about Israel produced by Billy Graham’s film studio, World Wide Pictures, took the evangelical world by storm. It was shown to hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of churchgoers and encapsulated the mix of prophecy beliefs and cultural arguments that cohered a decade later into the Christian Zionist movement—a major component of the religious right. Surprisingly, American evangelicals were not the only fans of His Land. American Jews, led by the American Jewish Committee (AJC), helped make the film an international success. AJC officials organized ecumenical screenings and kept detailed records of the film’s reception, praising it as “an authentic interpretation” that “strengthen[s] the current interreligious discussion on the Middle East question.” By 1971, the AJC was showing this unabashedly evangelical film to Jewish audiences in synagogues and community centers. Through reconstructing His Land’s production and reception, this article provides a new interpretation of the origins of bipartisan, Jewish and evangelical support for Israel in the late-twentieth century. It recasts the rise of a Jewish-evangelical pro-Israel lobby as an important religious episode to understanding the rise of the religious right and the continuing importance of confessional and theological identity even in the era of the “culture wars.”

I. INTRODUCTION

On the evening of February 18, 1971, a crowd of more than four hundred showed up for film night at the Jewish Community Center in Cleveland, Ohio. Despite one of the largest downpours of the season, the Jews of Cleveland Heights came to see a sixty-seven-minute documentary titled His Land, released the previous year. As the lights dimmed, they were treated to “a musical journey into the soul of a nation” that identified “his land” as God’s land of Israel. The British pop star, Cliff

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Gerald Strober to Kenneth Bliss, February 25, 1971, box 22, folder 4, Marc H. Tanenbaum Papers, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio (hereafter cited as MHT).

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Richard, who would go on to sell the third most singles in U.K. chart history behind the Beatles and Elvis Presley, graced the screen singing the key line: “The world will understand, this is his land!” along with a pop rendition of Psalm 23 belted from a rowboat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. Featuring some of the crispest footage of Israel yet captured on film, His Land was a feast for the eyes and ears as much as the soul.

While His Land offered paean to Israel, its primary audience was not American Jews. His Land was written, produced, and filmed by World Wide Pictures, the production company founded by evangelist Billy Graham, and the film never tried to hide its evangelical influences. His Land’s virtual tour of modern Israel and biblical sites appealed to churches, and its biggest boosters were pastors. In the film, Cliff Richard was joined by Cliff Barrows, the longtime worship leader for Graham’s crusades, to walk through colorful vistas and discuss the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. The two quoted from the Hebrew prophets, New Testament gospels, and the book of Revelation.

Despite His Land’s Christian trappings, the American Jewish Committee promoted hundreds of screenings for Jewish audiences like the one in Cleveland. Marc H. Tanenbaum, the director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, endorsed the film as “dramatic, warmly sympathetic . . . a moving documentary which communicates the humanity and living reality of the Jewish people, their struggles and achievements in Israel.” In the AJC’s prepared remarks for audiences before the film’s screening, a representative was instructed to clarify that while the film was “produced from an Evangelical Protestant understanding of Israel,” it was “an authentic interpretation” that “strength[en] the current interreligious discussion on the Middle East question.”

Interreligious relations have played a crucial role in postwar American politics, nowhere more than in building and maintaining a bipartisan consensus over American diplomatic, political, and financial support for the state of Israel. In recent years, historians have highlighted the role of ecumenical and interreligious cooperation in the civil rights movement, the labor movement, and the movement for same-sex marriage. But in

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2 Quoted in monthly American Jewish Committee letter to National Council for Christians and Jews, November 1970, box 22, folder 3, MHT.
3 “Introductory Remarks to His Land,” box 22, folder 4, MHT.
accounting for widespread American support for Israel, interreligious cooperation has been ignored. Evangelical support for Israel and the modern Christian Zionist movement has been consigned to its identification with the religious right and explained in terms of evangelical apocalypticism and Jewish pragmatism. Paul Boyer’s classic description captures the consensus of an “Israeli-premillenialist nexus, sealed by the former’s Realpolitik and the latter’s prophecy beliefs.”

His Land and the reception it received among American Jews, however, point to an important history of interreligious cooperation at the core of bipartisan support for Israel.

Recent scholarship on religion and politics in the late twentieth century mentions the alliance of Jews and evangelicals in support of Israel briefly or not at all. These studies continue in the mold of James Davison Hunter’s landmark work, Culture Wars (1991), arguing that during the second half of the twentieth century, religious identity reorganized around cultural and political differences instead of historical confessional loyalties. In the words of Hunter, new “communities of moral authority” created a cleavage “so deep that it cuts across the old lines of conflict [based on confession], making distinctions that long divided Americans—those between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews—virtually irrelevant.”

This explanation has been especially prevalent in studies of the religious right, the movement consisting of traditionalist evangelicals, Catholics, Mormons, and Jews since the late 1970s. As Neil J. Young has written, historians now agree that “the formation and success, if limited, of the religious right depended on the sublimation, abandonment, and erasure of denominational distinctions, historical divisions, theological disputes, and institutional exclusivity among different and historically antagonistic religious groups in pursuit of political victory and the defense of traditional morality and the idea of a Christian

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8Hunter, Culture Wars, 43.
nation. Americans divided into traditionalist and progressive camps that aligned against each other on a range of issues from abortion to feminism to same-sex marriage.

How, then, did partisans from across the culture war divide—conservative-leaning evangelicals and liberal-leaning Jews—work together to create one of the most powerful lobby coalitions in American politics at precisely the time it was least likely to do so? Jews and evangelicals were so successful that the resultant interreligious, bipartisan consensus on Israel in the late twentieth century has raised concerns about a pro-Israel lobby unduly influencing American foreign policy. Indeed, Jewish-evangelical cooperation on Israel is one of the most significant partnerships to emerge from the movement of interreligious or interfaith cooperation in the twentieth century. This is remarkable not only because Jews and evangelicals came to a working relationship decades after the beginnings of the interfaith movement, but also because on almost every political issue besides Israel they are at odds. At various times, Jewish organizations have called the religious right anti-Semitic and a threat to American democracy. Evangelicals, on the other hand, have blamed Jews for the secularization of American society. The two communities vote in equally lopsided numbers for opposing political parties. Yet in supporting, and indeed advancing, closer U.S. relations with Israel, this relationship stands as a counter example to the culture war alignments of the late twentieth century.


12See, for example, the Anti-Defamation League’s 1994 report, The Religious Right: The Assault on Tolerance and Pluralism in America (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 1994).

13See, for example, Pat Robertson, The New World Order (Dallas, Tex.: Word Publishing, 1991).

14For example, in 2014 Pew Research found that Southern Baptists leaned or identified Republican by a margin of +38 while Jews leaned or identified Democratic by a margin of +38. See Michael Lipka, “U.S. religious groups and their political leanings,” Pew Research Center, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/23/u-s-religious-groups-and-their-political-leanings/.
This article argues that Jews and evangelicals created a language and mode of cooperation in the early 1970s based on Christian theological categories that aligned with a new Jewish emphasis on “peoplehood,” a concept drawn from biblical covenantal language that posited an inextricable link between Jewish identity and the land of Israel. Through the Christian production and Jewish reception of *His Land*, these particularistic arguments—reinforcing confessional identities and theological distinctions—sparked the engine of theological and interreligious change. Israel became a more prominent marker of group identity for both communities: for evangelicals as a historical and prophetic symbol of biblical authority and for Jews as a core component of peoplehood. Counterintuitively to the prevailing scholarly understanding, affirming religious identity did not limit political cooperation; it provided a new opportunity for cooperation.

In short, in 1970, *His Land* popularized Christian theological arguments for Israel that resonated with American Jewish existential concerns. By arguing for Christian support for Israel with Christian theological and historical claims, *His Land* reified old identity markers (Christian and Jew) and subverted political identities (liberal and conservative) to create a new space of interreligious cooperation. It was by avoiding the overt language of politics—and by avoiding a recourse to political arguments—that *His Land* was able to appeal to the American Jewish Committee, the Israeli government, and American evangelicals all at once.

The literature on evangelical support for Israel has yet to grapple with the reasons why evangelicals, to use Jerry Falwell’s words from 1984, “converted to support for Israel at a very rapid pace” over a “twenty year” period, and why American Jewish groups, from the American Jewish Committee to the American Israel Committee on Public Affairs (AIPAC), received them at the same time. The obvious tension between evangelicals and Jews over social issues and religious differences has led some scholars to interpret the relationship as nothing more than a *realpolitik* calculation by American Jews and Israelis. Another interpretation defines evangelical


16For ethnographic studies that offer more varied explanations, including the role of biblical typology in Christian Zionist thinking, see Faydra L. Shapiro, *Christian Zionism: Navigating the Jewish-Christian Border* (New York: Cascade Books, 2015); Sean Durbin, “‘For Such a Time as
support for Israel as explicable almost entirely by reference to belief in evangelical end-times prophecy, specifically the theology of dispensational premillennialism. Although most evangelicals are not dispensationalists (indeed, many Christian Zionists refuse the label, as well), scholars have continued to highlight apocalyptic theology and resisted integrating Christian Zionism into evangelical politics more broadly. A third scholarly interpretation regards Israel’s symbolism in American society as an anomaly. The “special relationship” between the United States and Israel means its sources of political support are not comparable with other political issues.

Without taking each of these interpretations head on, this article is especially interested in highlighting how evangelicals and Jews emphasized religious difference to facilitate political cooperation—a dynamic at odds with the reigning understanding of late-twentieth-century religion and politics. The enduring importance of theological language is at the heart of Jewish-evangelical cooperation, especially concepts of covenant, land, and missions. This article concludes with an example of Christian theological language reform that solidified Jewish-evangelical cooperation a handful of years before Falwell and the religious right took the mantle of Christian Zionism. In 1973, Billy Graham publicly distanced himself from Jewish missions (evangelical efforts to convert Jews). Graham’s statement, given in response to Jewish concerns of the organized evangelism campaign Key ’73, was a product of His Land’s success. Graham’s friendship with Marc Tanenbaum, who would be crucial to shaping Graham’s attitudes on Jewish missions, was boosted by the film’s popularity. The relevant points of connection between the two relatively isolated communities had formed in the wake of the film. Theologically, the covenantal relationship that Graham and later evangelicals

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17 See especially Smith, More Desired Than Our Owne Salvation; Clark, Allies for Armageddon; Weber, On the Road to Armageddon; and Boyer, When Time Shall Be No More. The thematic center of gravity of these titles are revealing in their focus. Yaakov Ariel, the foremost scholar of Christian Zionism, likewise privileges apocalypticism over other factors in explaining evangelical (and earlier fundamentalist) Zionism. See, for example, Yaakov Ariel, “Israel in Contemporary Evangelical Christian Millennial Thought,” Numen 59, no. 5–6 (2012): 456–485.

18 Works on American evangelicalism often tend to treat Christian Zionism as an isolated element of evangelical politics. See, for example, George Marsden, Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 77–78 and Joel A. Carpenter, Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1999), 97–100.

conceptualized between Jews, Christians, and God found popular exposure, especially for Jewish audiences, in the film’s wide release. Over the course of the early 1970s, the interreligious connections that His Land sparked became institutionalized, and they eventually helped evangelicals to cope with and even welcome the pluralistic demands of Jewish-evangelical cooperation. These developments, like His Land itself, were not based on shared political or cultural values but particular evangelical theological arguments and Jewish responses.

The example of His Land points to how religious identities (specifically Jewish and Christian) retained influence even after “communities of moral authority”—organized around divergent worldview assumptions—split the national body into progressive and orthodox camps (with many Americans somewhere in the middle). It makes a case for interpreting the expansion of the pro-Israel lobby to include evangelicals as a religious story with political consequences, not merely a political coalition arranged by religious actors. Moreover, His Land illustrates how emphasizing religious difference furthered interreligious cooperation toward a shared political goal. In the broadest sense, this article gestures to how religious alignments that cut across the culture wars divide reveal a continuity of theological and confessional concerns, even in the midst of an increasingly pluralistic and polarized society divided by political differences.20

II. INSPIRATION

His Land would have been an inconceivable undertaking without declining levels of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism among Americans after World War II.21 As American Jews made strides toward the center of American life, they represented, for many Americans, the quintessential traits of successful immigrant communities: upwardly mobile and increasingly assimilated into American popular and elite culture. For sociologist Will Herberg, American Jews were the prototypical immigrant community (it should be noted that Herberg was the son of Jewish immigrants).22 The postwar American civil religion, as Robert Bellah and later observers defined it, propounded “Judeo-Christian values” and the importance of a general biblical morality (including both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament) in the face of...
atheistic communism. The civil religion of the Cold War era drew upon the significant Protestant influence of the American past but also stressed moral conformity and sincerity over dogma. In addition to a public emphasis on tolerance, rising rates of geographical mobility, intermarriage, and special interest groups all provided the impetus for engagement between Jews and Christians broadly across American society. In the pluralistic society receptive to Herberg’s formulations that to be American was to be a Protestant, Catholic, or Jew, evangelicals also sought opportunities for common ground.

The importance of theology to informing Jewish-Christian community relations indicated that the turn to Israel undertaken by both American evangelicals and Jews in the postwar period emerged as much out of communal debates over identity and theology as by other forces. For the most part, neither evangelicals nor Jews substantially changed their basic visions of American society after World War II. From the 1940s–1970s there were only gradual political shifts in either community. Jews remained largely liberal, while evangelicals retained their basic political conservatism, albeit both mobilized around issues including civil rights, abortion, and feminism. Their visions were, and remain, starkly opposed.

As scholars of postwar America have now shown, characterizing the increasing national presence of evangelicals after 1970 as a backlash to the 1960s obscures the longer tradition of conservative Protestant politics. Since at least the 1920s, evangelical and fundamentalist leaders were politically active in conservative politics, preaching the virtues of limited government, free market economics, and social conservatism. At the same time, the basic liberal orientation of American Jews—maintaining religious disestablishment, protecting minorities, and expanding public services—was just as powerful in 1970 as it was in 1940. Of course, both communities

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witnessed the growth of vocal and often influential dissenting voices. Evangelicals remained locked in competition with fundamentalist firebrands and, by 1970, a fledgling evangelical left.\(^{27}\) Jewish life also had its fractures—not only along Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox religious traditions, but through a nascent neoconservatism and a rising new left radicalism.\(^{28}\)

Both communities, however, remained embedded in their historical-political leanings. Certainly in terms of party identification, American Jews remained enrobed in the base of the Democratic party, only twice falling below 60% support for the party’s presidential candidate since 1932.\(^{29}\) Southern evangelicals moved from Democratic to Republican loyalty—a sign not of their changing attitudes but of those of the parties themselves. All told, groups that have represented the radical left and right in either community have generated an immense amount of scholarship, which may obscure the basic reality that for most evangelicals and most Jews, the positions they held on what would emerge to be key culture wars issues—abortion, feminism, public education, judicial activism—had clear antecedents throughout the twentieth century. There is a political and cultural continuity to the evangelical and American Jewish establishments (here represented by Billy Graham and the American Jewish Committee) that pushed both communities to opposite sides in the emergent culture wars of the 1970s.

*His Land*’s production by evangelicals and promotion by American Jews came about because of the particular theological and religious concerns of evangelicals and Jews in the late 1960s. Most importantly, the Arab-Israeli War (or Six Day War) between Israel and the Arab states of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in June 1967 shocked both communities, which in turn contributed to their support for the state of Israel. Israel’s overwhelming victory drastically reordered the Middle East and transformed the Arab-Israeli conflict into a global struggle that allowed Americans—both Jews and Christians—to see themselves as partisans in it. By the end of the six days of fighting, Israeli forces had taken the Sinai Peninsula, West Bank, Gaza


Strip, East Jerusalem, and Golan Heights.\textsuperscript{30} Soldiers prayed at the Western Wall, Egyptian tanks smoldered in the desert, and images of one-eyed military hero, Moshe Dayan, dominated American media. American evangelicals were enthusiastic for Israel’s victory and cast the new dimensions of the Arab-Israeli conflict in religious terms. Postwar evangelicals were part of a centuries-old Protestant tradition of Jewish restorationism that regarded the “regathering” of God’s chosen people as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy and sign of God’s faithfulness.\textsuperscript{31} Different schools of restorationism ebbed and flowed over the centuries; American evangelicals were most influenced by premillennial dispensationalism, first propounded in the nineteenth century. The doctrines and aesthetics of dispensationalism appealed to evangelicals and fundamentalists as modern, rational, and authentic to Bible’s authority as a sacred text.\textsuperscript{32} Dispensationalists promoted a “literal” or “straightforward” reading of biblical prophecies that minimized allegorical or “spiritualized” interpretations. When Jesus prophesied that “Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21:24), dispensationalists interpreted this to mean that Israel’s capture of the Old City in 1967 concluded the “time of the Gentiles” and signaled the beginning of the end of the age. Evangelical prophetic interest in the Jewish people had peaked before in the 1930s with the rise of European anti-Semitism and again in 1948 with the establishment Israel. But the apparent accuracy of biblical prophecy in 1967 had turned evangelical attention to the Middle East with a sense that God’s plans were speeding toward a climax.

American Jews also reacted to the June 1967 war by reordering the priorities of their community, expressing relief and celebration over Israel’s victory in 1967. They sent significant financial support to Israel and oriented much of their postwar work toward advancing Israel’s interests. As Doug Rossinow has shown, the framework for the pro-Israel lobby and American Jewish support for Israel was established in the years immediately following Israel’s creation in 1948.\textsuperscript{33} But after June 1967, the key lobby organizations of AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish

\textsuperscript{30}For an account of the war, see Michael Oren, \textit{Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).


\textsuperscript{32}See Branden Pietsch, \textit{Dispensational Modernism} (Oxford University Press, 2015).

Organizations (Presidents’ Conference) were joined by Jewish defense organizations—the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and the United Jewish Appeal, among others—that both expanded and deepened American Jewish Zionism into what Dox Waxman has called a “golden era in American Jewish support for Israel.”

This era began in the days before the war. Over the course of a little more than two weeks between May and early June 1967, American Jews gave more than one hundred million dollars to the Israel Emergency Fund of the United Jewish Appeal. Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, the scholar and activist, pinpointed mid-May 1967 as the moment when “the mood of American Jewry underwent an abrupt, radical, and possibly permanent change.”

Journalist J.J. Goldberg later wrote, “Even though it was fought between foreign states half a world away, the Six-Day War assumed immediate, personal significance for many American Jews, even more so than the birth of the Jewish state.”

Even skeptical observers of the impact of the war on American Judaism, such as sociologist Chaim Waxman, acknowledge that “Israel moved from the periphery to the center in the structure and culture of the American Jewish community” after 1967. Support for Israel among American Jewish organizations predated June 1967, to be sure, but the impetus to reorient core organizational goals around Israel, and to shape American public opinion regarding Israel more generally, reached new heights in the years following and including the production of *His Land*.

Among organizational leaders, Israel’s move from the periphery to the center of the American Jewish community was often expressed as adopting a new “Jewish self-understanding” of an inextricable tie between Jewish peoplehood and “the land.” This phrase was especially popular among more traditional and Orthodox Jews, but it reached into Conservative and Reform thinking just as powerfully. The always-cautious Rabbi Hertzberg, doyen of Conservative Judaism, explained that after the war, Judaism “beyond any doubt, created the fact of indissoluble emotional and historic connection. The State of Israel . . . is

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necessary for the continuity of Judaism and Jews.” Rabbi Seymour Siegel, a more outspoken Conservative leader, argued that attachment to the state of Israel “is a reconfirmation of the Jewish desire to express Jewishness not only under conditions of exile, but also in a situation of independence. The land and the promise [of God] have always gone hand in hand.” Israeli participants in this Jewish rethinking were perhaps the clearest and most consistent. Yona Malachy, an official with Ministry of Religious Affairs and participant in Jewish-Christian dialogue, defined “Judaism as [it] understands itself” as “the tripartite union of religion-people-land.” Perhaps most important was the opinion of Marc Tanenbaum, who, in discussing the future of Jewish-Christian relations, simply demanded, “There will be no future Jewish-Christian dialogue unless Jews insist that Christians face and accept the profound historical, religious, cultural, and liturgical meaning of the land of Israel and of Jerusalem to the Jewish people.”

The two communities’ lurches toward Israel after the June 1967 War were also fueled by the explosion of American cultural production centered on Israel, drawing from the deep wells of American fascination with the Holy Land. Since the 1950s, the state of Israel had encouraged Hollywood to produce films on location. It achieved success with the pro-Zionist story of the Arab-Israeli War in 1948–49, Exodus (1960). The similar themed Cast a Giant Shadow (1966) highlighted how films set in Israel before 1967 mostly retold the story of modern political Zionism. The June 1967 War,
with Israel’s capture of the major Christian religious sites, transformed the state into the premiere Holy Land destination. Evangelical tourism to the Holy Land expanded dramatically in the years after 1967, especially as it was “honored and popularized” through modern advertising and jet travel.46

Americans also encountered the Holy Land through cultural products produced in Israel after 1967. Music stars Johnny Cash and June Carter took a “honeymoon pilgrimage” to Israel in 1969, and in 1971, they filmed Gospel Road, a documentary-style narration of the life of Jesus in which June played Mary Magdalene.47 Other music stars, Christian and non-Christian alike, made similar pilgrimages, from gospel singer Pat Boone to folk rocker Don McLean.48 A more controversial film set in Israel was the adaptation of Jesus Christ Superstar (1973), a long-running Broadway play that American Jewish organizations lambasted for its portrayal of Jews.49 And the widely distributed film Jesus (later The Jesus Film), funded by evangelical Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ, was shot in Israel later in the decade.50 After 1967, the state of Israel sought out Christian filmmakers to make it a location in Christian popular culture.

The convergence of these immediate events and long-term trends created the context in which His Land was written and produced. Without the June 1967 War and the particular interpretation that evangelicals and Jews applied to the war, it is unlikely that His Land would have been as successful as it was, certainly not just three short years later in 1970. When filming began on location in Israel in the summer of 1969, Cliff Barrows wrote that he wondered if it was “presumptuous to think that World Wide Pictures could actually portray to the world something of the heart throb and cry of the city, something of God’s love for this city and his eternal plan for it?”51 Barrows’s answer was surprising: he would write the movie for Jews and Christians alike not by dressing His Land in the language of interfaith dialogue, but in doubling down on evangelical theological categories and in pitching evangelicals to reform their attitudes toward Jews. This move paved the way for His Land to become an interreligious success.

48See, for example, Pat Boone, The Pat Boone Family—In the Holy Land, Lamb & Lion Records, 1974; Don McLean’s most famous album, American Pie (1971), includes the track “Babylon,” a cover of Psalm 137 on Jewish longing for return to their homeland. In later albums, such as Believers (1981), he includes tracks such as “Jerusalem.”
50Jesus, directed by John Krish and Peter Sykes, Warner Brothers, 1979, film.
III. CREATION

Though steeped in political contexts, the creation and production of *His Land* in 1969 was understood by World Wide Pictures as an apolitical effort. The core creative team assembled for *His Land* had responded to Billy Graham’s longtime wish, expressed during his first trip to Israel in 1960, that the Holy Land be portrayed through high-quality color film.\(^{52}\) Requiring the work of some thirty-five personnel divided into five crews, *His Land*’s production would ultimately cost close a quarter of a million dollars (approximately $1.5 million in 2017), the most expensive World Wide Pictures budget to date. Director and writer Jim Collier was a veteran of the company, having directed two previous films and an enthusiast for new filming and editing techniques. Collier tapped Ralph Carmichael, a composer who had worked on *I Love Lucy* and *The Blob* (1958), to write original music that wove together biblical, Zionist, and pop culture themes. Some of the music was written “on location,” implying that it was infused with the raw insights of firsthand experience of “his land.”\(^{53}\)

Before filming, Collier, Barrows, and Carmichael had settled on the title *His Land*. Like so many aspects of the film, this decision appealed to both Christians and Jews. At one register, both communities could agree that “His” referred to God. But at another register, “His” was the triune God of evangelical theology that Jews found inimical to their faith. Like the title, the structure of the film also sought to advance evangelical interpretations of Israel that would have wide appeal. *His Land* was organized around a cluster of evangelical themes related to the core interest of God’s relationship to the Israel. The film, structured as a documentary that pulled viewers along through Ancient Israelite, early Christian, and modern Israeli history, gave an understanding of the history of “the land” that hewed to evangelical concerns. The film organized its visuals, songs, and exposition to advance evangelical historical, prophetical, and covenantal arguments for celebrating Jewish history and Israel’s modern-day accomplishments. On the screen, Cliff Barrows and Cliff Richard combined singing, Bible verses, and walks through modern Israel to explore the land and its Christian meaning. The hosts discussed historical events on or near the sites they were to have taken place, while footage of Israeli city life—in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa—which interspersed with panoramas of Israeli farm lands, the Negev desert, and the hills of the Galilee.


\(^{53}\)Barrows, “I Walked in His Land,” 23.
The film’s first minutes told the story of Israel’s Babylonian captivity and the prophet Ezekiel’s vision of the “Valley of Dry Bones,” especially God’s promise: “My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel” (Ezekiel 37:12). The film depicted the fulfillment of this promise as the culmination of more than two thousand years of Jewish history, a theme not unfamiliar to the Zionist movement itself. With Cliff Richard overlooking the Haifa skyline, he sang:

Slowly from hiding but surely they come  
Back to the homeland their fathers were from  
Israel their citadel, Israel their home  
Now they are here at last never to roam  
Here they will stay and bring life to the land  
It’s a new day and with boldness they walk, tall and so straight  
See them stand

The film also celebrated the symbols of Jewish history and Zionism, Jewish folk dancing, and the revival of the Hebrew language. “Never before has any nation been restored to its original homeland and picked up its original language after twenty centuries of separation,” Barrows marveled while sitting in a Tel Aviv café, speculating that the prophet Zephaniah (living in the seventh century BCE) could order food in modern Israel in his native tongue.

The prophetic significance of the Zionist movement and the state of Israel comprised the film’s primary theme. “The main purpose of the film,” wrote Barrows, was “to present the biblical background for God’s dealing with the nation of Israel and to point out the prophecies that have been fulfilled since the United Nations decree [of partition] on November 29, 1947.”54 Beginning with Jewish migration to Palestine in the nineteenth century and climaxing with Israel’s annexation of East Jerusalem in 1967, the prophetic timeline, as pieced together from biblical prophets, was being fulfilled. Barrows read Old Testament texts as prophesying the “regathering” of the descendants of Abraham in their homeland. God would then bless them through abundance and prosperity. Ultimately, Israel’s regathering presaged the second coming of Jesus and the end of history, a theme which His Land touched upon intermittently. The prophetic significance of the new state of Israel was important as empirical evidence of God’s faithfulness. The film’s visuals of a reinvigorated agricultural and industrial economy in Israel pointed to fulfillments of Old Testament prophecies. Walking through cultivated fields in the Hula Valley, Richard sang of:

54Ibid., 22.
Harvest of plenty so joyous and bright
Her fields, her treasures, magnificent sight
This is the Israel promised of old
This is the miracle happening now, as sages and prophets foretold

Richard and Barrows emphasized that the prophecies from Old Testament prophets were written hundreds of years before the time of Jesus and thousands of years before 1970. Their fulfillment affirmed that that the Bible was not a “dead book” full of myths but a text still relevant in modern times. “God shows himself in Israel,” Barrows observed, and his existence was empirically verifiable in the fulfillment of prophecy. Thus, “his land” was the land in which God was most visible in an era of increasing skepticism of traditional Christian claims. “It’s a feeling, there’s a presence” in the Old City, Richard explained. Walking through Jerusalem felt “like going through someone’s house when he isn’t home. You know you’ve been invited, but he isn’t there yet. Like there’s always more going on than what you can see.” Barrows shared in the liminal experience: “The Land of Israel is fascinating, and has a magnetic quality that cannot be explained.”

The fascination was due to the distinctive evangelical approach to biblical prophecy that made Richard and Barrows especially interested in claiming Israel as “his land.” Walking up the Mount of Olives, Richard turned to Barrows at one point and suggested: “Here’s a definition of prophecy: it’s history written down before it happens.” This captured the hermeneutic of dispensationalism. When Jeremiah prophesied, “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their ancestors to possess’” (Jeremiah 30:3), dispensationalists looked for the genetic descendants of the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah (the Jewish people) to be physically restored to the same geographic land. Seeking empirical proof of God’s fulfilled promises, dispensationalists were ecstatic over developments in the Middle East and confident that God had set a timeline for future events. “The Bible clearly reveals that God has a plan for the world,” Barrows explained in one of the most exposition-heavy segments of the film. “The Middle East is God’s timepiece . . . Jerusalem reclaimed after two thousand years could well mean we’re nearing the end of a block of time on God’s calendar.”

The historical and prophetic arguments for Israel as “his land” were supported by a third theme: the Jewish covenantal belief that God had reserved this specific plot of land for the Jewish people. Beginning in the first minutes and extending to the final scene, Richard sang the most repeated lines of the film that expressed the covenant between God and Israel:
Yes it is his land, all of it is
He stepped it off and marked it there
To be his earthly thoroughfare
And he blessed it with his hand
And as it blooms before our eyes
Just like an Eden paradise
The world will understand, this is his land

The words expressed an evangelical understanding of covenantal attachment between God’s “earthly thoroughfare,” his chosen people, and the “Eden paradise” of modern Israel. Evangelicals could bolster this land-people-prosperity connection with passages from Genesis, but could just as easily discuss the tripartite connection in non-prophetic terms. Barrows cited statistics about Israel’s expansive economic output, including the fact that “Israel is one of only six countries in the world producing enough food to feed its own population.” The land’s revival and God’s protection of his people were not only testaments to his historical faithfulness and his dependability in the future, but also an expression of the manifestation of God in the world. “Jerusalem has always been a symbol of God’s covenant with man,” Barrows explained while striding atop the Temple Mount (Haram al-Sharif). Later, walking along a rocky path and surveying the land around Bethlehem, Richard remarked to Barrows, “You know, my biggest impression of Israel, it’s that, well, God really has a long memory. He just doesn’t forget his promises and his blessings to his people.”

The theological underpinning to His Land was the lynchpin of the film, though the production team vowed that this theology was not political in the sense that the producers did not wish to wade into the details of borders, property rights, or diplomatic negotiations. Barrows did argue from prophecy for a future of Arab-Israeli peace, citing Isaiah 19:24–25: “In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.’” But the film studiously left questions of Israel’s borders vague and did not mention contemporary issues including the Palestinian refugee crisis or the peace process. In this narrow sense, the film was a religious documentary that prioritized and was organized around theological arguments. The consequence, however, was that the film promoted a celebratory and triumphalist view of Israel meant to express evangelical identification with the Zionist project and the Jewish people. Barrows wrote that a signal goal of the film was to “tell the Jewish community across America and in other parts of the world how much they mean to us Christians, and how grateful we are for the heritage they have given us, and how important they are in the development and fulfillment of our Christian faith.” He cited “the burden and concern of Billy Graham” for
better relations with the Jewish people. Jim Collier explained, “If God would use any part of this picture as a gesture of love from a Christian to a Jew, it will be more than worthwhile.”

His Land galvanized a set of historical, prophetic, and covenantal themes about Israel that were popular among evangelicals in 1970. Though there were obvious political implications to these themes, the film’s purpose and arguments were framed in only religious language. The creators arrived at their conclusions not through an analysis of the Middle East and geopolitics, they insisted, but from a mixture of theological, historical, and cultural fascination with Israel as a symbol and as a sovereign entity in continuity with the biblical Israelite nation. The signs of Jewish revival, the literal fulfillment of prophecy, the steadfastness of God’s covenant with Israel—these gave shape to His Land’s interpretation of Jewish history and depiction of Israel. These points of argument were unabashedly and sharply evangelical. While His Land celebrated parts of Jewish history and Israeli society, it did not seek to identify with them. Jews, as Jews, were the key part of God’s relationship to “his land.” The theological and historical border between Christian and Jew remained intact even in His Land’s most celebratory moments.

The seeds of positive Jewish reception to this evangelical interpretation of Israel would later expand into the common ground for political cooperation could take place. His Land’s purposeful avoidance of politics and laser-focus on religious themes was intentional. The internal logic of the film was to strengthen evangelical appreciation of Israel on the terms of evangelical theology. Even more surprising, then, was the interest it garnered among American Jews.

IV. Reception

His Land was released to the public at the very moment that the American Jewish Committee was looking for a new “interpretation of Israel to non-Jewish communities.” As we have seen, American Jewish responses to the June 1967 War moved Israel to the center of communal life, especially among Jewish defense organizations. The American Jewish Committee, along with other defense organizations, expanded its efforts to raise money and lobby for Israel, combat anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, and find

55Ibid., 26.
56Dave Foster, “This Land is ‘His Land’,” Christianity Today, May 8, 1970, 39.
57“Introductory Remarks to His Land,” n.d., box 22, folder 4, MHT.
partners in American politics who would expand their base of support. This was urgent given the rising international criticism of Israeli policies and Israel’s legitimacy after 1967.

Critiques of Zionism and Israeli policy were not new (the AJC itself had once proudly identified as “non-Zionist”), but nothing prepared the American Jewish establishment for the criticisms leveled at Israel after 1967. Emerging chiefly on the left and in international bodies such as the United Nations, Israel was depicted as an imperialist nation, colonial power, and pawn of Western interests. The war and its aftermath permanently altered Israel’s labor Zionist image and threw into chaos its moral mandate, fostered since the beginning of the Zionist movement, as a necessary refuge against antisemitism. Moreover, the war disrupted the decades-long advance of interreligious and interfaith organizational efforts between Jews and liberal Christians. The National Council of Churches and other denominational bodies that had been at the forefront of dialogue efforts during the postwar years had either become “silent” in the weeks leading up to the war or critical of Israel in its aftermath. In fact, many liberal Protestant churches, especially at the local level, voiced support for Israel, but the national and international bodies were more critical.

Rabbi Balfour Brickner spoke for many Jewish leaders when he lamented, “the spectacle of nearly total absence of visible support for the State of Israel during her hour of need.” Such “silence” by prominent liberal Protestant leaders made him wonder if “there was any real substance to this matter of interfaith relations.” Brickner, the director of the Commission on Interfaith Activities of Reform Judaism for the Central Conference of American Rabbis, had invested years into interreligious dialogue. That his mostly liberal Protestant dialogue partners would not identify with the new American Jewish support for Israel disturbed him. The lack of “substance” to pre-1967 Jewish-Christian relations identified by Brickner and other Jewish leaders became a broader indictment of interfaith dialogue and a suspicion that the most difficult theological issues and issues of identity separating the two faiths had been elided by interfaith Christians before the war in order to give the appearance of progress. But when cries arose, Christians returned to their dismissive attitudes of Jewish identity.

60See Staub, Torn at the Roots, 112–152.
Marc Tanenbaum of the AJC, who would lead his organization’s promotion of *His Land*, acknowledged that because of this interpretation of the “silence of the churches,” his organization undertook a dramatic change in focus after the war. “Before the six-day war,” Tanenbaum told the *New York Times* in 1970, “about eighty-five percent of the American Jewish Committee’s interfaith efforts had been directed to Catholics, and most of the remainder to Protestants. About forty percent of the committee’s efforts this year [are] going to Evangelical Protestants.”

Premised on not only an understanding of the emerging political power of evangelicals, but also the need to find “authentic” Christian supporters of Israel, the AJC gravitated toward the most vocal and consistent American Protestants celebrating Israel and affirming its centrality to Jewish identity.

This new focus made the release of *His Land* in early 1970 an event of special interest to Tanenbaum and other Jewish observers. The rollout of *His Land* heightened its perceived importance in shaping Christian support for Israel. Deciding against a traditional theater strategy, World Wide Pictures distributed *His Land* through word of mouth and direct requests by regional representatives who would travel with the reels to show the film, provide introductory remarks, and take questions for a flat $100.00 fee. By eliminating individual ticket sales, supplying representatives, and showing the film in churches and community centers, World Wide Pictures both controlled the reception of *His Land* in its early months and exercised an unusual amount of influence over its eventual promotion by the AJC.

In February 1970, Gerald Strober, the AJC’s liaison to Christian communities (and only Christian employee), inquired about *His Land* after a chance conversation with Cliff Barrows in New York City. Wondering if the film’s pro-Israel Christian message could appeal outside of the evangelical Christian market, he scheduled a special screening intended for “a representative group of leadership individuals representing both the national and local [New York] Protestant communities” to be “coordinated by the AJC in cooperation with the Billy Graham organization.”

Taking place even before the general release of the film in April 1970, this early intervention would be decisive for the broad appeal of the film. An institutional partnership across religious lines was forged to promote *His Land*. This would expand into a national effort over the next year.

Through the spring and early summer of 1970, *His Land* was shown in thousands of churches to hundreds of thousands of Christians. By the end of May 1970, the AJC reported that more than two hundred churches in

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63 Gerald Strober to Walter Smyth, February 27, 1970, box 22, folder 2, MHT.
San Francisco and more than one hundred fifty in Chicago had shown the film. By October, there had been more than two hundred showings in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. The size of audiences could range from church groups of twenty to more than 1,500 at a publicized evangelical gathering in Phoenix in November 1970. Throughout 1970, World Wide Pictures described *His Land* as its largest print run to date and claimed that 10,000–15,000 people were viewing the film each day.\(^{64}\)

This flood of attention was fueled not only by audience enthusiasm but also by strong endorsements. Ottilie Jerehower, a member of the national board of the Young Women’s Christian Association, praised *His Land* as “perhaps the finest film made to promote understanding between the major religions.”\(^{65}\) Bernhard E. Olson, the national director for interreligious affairs at the National Conference for Christians and Jews, was equally enthusiastic. Committing his organization to promoting the film, he described it after a showing as “deeply moving, a statement of faith that needs to be discussed among Christians.”\(^{66}\) By the end of 1970, special “ecumenical” screenings took place in major cities, including Boston, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Miami, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Chicago, Kansas City, Dallas, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle.\(^{67}\)

The popularity of the film among evangelical churches and organizations grew with positive reviews by mainstream press outlets. Working with World Wide Pictures, the AJC organized press screenings, which generated some of the most influential coverage. The *New York Times* reported on the “ecumenic praise” the film received, citing Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, and Jewish leaders who gave positive reviews.\(^{68}\) George Cornell, writing for the Associated Press, celebrated the film as an “interfaith miracle” that was gaining the approval of not just Christian leaders and laity, but of Jewish leaders, as well.\(^{69}\) His article was picked up by hundreds of city and local papers. Alan Harper of CBS News, while deriding the singing, admitted that the film was “moving and effective . . . [the] underlying humanity of the theme [of the film] cannot fail to affect many.”\(^{70}\)

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\(^{64}\)Billie Stern to Gerald Strober, October 26, 1970, box 22, folder 3, MHT; Marc Tanenbaum to Area Directors, “Follow Up on His Land,” memo, July 15, 1970, box 22, folder 3, MHT.

\(^{65}\)Comments on “His Land,” box 22, folder 2, MHT.

\(^{66}\)Comments on “His Land,” box 22, folder 2, MHT.

\(^{67}\)Marc Tanenbaum to Area Directors, “Responses to His Land,” January 14, 1971, box 22, folder 4, MHT.

\(^{68}\)George Dugan, “Ecumenic Praise Given Graham’s Film on Israel,” *New York Times*, June 1, 1970, 15.


\(^{70}\)Comments on “His Land,” box 22, folder 2, MHT.
*His Land* garnered positive reviews in Israel at the same time, increasing its public credentials. Perhaps most important were the reviews of Israeli political leaders. Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli ambassador to the U.S., received a private screening in Washington D.C. and praised the film’s message of “love for the land of Israel and its people and the deep historic ties of the people of Israel and the land of the Bible.” In April 1970, Golda Meir and the entire Israeli cabinet attended a viewing in Jerusalem. *Christianity Today* reported that Meir “was visibly moved.” After the film, she “said quietly: ‘so many thanks for picturing our land as it is. I’ve never seen it so beautiful.’” A second screening for Israeli leaders received similar rave reviews. Teddy Kollek, the popular mayor of Jerusalem, declared “I was deeply moved. I haven’t seen a better film about Israel.” Karen haYesod (United Israel Appeal), the Jewish Agency office in Jerusalem, and Christian Zionists in Israel hosted local showings, while the *Hadassah* magazine also gave it positive marks.

Enthusiastic Christian and Israeli reception helped the AJC to see the utility of *His Land* for Jewish viewers. In one of the master strokes that increased *His Land*’s popularity, World Wide Pictures produced two cuts of the film. The original cut was sixty-seven minutes long. A final section, running the last twelve minutes, began with Cliff Barrows appearing alone on screen, standing on a hill with the Old City wall in the background. He explained that “Christ poured out his blood for us” and asked viewers to “invite Jesus into your heart.” Aware that this section would offend most Jewish viewers, World Wide Pictures produced a shorter, fifty-five-minute cut meant for Jewish audiences. Though scattered evangelicals questioned the sidelining of evangelism in the shorter cut, there was no concerted criticism and the American Jewish Committee was enthusiastic. The pragmatic decision to produce two cuts presaged the theological argument Graham would make a few years later to further distance himself from Jewish missions.

In late 1970, seeking $50,000 to purchase two hundred reels of the shorter cut, the AJC’s department of interreligious affairs was hoping that 1971 would witness a second wave of the film’s popularity, this time in synagogues and Jewish community centers. They hosted showings in these and other civic locations, sometimes with both Jews and Christians in attendance at public libraries, movie theaters, and even at the Smithsonian’s

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71 Quoted in *His Land* promotional letter, September 14, 1970, box 22, folder 3, MHT.  
72 Foster, “This Land is ‘His Land’,” 39.  
73 Quoted in Marc Tanenbaum to Area Directors, “Responses to His Land,” memo, January 14, 1971, box 22, folder 4, MHT.  
74 Marc Tanenbaum, memorandum, May 29, 1970, box 22, folder 2, MHT; Gerald Strober to W.W. Simpson, January 5, 1972, box 22, folder 4, MHT.
Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C.\textsuperscript{75} To facilitate these gatherings, the AJC prepared a study guide, which emphasized the film’s appeal as a testament of religious affection from Christians to Jews and suggested further readings by Jewish and Christian veterans of interreligious dialogue.\textsuperscript{76} The study guide was used at AJC-directed screenings, but also among other American Jewish organizations including Jewish Community Relations Councils.\textsuperscript{77} “What are the implications of the dominant theme of the film for Christian and Jewish relations?” the guide asked. The answer, laden in the lyrics and biblical quotations of the film, involved a mixture of biblical interpretation and interreligious solidarity.

Of course, not all viewers received \textit{His Land} positively. Criticisms revealed the theological narrowness of the coalition of Jews and evangelicals that came together around the film. The broad sorting of traditionalist and progressive religious communities (the proto-outlines of the culture wars) made full-fledged Jewish-evangelical cooperation difficult. Many Christian leaders, including evangelicals, regarded the film’s treatment of prophecy skeptically. Less glowing reviews, such as Gerard Persaghin’s in the \textit{Catholic Standard}, criticized the film’s “oversimplifications of Bible interpretation” and concluded that “the film stumbles along like a clumsy but well-intentioned oaf unaware of his annoying features.”\textsuperscript{78} Common complaints of simplistic politics and ham-fisted theology were peppered throughout the dozens of viewer response forms collected by the AJC. Eugene Schneider of the United Church of Christ, who viewed the film in a New York City screening, criticized its “concept of prophecy [as] not acceptable in my denomination.” Moreover, he complained, echoing other viewers, the film “lacks [the] Arab [sic] point of view on the holy places.”\textsuperscript{79} Remarks describing the performances of Barrows and Richard as “hokey” and “dull” pointed to the cultural gap among Christians about what makes good entertainment.

Other observers wondered if the film too reflexively endorsed the policies of Israel and inflamed Arab-Israeli tensions, though these criticisms were often framed in terms of the consequences of \textit{His Land’s} theology or representation of Israel.\textsuperscript{80} World Wide Pictures had sought to head off such criticism by avoiding explicit talk of politics. It further enforced its apolitical

\textsuperscript{75}Invitation, November 17, 1970, box 22, folder 3, MHT.
\textsuperscript{76}"His Land: A Discussion Guide," box 22, folder 2, MHT.
\textsuperscript{77}See, for example, “His Land Study Guide,” box 129, folder 8, Collection 1–123: Jewish Community Relations Council—Boston, American Jewish Heritage Center—New England Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.
\textsuperscript{78}Gerard Persaghin, “‘His Land’ Stumbles Along Like a Clumsy, Well-Intentioned Oaf,” \textit{Catholic Standard}, August 11, 1970, box 22, folder 3, Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, AJA.
\textsuperscript{79}Comments on “His Land,” box 22, folder 2, MHT.
\textsuperscript{80}See Bert DeVries, “‘His Land’ and History,” \textit{Reformed Journal} (April 1971), 10–11.
credentials by portraying the film as not only friendly to Jews and Israel but to Arabs as well. Cliff Barrows emphasized the “several [film] crews made up of nationals from different countries in Europe, the Middle East, and America,” including Jews and Arabs, and recounted how he “couldn’t keep the tears back” when, on the last night of filming, an Israeli cameraman learned “to know and understand and appreciate his Arab brother [in the same film crew] in a dimension he never dreamed possible.”\textsuperscript{81} Though the film failed to grapple with the condition of Palestinian refugees or the status of the occupied territories after 1967, it in fact did not confront any key political issue related to Israel or the Middle East. It was idealistic in its representation of the lives of Jewish immigrants, the growth of Israeli cities, and the environmental transformations of the land undertaken by the state. This was, as we have seen, a major selling feature of the film—a truly cosmic, theological, and symbolic embrace of Israel. But by focusing on the religious significance of Israel, \textit{His Land} strengthened the particularity of evangelical-theological arguments while at the same time appealing to American Jews looking for new allies. The constant refrain by viewers that the film expressed “authentic” and “genuine” Christian sentiments was worth far more than plaudits for pluralism or multiple perspectives might have accrued.

This evangelical particularity, however, also meant that Jewish leaders outside the AJC were skeptical of \textit{His Land}’s purpose and utility. Writing in November 1970, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) released a detailed report on the film, ultimately recommending against its promotion by Jewish organizations and urging Jews to avoid it. Especially worrying to the ADL and its director of interreligious relations, Solomon Bernards, was the “shift” halfway through the movie to link Jewish and Christian prophecy fulfillment, a common dispensationalist move. The argument of the movie was straightforward: “if these earlier prophecies of the Bible are being realized with the resettlement of the Jewish people in ‘His Land,’ so can we confidently expect that the ‘later prophecies’ concerning the second coming of Jesus will also be fulfilled.” This “Christology narrative” might seem harmless in service of the greater cause, warned Solomon, but it was ultimately a threat to American Jewish interests. “It seems clear to us,” the report concluded, “that no Jewish group ought, in good conscience, to be identified with the promotion of a film which projects a Christological outlook.”\textsuperscript{82} This analysis certainly outlined the borders of the common ground the AJC claimed it had found with evangelicals over \textit{His Land}. The Jewish fear of evangelicals smuggling in “Christology” along with their odes

\textsuperscript{81}Barrows, “I Walked in His Land,” 26.
\textsuperscript{82}Solomon Bernards to ADL Regional Offices, report, box 22, folder 3, MHT.
to Israel was, and remains, a central tension in the Jewish-evangelical relationship. That the AJC and ADL were divided over this issue reveals how tenuous the cooperative impulse was in its infancy in 1970.

*His Land’s* reception, promotion, and the criticism it received point to the film’s instrumental role in facilitating a discourse on Israel that purposefully avoided politics and fixed attention on evangelical theology. The Israel of *His Land* was a religious rather than political entity—an object of evangelical love and support based on theological and religious beliefs. Both evangelicals and American Jews sought to clarify why *His Land’s* depiction of Israel resonated. Evangelicals regarded Israel as an integral part of their faith and evidence of God in the world, while Jews—at least those working in the AJC and Israel—regarded the outpouring of religious sentiment as a sorely-needed support in light of growing criticisms of Israel. That both communities expressed “authentic,” community-based concern over the fate of Israel gave *His Land’s* unmistakable Christian trappings a far friendlier reception among supportive Jews, who would likely have denounced the film in terms similar to the ADL had it released a few years earlier. The changing importance of Israel in American Jewish definitions of peoplehood made Jewish Zionism, in the words of historian Michael Staub, narrower and sharper, focused on Israel’s survival. By the 1970s, the once fluid and diverse ideological commitments of American Jewish Zionists had constricted; Israel “stood alone at the center of Zionist concerns.”

The same narrowing and sharpening facilitated closer Jewish-evangelical relations. The two communities cared about the same entity for vastly different reasons, but the authentic, particularistic expressions of concern were what mattered most. The new alignment could (and did) lead to a sense of Jewish-evangelical solidarity, but it did so through strengthening the claims of evangelical theology and Jewish peoplehood.

V. Reform

Over the early 1970s, the connections made by *His Land* and the trends it exemplified became institutionalized and eventually smoothed the process for Jews and evangelicals to cooperate politically. Rather than sublimating, abandoning, and erasing confessional and theological distinctions—to again borrow the words of historian Neil J. Young describing the “co-belligerency” of the religious right—*His Land* was part of a process of reaffirming distinct group identities. The film reasserted the centrality of Israel to evangelical theology, and the centrality of Israel to Jewish identity and peoplehood. Given the prevalent understanding of the culture wars and the restructuring of

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American religion in the 1970s, we might expect a decline in explicitly Christian or Jewish theological language in lieu of political or diplomatic pragmatism.

The idea of co-belligerency, popularized by religious right leader Francis Schaeffer and others, promoted institutional and political cooperation between traditionalist evangelicals and other traditionalist religious groups in the face of rising secularism and deteriorating “family values.” However, in the case of Israel, Christian theological claims did not fade away; they could not fade away in light of their centrality to Jewish-evangelical relations. Indeed, the theological depictions of Israel became even more prominent through the 1970s—both in terms of apocalyptic speculation and in the Christian and Jewish theological language that gave shape to interreligious cooperation over Israel. This cooperation, though originally narrowly conceived as shared concern for the existence of the state of Israel, prompted changes in the related and more fraught area of evangelical attitudes toward the American Jewish community. In the case of Billy Graham, the leading evangelical supporter of Israel through the mid-1970s, common cause with American Jews over Israel was strengthened not despite theological differences, but because the process of mutual recognition and exchange made Graham reevaluate his evangelical theology and emphasize a new, more Zionist-friendly orientation toward Judaism.

The friendship between Tanenbaum and Graham in the wake of His Land’s success was instrumental in overcoming one of the historically insurmountable barriers to Jewish-evangelical cooperation: Jewish missions. Graham, more than perhaps any person on the planet, embodied the evangelical impulse to “make disciples of all nations.” The long history of conflict between Jews and Christians, and the legacy of Christian anti-Judaism, pitted Jews and evangelicals on opposing sides of a historic religious rivalry. But in a remarkable development over the early 1970s, Graham’s attitude toward Jewish missions changed considerably. The issue was brought to a head in 1973, as many evangelicals (including Graham’s own organization) endorsed Key ‘73, a year-long evangelism effort meant to raise “an Overarching Christian Canopy” over North America. American Jewish organizations reacted with alarm, especially as Key ‘73 coincided with the emergence of Jews for Jesus, an organization of young Jewish converts to Christianity who claimed that being Jewish and being Christian were compatible; moreover, that a Jew without Jesus was incomplete.84

Graham, however, had come to rethink his attitudes, especially as he became attuned to American Jewish concerns. As Gerald Strober reported to

Tanenbaum, relations with the Jewish community “is the only issue in which [Graham] plays an advocate’s role with his friends.” At the end of one meeting Strober observed, “He concluded [the conversation] by saying as a Christian he owed everything to the Jewish people.”85 It bears repeating that the primary event to solidify the relationship between the AJC and Billy Graham was the massive success of His Land. In 1966, Tanenbaum had originally reached out to Graham, and Graham was receptive to a meeting. But it took the June 1967 War to spur both sides to settle on a time and place. Relying on the work of Strober, Tanenbaum, and Graham, along with dozens of Jewish leaders, met for ninety minutes at the AJC’s New York City headquarters in June 1969.86 The meeting was a success, but it was not until His Land released six months later that the AJC invested heavily in evangelical outreach.

In February 1973, after hours of consultation with Tanenbaum and Strober at his home in Montreat, North Carolina, Graham decided to release a public statement clarifying his views on Jewish missions.87 In a press release Graham affirmed his evangelistic concern “for all men” but denounced evangelistic “gimmicks, coercion, and intimidation,” and condemned “overbearing witness to seek conversions” as “zeal without knowledge,” a reference to Proverbs 19:2.88 This language closely mirrored Jewish organization literature warning against Key ’73. Framed with explicit concern for “Christian-Jewish relations,” Graham’s statement addressed the theological relationship between the two faiths. “Along with most Evangelical Christians,” Graham explained, “I believe God has always had a special relationship with the Jewish people, as St. Paul suggests in the book of Romans. In light of that I have never felt called to direct my evangelistic efforts to Jews or any other particular group.”89 Graham’s reasoning was unclear, though has was not alone in struggling to articulate the meaning of the famous passage in Romans 9–11 about God’s enduring relationship to the Jewish people. But the vagueness, in fact, increased the influence of Graham’s statement, providing a wide license for evangelicals to rethink their theology of evangelism and, as importantly, raise cooperating with Jews on Israel to the top of their agendas.

Tanenbaum was predictably enthused with Graham’s public statement. The process of counseling Graham and convincing him to adopt new theological

85 Gerald Strober to Marc Tanenbaum, November 5, 1973, box 24, folder 1, MHT.
86 Gerald Strober to Marc Tanenbaum, June 9, 1969, box 21, folder 1, MHT.
88 It is less probable that Graham was making a reference to Paul’s chastisement of Jews in Romans 10:2, which contains the same phrase.
89 “Statement by Billy Graham,” February 28, 1973, box 24, folder 1, MHT.
insights had stimulated Tanenbaum’s hopes for broad-based evangelical reform that was not towing to the interests of Jews, but becoming more authentically Christian. “I cannot begin to find words adequate to express my deep personal pleasure of the several conversations we have had the past few days,” Tanenbaum wrote Graham the day after the press release. He reflected, “I came away from our conversation persuaded that you have the capacity to make a historic contribution to the clarification of relationships between Christians and Jews in our century.”

While Graham’s theological reasoning had been imprecise, Tanenbaum praised “the words which you shared with us about God’s Covenant with Israel and your attitude toward missions-to-the-Jews.” Tanenbaum elaborated publicly on Graham’s theological evolution, writing in *Jewish Post & Opinion,* “he told me several times... [about] the basis of his developing Biblical and theological studies that ‘God’s Covenant with the Jewish people is eternal, forever’ and not subject to recall or substitution by Christianity.”

The pattern of evangelical emphasis on solidarity, and American Jewish encouragement and praise for Christian Zionist support, lived long past the Graham–Tanenbaum relationship. By the early 1980s, both Graham and Tanenbaum had been displaced from the center of their respective communities. Graham, no fan of the religious right, was overshadowed by Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and a host of other evangelists and pastors who took up the mantle of evangelical Christian Zionism. Tanenbaum retired as director of the interreligious affairs department of the AJC in 1982, though he remained active in dialogue until his death in 1992. But more importantly than either individual was the interreligious pro-Israel lobby, made up of Jewish establishment organizations, the Presidents’ Conference, AIPAC, and supported by dozens of religious right groups such as the Moral Majority and Religious Roundtable, which had pro-Israel planks in their value statements, or Christian Zionist organizations such as Christians United for Israel, Bridges for Peace, and Christians for Israel. This lobby and its allies, rising to new heights of political and financial influence in the early 1980s, internalized the pattern of interreligious affirmation spurred by existential concern for Israel.

90Marc Tanenbaum to Billy Graham, March 1, 1973, box 24, folder 1, MHT.
One substantial change from the 1970s, when the lobby and evangelical Christians had virtually no contact, was the emergence of new priorities in the Jewish defense organizations, especially the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League. The AJC, as we have seen, embraced Zionism and the new understanding of Jewish peoplehood after 1967 and committed resources to support the belief that the route to increasing Christian support for Israel was through theological reform. The ADL, on the other hand, worked vigilantly against the promotion of His Land and, throughout the 1970s, was critical of the AJC’s evangelical outreach. Their concerns seemed validated later in the decade with the rise of the religious right and rising Jewish concerns that political evangelicals were seeking to revive a “Christian America”—an ominous future for non-Christian minorities. Yet with the ascendancy of Nathan Perlmutter as the executive director of the ADL in 1979, and alongside him the influence of new proponents of Jewish-evangelical dialogue within the organization, such as Yechiel Eckstein, co-director of interreligious affairs from 1978–1983, the ADL also began to reassess Christian Zionism on the same terms as the AJC a decade before. In the words of Eckstein, the ADL needed to establish “lines of communication” across religious and political divides, the creation of which had deep “implications for Jewish-Evangelical relations and for the question of support for Israel.” By the early 1980s, the ADL had intermittent meetings with religious right leaders, electronic church televangelists, and less flashy evangelical organizational leaders. The rocky and at times explosive relationship between the religious right and the American Jewish establishment, occupying opposing territories in the culture wars of the 1980s, never entirely broke down, however, largely due to shared interest in, and understanding over, the centrality of Israel to both communities.

Fundamentalists like Falwell, who increasingly spoke for evangelical Christian Zionism, found in Israel an affirmation of evangelical theology and covenantal solidarity. Falwell came to see the fate of Israel as an existential issue for America, describing it and global missions as the sole purposes of the republic. “God has raised up America in these last days for the cause of world evangelization and for the protection of his people, the Jews. I don’t

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think America has any other right or reason for existence other than those two purposes,” he said in 1981. Along with his constant (and inconsistent) invocations of Christ’s imminent coming, Falwell’s Zionism emerged out of the evangelical understanding of Israel captured in *His Land*, crystalized in the willingness of World Wide Pictures to cut the proselytizing coda. Falwell himself was inconsistent on Jewish missions, though he disavowed any connections to Jews for Jesus and was vague enough on his positions that in later years he was mistaken by Jewish leaders to hold to “dual covenant” theology that denied the need to convert Jews. Unable or unwilling to rectify the deep contradictions in his stance on Israel and the other “purpose” of America—global missions (presumably also to the Jewish people)—Falwell nevertheless functionally prioritized the covenantal relationship that saw Israel and the U.S. as the two representatives of Judeo-Christian values.

The movement away from American evangelicalism’s centuries-old emphasis by American Protestants on Jewish missions by Graham and Falwell did not, of course, entirely transform American evangelical attitudes toward Jewish missions. In 1989, the “Willowbank Declaration,” signed by more than a dozen leading evangelical theologians, called for renewed efforts to pursue Jewish missions. The signees wrote to “reaffirm our commitment to the Jewish people and our desire to share the Gospel with them.” While confirming Jewish missions remained important for a large segment of evangelicalism, the declaration also exposed the transformations wrought by the then twenty-year-old Jewish-evangelical relationship. The declaration was in response, its signees wrote, to “confusion among Christians about the need for, and the propriety of, endeavors to share faith in Jesus Christ with Jewish people.” There appeared to be “a new theology” among some evangelicals, the document lamented, “which holds that God’s covenant with Israel through Abraham establishes all Jews in God’s favor for all times, and makes faith in Jesus Christ for salvation needless.” To these evangelicals, the effort at outreach and engagement first pioneered by Graham had taken on a life of its own, leading to “an uncertain state of mind” and undue concern on the part of evangelicals for the state of Israel over evangelization to the Jewish people.

Both the place of Jewish missions and of Messianic Jews in the Jewish-evangelical relationship have remained enduring points of tension. Certainly,

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in the wider American evangelical community, Jewish missions remains a core focus for many churches and organizations. Messianic Jewish pastors including Lon Solomon and Jonathan Cahn command large evangelical audiences. The universal human need for the gospel is propounded weekly. Yet closer to the theological, institutional, and political center of Christian Zionism, while there remain some Messianic Jewish proponents of Christian Zionism—such as Mike Evans, founder of the Friends of Zion Heritage Center in Jerusalem—the foremost leaders of Christian Zionist organizations are less committal on Jewish missions. The leading Christian Zionist in twenty-first century America, John Hagee, founder of Christians United for Israel, has been labeled by evangelical detractors as a “dual covenant” proponent and has explicitly denounced Jewish missions. His organization, as well as other leading Christian Zionist organizations including the International Christian Embassy—Jerusalem and Bridges for Peace, disavow any intent to evangelize, as well. Viewed through the prism of the long history of evangelical Christianity, the transformation of attitudes on Jewish missions since 1970 is swift and remarkable.

In large part because of the rapidness of this shift among those evangelicals most engaged in Jewish-evangelical relations, American Jewish leaders, especially those at the nexus of the pro-Israel lobby, made quick peace with Falwell and the religious right in the 1980s. They, in fact, welcomed the support of evangelicals as one of the few groups on the American religious landscape that affirmed Jewish existential ties to the land of Israel. Perlmutter, executive director of the ADL until 1987, was especially willing to look past the religious right’s more controversial policy positions. “Jews can live with all the domestic priorities of the Christian Right on which liberal Jews differ so radically, because none of these concerns is as important as Israel.” 98 The existential note in Perlmutter’s evaluation was shared by other Jewish leaders—in the AJC, AIPAC, and the Presidents’ Conference. 99 Perlmutter’s successor at the ADL, Abe Foxman, likewise came to see the religious right’s support for Israel as more important than its conservative domestic positions. By the early twenty-first century, Foxman praised religious right support for Israel as “overwhelming, consistent, and unconditional.” 100 This pattern of submerging domestic political concerns for the sake of Israel came out of the post-1967 moment and the arrival of

evangelicals, in only a few years, to the forefront of American Jewish concerns about Israel, American politics, and the Christian world.

VI. Conclusion

At the Jewish Community Center showing of His Land in Cleveland in February 1971, the fragility of the interreligious project was on display. On that night, His Land ran twelve minutes too long. As Cliff Barrows urged viewers to “invite Jesus into your heart,” the audience became visibly uneasy. Organizers from the AJC and World Wide Pictures realized too late that they had played the longer cut of the film. Jewish audiences could stomach or ignore most of the Christian trappings of His Land, but the final twelve minutes were too much. There were rumors, too, that Dallas Blackburn, the Ohio representative for World Wide Pictures in attendance, was “a former fundamentalist Baptist preacher.” A staffer connected the dots and felt that “this act was premeditated.”

At the very pinnacle of His Land’s reach, the fragility of Jewish-evangelical cooperation was never more apparent. But more remarkable than the wide chasm of misunderstanding on display was its ultimate inconsequentiality. Apologies were sent, assurances were given. Hilda Faigin, the president of the Cleveland center, refused to sponsor a planned second showing of the film. But there were plenty of other churches and synagogues to take its place. And all the while evangelical and Jewish leaders affirmed their differences and, at the same time, advanced a common discourse about the existential religious meaning of Israel that deepened the Jewish-Christian religious cleavage while building a political bridge over its chasm.

The new approach to Jewish-Christian relations, embraced by Graham and a growing number of evangelical leaders interested in Israel in the 1970s, de-emphasized Jewish missions in favor of support for Israel. This was a conscious reversal of evangelical theological priorities, but framed by both evangelicals and supportive Jews as a theologically consistent expression of evangelical identity. Falwell, the founder of the Moral Majority and a key figure in interreligious pro-Israel lobby, explained in 1985 during a public dialogue with Tanenbaum that “there has been developing in this country a phenomenon” of evangelical interest in Israel, with the community “coming towards a commitment to the Abrahamic covenant, coming

101 Michael Mehlman to Seymor Brief, February 22, 1971, box 22, folder 4, MHT.
102 Seymor Brief to Gerald Strober, February 22, 1971, box 22, folder 4, MHT; Gerald Strober to Kenneth Bliss, February 25, 1971, box 22, folder 4, MHT.
towards a humanitarian commitment to the State of Israel, an historical commitment."

It is this theological and religious transformation, as much as any structural change in American religious life, that facilitated Jewish and evangelical collaboration on the issue of Israel. While the new social and political divides emerging at the dawn of the culture wars era mattered, so did the theological and religious connections with Jews constructed by evangelicals. Without the personal relationships between Tanenbaum and Graham, without the mediating influence of the AJC, and without the shared existential discourse around His Land that privileged authenticity, the emerging pro-Israel lobby would have proved immensely more difficult to create and maintain.

The evangelical theology in 1970, as well as the distinct American Jewish reactions to the June 1967 War, help us understand the development of a Jewish-evangelical coalition based on advancing support for Israel. The way His Land connected evangelical and Jewish priorities through Christian theological and religious language works against the culture wars framework. To explain interreligious support for Israel, the specific Christian theological developments mattered, and continued to matter. The maintenance of confessional boundaries between Jews and Christians actually fueled a sense of authentic encounter. The interpersonal and institutional connections sparked by the film, and the relationships that were consequently formed, fashioned the sinews of an emerging interreligious pro-Israel lobby. Even today, when support for Israel has grown into a major facet of evangelical identity and American political life, and an increasingly important source of political support for the state of Israel, it bears reflecting on the forces that have given it room to flourish and the stamina to persist through the most vicious battles of the culture wars, even as its history has been inextricably bound to them.

103 Jerry Falwell, transcript, April 26, 1985, box 20, folder 2, MHT.