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## **Christian Heresy and the Anti-Judaic Midrash**

### **The Jews in the Minds of Herbert W. Armstrong and his Evangelical Foes**

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#### **Abstract**

Jews, before and after World War II, were viewed with an attitude that was generally more positive and inclusive in the United States. This thinking about the Jews manifested in concepts such as Judeo-Christian and the Christian Zionist movement. Despite this newfound favor, hostile and negative conceptualizations of the Jews and Judaism persisted in some areas of American religion. An anti-Judaic midrash was being elaborated and spread. This negative attitude towards Judaism appeared not in the evangelical discourse about Jews or Israel but in one of the most unlikely of places: in internal struggles within the Christian church in the United States. On the margins of American Christianity, an unorthodox Christian movement arose. It was in conservative evangelical opposition to Herbert W. Armstrong's "heretical" movement and in Armstrong's theology that the anti-Judaic was resurrected and enjoyed new life during the Cold War.

Keywords: Herbert W. Armstrong, evangelicals, heresy, anti-Judaic midrash, Worldwide Church of God

#### **Introduction**

"I want you to know what Judaism is! I'm picturing for you now Judaism. And Judaism, my friends, is not the religion that came through Moses. Judaism is not the religion that God gave the people through Moses" (Armstrong, "Religion of Tradition"). Thus harangued Herbert W. Armstrong (1892–1986) on his radio program *The World Tomorrow*. "Judaism," Armstrong alleged, "is the religion that was really invented out of the imaginations of the

rabbis that were the priestly rulers over the Jewish people that were in Palestine from the days of Ezra and Nehemiah on until the time of Christ” (Armstrong, “Religion of Tradition”). Armstrong was a leader of a formidable and global Christian movement from the 1930s until his death in 1986. The “apostle,” so Armstrong styled himself (Armstrong, “We Are to Be Like God”), broke away from conservative evangelicalism in the United States. The message he delivered on *The World Tomorrow* that day was no anomaly. His interpretation of Judaism was a frequent and crucial feature of his theological system, which he believed represented the “true church” (Armstrong, “History of the True Church—Part 4”) and the “true values” of Christianity (*Envoy* 1955).<sup>1</sup> Addressing listeners as “friends,” a rhetorical move through which Armstrong manufactured a feeling of intimacy, the religious leader made a distinction that was vital to his religious system: separating the notion of Israel from the Jews. Judaism, Armstrong said, was not given by God. Hence, the Jews could not partake in, according to Armstrong, the fruits of chosenness, the promises of ancient covenants. Moreover, he stressed, Judaism was a man-made figment, concocted in the minds of ancient rabbis. In this sense, Armstrong advertised his idea that Jews, equipped with their fake religion, were interlopers in the game of chosenness.

Armstrong was a twentieth-century religious figure who played a leading and astounding role in the religious life of the United States. The tentacles of his “empire,” as conservative evangelicals frequently and in a tone of consternation called Armstrong’s church (Hopkins 1974; Benware 1975, v; Chambers 1988, 13), ensnared almost all parts of the United States and reached far beyond into other parts of the world. But with this highly visible and, at the time, influential figure there is a strange paradox. Despite his public presence, despite his global reach, and despite the considerable wealth and following he drew to himself, Armstrong remains today almost entirely forgotten. Armstrong’s church is largely a temple in ruins, overtaken by the undergrowth of time. The best evidence for the spotty knowledge of Armstrong today is his fleeting presence in the scholarship on American religion. Michael Scott Lupo (2002) wrote an informative and comprehensive dissertation on Armstrong’s life and career, which situates Armstrong’s style of evangelism and religious ideology in the American culture of success. A 2018 article explores Armstrong’s brand of apocalypticism (Martin 2018). Another article investigates the Armstrong movement after the leader’s death (Jenkins and Thomas 2009). Apart from these studies,<sup>2</sup> one encounters a resounding silence in the scholarship of American religion regarding Armstrong. Major works on evangelicalism and American religion make no effort to catalog his deeds or make sense of his work vis-à-vis the wider panorama of American religious life.<sup>3</sup> While scholars have forgotten or are unaware of Armstrong, the situation is strikingly different with conservative evangelicals, especially those who were contemporaries of him. These conservative evangelical Christians looked up

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<sup>1</sup> *Envoy* was the yearbook for Ambassador College in Pasadena, California.

<sup>2</sup> There are other fleeting mentions of Armstrong in the literature. For example, Armstrong is named in a footnote of *Mapping the End Times: American Evangelical Geopolitics and Apocalyptic Visions* (Dittmer and Sturm 2010). Armstrong also appears in a footnote in another article (Kaplan 1993, 291).

<sup>3</sup> Important scholarly works on American evangelicalism neither make mention of Armstrong nor is there an attempt to understand how Armstrongism fits in the mosaic of American religious life during the Cold War. (Diamond 1989, 1995; Balmer 1999; K. Armstrong 2000; Lahr 2007; Sutton 2014; FitzGerald 2017).

astonished at Armstrong's meteoric rise and interpreted it as the augury of something truly, in the words of one evangelical, "Satanic" (Lugt quoted in DeLoach 1971). In the end, much of the knowledge we have of Armstrong has been refracted through the lens of conservative evangelicals who were antagonistic towards this leader for his unorthodox beliefs and, therefore, approached him in the spirit of theological polemic (Lupo 2002). This article, therefore, adds to what is largely absent from the scholarship on American religion.

Amongst many conservative evangelicals during the Cold War, there was, generally speaking, a positive attitude towards Jews that was manifested primarily in two ways: through the expanding use of the concept of Judeo-Christian and the Christian Zionist movement. Despite this interest, a favorable attitude, and a more inclusive understanding of the Jews and their place in the world, this article argues that in the heated and decades-long religious infighting between conservative evangelicals, on the one hand, and the radio evangelist Herbert W. Armstrong on the other, a highly negative and even derogatory attitude towards the Jews crept in. In other words, just as conservative evangelicals began broadly to conceive of Jews as part of Western civilization or American life, and were in ecstasy about the state of Israel and events surrounding it, some evangelicals resorted to an ancient form of derision. Conservative evangelicals writing against "Armstrongism" and Armstrong himself mobilized a certain type of discourse—the anti-Judaic midrash. Evangelicals employed the anti-Judaic midrash as a means of undermining a Christian movement they viewed as heretical. Armstrong deployed the same tactics to crowd out the Jews, whose very existence presented real complications for his theological doctrines. The appearance of an anti-Judaic midrash in this unlikely place—the heretical controversies between American Christians—is historically significant first because it adds to our understanding of the complex attitude that some Christians held towards Jews during the Cold War. Second, through this tracking down of the anti-Judaic midrash, a largely unknown conflict on the margins of American religion and a highly influential but largely forgotten man can be better understood.

The term anti-Judaic midrash deserves clarification. It has been taken from the Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether (1936–2022). In her *Faith and Fratricide*, Ruether traces the theological origins of anti-Semitism. Ruether maintains that this history started with the early church and appeared most concretely in the *Adversus Iudaeos* ("against the Jews") literature. Ruether argues that the historical life of this literature was long, spanning from the second century into the Early Middle Ages (around the sixth century CE) (1974, 123). The literature was diverse and included sermons, mock dialogues between Jews and Christians, and theological tracts. Ruether identified the following recurring negative themes in the *Adversus Iudaeos* texts written by early Christians: that the Jews had earned the wrath of God for their continual backsliding into idol worship; the charge that the Jews had not heeded and had killed the prophets; that they would reject Christ was "foretold;" that Jews simply lacked an understanding of Scripture; that understanding could only be supplied through the life, teaching, and redemption of Christ; that the Jews would be dispersed; that the "old dispensation" in which the Jews were at the center of God's redemptive work in the world had been snuffed out and that the Jews would be supplanted by the Gentiles (1974, 118). To Ruether's mind, these centuries of literary tradition, theological speculation, and attitudes towards the Jews were not insignificant. Early Church fathers wrote in this genre, Augustine of Hippo being just one example. The tradition of anti-Judaic theological speculation was also

of consequence because it formed the basis of scriptural exegesis of the Old Testament. “It was virtually impossible,” Ruether insists, “for the Christian preacher or exegete to teach scripturally at all without alluding to the anti-Judaic theses” (1974, 121). This theological tradition, which appeared at the very beginning of Christianity, had three clear purposes. These sermons or treatises promoted the idea that the Jews had been cast aside by God in favor of the Gentiles and, second, that the entire religious system and religious history of the Jews was inferior to and also fulfilled by Christian revelation (974, 123). While the demotion of the Jews in the minds of Christians was central to these works, there was a third purpose in this struggle between *ecclesia et synagoga*.<sup>4</sup> differentiation. In a historical moment when the lines around Christianity were being drawn and pushed against, this Christian literature and the themes it contained also served as a means of differentiating the fledgling religion of Christ from the Jewish religion and world (1974, 123).

One final point deserves further attention: the use of “midrash.” Why would a term forged entirely in the context of Jewish religious and learning culture be applicable to Christian practices and discourse in the ancient world and in the contemporary United States? The most common understanding of midrash is a practice of interpretation, specifically of the Torah (Mandel 2017, 84, 148–50). Ruether, in fact, uses midrash, hermeneutic, exegesis, and interpretation interchangeably (1974, 64–66). But the conceptual history of midrash is more complex. Originally, for example, midrash was associated with the communal study of the Torah (Mandel 2017, 89–90). From this experience of study, the word underwent a change and became more and more associated with interpretation. Even before this, the verb *darash* was used, for which midrash is the nominal form (Mandel 2017, 77). The verb *darash* meant, amongst other things, “to teach” (Mandel 2017, 77). William W. Hallo claims quite intriguingly, however, that the more contextually accurate meaning of midrash does not exclude interpretation but that this is largely a Christian or Classical take on the term (2003, 160). Hallo maintains that midrash must also be understood in the context of Judaism at the time, a time when there were no concordances, no dictionaries. In this sense, Hallo sees in the earliest examples of midrash a mnemonic function, serving as a means of fixing sacred texts in the mind (2003). Where does this leave us? To Ruether, the notion of interpretation prevails, and the term anti-Judaic midrash makes sense to her because Christian interpretive practices emerged alongside and out of those of Judaism in the earliest moments of Christianity (1974, 64–65). Moreover, the texts from which both the Jewish and Christian interpretations and expounders were working were the books of the Hebrew Bible. The major difference between these two religious schools was that the Christian approach to these texts was marked by a

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<sup>4</sup> Of considerable interest, and highly relevant to the discussion here, is the fact that this theme of victory over Judaism or the synagogue, bled into the Middle Ages and was a recurring motif in the Christian art of Europe in this period; hence, it did not die out with the *Adversus Iudaeos* texts. This type of art with an anti-Judaic or anti-Semitic tinge is referred to as *ecclesia et synagoga*. The theme was depicted using two allegorical women, one representing the church, the other the synagogue. The artistic theme appeared in manuscripts and in statuary. The woman representing the *ecclesia* was often depicted as triumphant, confident, sometimes regal and carrying the accoutrements of power; most of all, she was imbued with the triumphant knowledge of election, of the chosenness of God. While the woman representing the synagogue was depicted as lowly, dejected, and often blindfolded, writing in stone what before had been spoken and written in words: namely the supposed “blindness” of the Jews, their alleged lack of understanding, their seeming ignorance of the incarnation and life of the son of God (“Ecclesia et Synagoga” 2008; Bishop 2013).

Christological lens and by an anti-Judaic attitude. Imprecise though the term may be, given its nuanced history and its specific origins in Jewish culture, anti-Judaic midrash will be used in this article, for the term cites and harkens back to an ancient type of biblical interpretation and attitude that was being revived. The concept of anti-Judaic midrash brings to the fore this involvement with, attitude toward, and interpretation of texts that a term like anti-Semitism might exclude.

### Sources and Methodology

Using Ruether's theoretical understanding of the negative attitude of early Christians towards Jews, this article will pursue the anti-Judaic midrash in the theological squabbles between American Christians in the twentieth century. The primary sources used to throw light on Armstrong's religious system will be confined to his radio program *The World Tomorrow*, though this represents only one part of this movement's cultural production. The radio program, produced over decades, is a treasure trove of Armstrong religious thinking and is therefore highly representative. Moreover, the radio program was one of the primary modes in which Armstrong presented his version of the gospel to the masses. Armstrong's media production was both an intensive and extensive use of communications technology (see Mann 2012). It was intensive in that, through its sheer volume, it could place people in an immersive religious experience. One could, should one tune in and read, become inundated with Armstrong's messages. Armstrong's religiocultural production also functioned extensively in that it was strewn over "extensive social space" (Mann 2012, 366). In other words, Armstrong exposed the world itself to his brand of Christianity. These primary sources have been taken from the digital depository of the Herbert W. Armstrong Library (HWA Library). The other side—the evangelical response to Armstrong—will be charted through books that conservative evangelicals published against the man they viewed as a modern-day heretic. These books, mostly written in the 1960s and 1970s, are not only useful in uncovering how evangelicals' received Armstrong's message and "work" (Armstrong, "Melchisedec—But by Every Word of God") but also in that they contain evidence of the anti-Judaic midrash that was, according to Ruether, such a central part of early Christianity.

### Historical Background on Armstrong and his Movement

Because of the *lacuna* concerning Armstrong both in the scholarship on religion in the United States and outside academia, a word on him, his religious ideas and movement, and the reaction he provoked in evangelicals will provide valuable context for readers. To begin, Armstrong's personal life was one of movement. Born into a modest working-class family in Iowa in the last decade of the nineteenth century, he and his family moved five times before Armstrong reached ten years of age (Armstrong 1958, 6-11). "A goodly portion of my life has been spent in travelling," Armstrong reflected in his autobiography (Armstrong 1958, 26). Indeed, the uprootedness of his life trajectory was mirrored in Armstrong's theological wandering. Armstrong first carved out a place for himself in the world not as a member of the priestly class but rather through a career in advertising (Lupo 2022). It was in the workshop of advertising where Armstrong honed the skills of crafting his speech and writing to appeal to the masses. Leaving his native Iowa behind, he eventually endured and passed through the hardships of the Great Depression in Eugene, Oregon. From there, he made his way to California where he relocated his radio evangelical enterprise and magazine and eventually

founded his first university campus: Ambassador College in 1947 in California—two more would follow. Once Armstrong’s Worldwide Church of God (initially the Radio Church of God) was firmly established, and he was swimming in excess funds,<sup>5</sup> Armstrong spent his life visiting other university campuses in Texas and England; conducting pastoral visits to satellite churches around the world; visiting heads of state, for example the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 1982 (*The Plain Truth* 1982) and various leaders of African countries in 1977 (“Mr. Armstrong Speaks to African Leaders” 1977, 44–45); and enjoying “eventful” pleasure trips (L. Armstrong 1956a, 7; see also L. Armstrong 1956b, 11–13). By the time of his death in 1986, his religious movement had churches throughout the United States and the rest of the world, Armstrong’s magazine *The Plain Truth* enjoyed millions of readers,<sup>6</sup> and his radio program blanketed the globe (Hopkins 1974).

The above-mentioned triumphs were not all that remarkable in terms of American religion; here, Armstrong was simply one amongst many. Some evangelicals denounced Armstrong’s religious movement in frightened terms, calling it a large, looming, and dangerous “empire” or “cult” (DeLoach 1971; Hopkins 1974, 214; Chambers 1988, 7; Martin 2019). Cult was a loaded word that fit in perfectly with the designs of evangelicals who wished to defrock Armstrong and excommunicate him in the minds of readers from the sacred realm of legitimate Christianity. But contrary to these evangelical judgments, Armstrong, in many respects, ran a similar operation to other conservative evangelical or fundamentalist Christians. The sophisticated and multipronged use of media—radio, television, publications—the expansion or exportation of one’s gospel beyond the United States, the raking in of vast sums of wealth from supporters and church members, the founding of universities, all this can be identified in abundance in the twentieth-century evangelical movement. From Billy Graham (1918–2018) with his international evangelism, radio program, stadium-filled crusades, and magazine to Jerry Falwell (1933–2007) with his television program *Old Time Gospel Hour* and Liberty University, from Pat Robertson (1930–2023) with his long-running *The 700 Club* and his own Regent University to the more contemporary example of Gwen Shamblin Lara (1955–2021) with her own media ecosystem and Christian diet plan *Weigh Down* (Davis 2022), Armstrong, like so many other evangelicals and fundamentalist Christians, took advantage of the increasingly interconnected life of the post-World War II era and the communications technologies that had been created and were being improved. It was not only the case that evangelicals and Armstrong had a convincing message but that they emerged in a particular historical moment in which centuries of historical change had created an increasingly globalized economic and social world and new and more sophisticated networks of communication had been brought online.

Although Armstrong and conservative evangelicals were running on parallel paths organizationally speaking, the messages they were hurriedly conveying to the world differed in some but not all ways. To put it simply, Armstrong was a twentieth-century heretic, according to many conservative evangelicals (DeLoach 1971; Hopkins 1974; Benware 1975; Chambers 1988; Martin 2019). And Armstrong the heresiarch’s sins against evangelical orthodoxy were

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<sup>5</sup> According to Hopkins, by 1974, Armstrong’s enterprise had reached an annual budget of \$56 million (1974, 7).

<sup>6</sup> The January 1984 issue of *The Plain Truth* boasts a circulation of 6,347,000.

copious, confident, and unrepentant. Armstrong, in a similar vein, viewed mainstream evangelicalism through a negative lens, believing that it was a pagan-tainted religion that was vapid, false, and actively and willfully deceptive (Armstrong 1979; Armstrong, “Grace vs License”). The main religious holidays of Christianity were excised from the Worldwide Church of God’s religious horizon and denounced as vestiges of ancient Roman or Near Eastern paganism (Armstrong, “The One True Church”). Along these lines, Armstrong felled the Christmas tree, denouncing it as a corrupt pagan practice (Armstrong 1979). Heaven, hell, the immortality of the soul, being saved merely through faith and acceptance of Christ (*sola gratia*), and the doctrine of the Trinity were just some theological tenets that Armstrong rent asunder. If Armstrong is known at all, it is usually for his adherence to Sabbatarianism, the belief that the Sabbath should be held on Saturday as opposed to Sunday, and British-Israelism (treated in the next few pages). It was with Sabbatarianism that Armstrong’s heresy (from the orthodox Protestant viewpoint) began. His wife Loma Armstrong first converted to this doctrine in 1926, which Herbert W. Armstrong initially saw as a form of religious “fanaticism” (Armstrong 1958, 4). His wife’s unorthodox theological move produced an inner crisis in Armstrong. He resisted her adoption of this doctrine for the reason that he viewed it as fanatical but also “contrary to the orthodox belief and custom” (Armstrong 1958, 4). What is peculiar about this explanation of his reaction to his wife’s unorthodoxy is that he, as he admits in his autobiography, was not all that religious and had neglected for some time the things of the spirit.<sup>7</sup> Given Armstrong’s temporary snub of the spiritual realm, it might be the case that he resisted his wife’s Sabbatarianism on the grounds that he experienced it as a form of uncomfortable religious, perhaps even intellectual, independence. “I was determined to drive this religious fanaticism out of my home,” the future religious leader emphasized in an early edition of his autobiography, as if attempting to reassert his authority in the domestic sphere (Armstrong 1958, 4). Whatever the case, Loma Armstrong’s stroll down the path of Sabbatarianism sparked a moment of intense study of the Bible for Armstrong. The fruits of this study were that, when he resurfaced, he ultimately concluded that his wife’s position was correct. Following Armstrong’s adoption of Sabbatarianism, other unorthodox approaches to Christian belief and practice rushed in. While there were considerable doctrinal differences between evangelicals and Armstrong, there were numerous points of overlap. For one, the tense, hostile, and belligerent ways in which Armstrong and evangelicals addressed and denounced one another were strikingly similar (West 2022). Armstrong and conservative evangelicals were also operating on the same mental plane in terms of biblical literalism and divine inspiration of the Bible. Lastly, both conservative evangelicals and Armstrong seemingly espoused apocalyptic doctrines (though the extent to which they actually believed the world was going to end is open to question). With apocalypticism, the most noticeable difference was that for evangelicals the Second Coming of the Lord (the Parousia) would terminate in a celestial bliss, a heavenly kingdom. For Armstrong, on the other hand, the Kingdom of God was to be an earthly rule; the doctrine of heaven had already been thrown overboard.

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<sup>7</sup> Armstrong, in his autobiography, states that at the age of 18 he had “drifted away” and become “completely out of touch” with organized religion (1958, 13). Additional evidence for this brief apostasy is that almost all of his energies, between the age of 18 and roughly 34, were plowed into business and the pursuit of “success,” a word that is a permanent fixture in Armstrong’s autobiography and his life as an evangelist.

One of the thorns that pricked deepest into the side of evangelicals was Armstrong's attitude towards the Old Testament and the socio-religious practices of the ancient Israelites. Armstrong insisted, time and again, that the secret to biblical texts was that it was a government and kingdom. "Jesus talked about a Government but you don't hear that in the churches today. Jesus talked about a Government, a Kingdom—the Kingdom of God," Armstrong preached in one radio program ("The Narrow Way"). In this statement, Armstrong communicated his frequent lamentation that the churches, by which he meant largely evangelicalism, were crushing and hiding the true reality of the Christian gospel. Armstrong, in this instance, also expressed the logic of his theological thinking: as with any government, even a divine one, there must be a law. Armstrong viewed keeping the Old Testament law as a prerequisite for true belief and its consequence: being truly in the fold of Christ's church. Armstrong's injection of Old Testament festivals and laws into Christianity meant that salvation depended not, as in evangelicalism, in a moment of conversion but also in what one did. In other words, Armstrong had flatly rejected the notion of *sola gratia*. It would be over simplistic to say that Armstrong's adoption of Old Testament law was universally applied. Instead, the introduction of Old Testament law and festivals into the Worldwide Church of God passed through a thick sieve, some things making it through and others not. Armstrong and his followers, some 60,000 by the year 1974 (Hopkins 1974, 174), had adopted the Festival of Tabernacles, which became one of the central religious rituals of the Armstrong movement. Kosher, too, was taken up. However, as some evangelicals writing about Armstrong pointed out, many laws, ordinances, and aspects of the Old Testament religion were simply not adopted. Israelite ritual sacrifice was, for example, not reinstated. Once Armstrong had eliminated religious holidays like Christmas and Easter, deeming them vestiges of pagan contamination, some degree of collective-identity-building ritual needed to be instituted. Rummaging through the Old Testament and picking out selectively different religious practices served to fill the void created by Armstrong's rejection of traditional, conservative Protestant belief and practice.

### **Armstrong's British-Israelism and the Anti-Judaic Midrash**

A tension, therefore, was brewing in the heart of American Christianity that involved differing attitudes to fundamental doctrines, divergent religiocultural practices, vitriol on both sides, and various points of overlap between Armstrong and conservative evangelicalism. One of Armstrong's most controversial beliefs, one that entangled him in the long tradition of anti-Judaic midrash, was British-Israelism, also known as Anglo-Israelism. Roger R. Chambers, a conservative evangelical detractor of Armstrong, in his book *The Plain Truth about Armstrongism*, asserted, "The substructure and foundation of Armstrongism is British-Israelism" (1988, 26). In this, Chambers was correct, for Armstrong's religious system was permeated with this British ideological import. Though British-Israelism did not originate with the leader of the Worldwide Church of God, Armstrong's version of this doctrine affirmed that once the Northern Kingdom of Israel had been vanquished by the Neo-Assyrians in 721 BCE and much of its population deported, these ten scattered tribes, though lost to history, maintained their identity as Israelites. With their identity absconded, the tribes migrated to Northern Europe, specifically to the British Isles. From there, once the British commenced their colonization of North America, they spread their secret bloodline to North America. Hence, Americans, white Americans, were also, in this ideological system, members of the House of



Israel. For Armstrong, the democratic countries of Northern Europe, too, were partakers in this clandestine lineage (“The Feast of Tabernacles and God’s Law—Part 2”). Thus, Armstrong’s British-Israelism oscillated between the United States, Britain, and certain parts of Europe; put in more abstract terms: the West. Election was now no longer, as in traditional Christianity, just a question of belief but rather of belonging to an ethnic group (vague and sprawling though the definition was). Armstrong’s British-Israelism, with this special place carved out for the United States, bizarre though it might seem, should be situated in a long tradition of inhabitants believing that theirs was a chosen nation. This ideology of chosenness has appeared in Spain, France, and in England (Ruether 2007). The United States, too, has been fertile ground for this thinking. Even before independence, Puritans saw themselves as chosen, unique, and bound by covenants to their Christian God. In the nineteenth century, Providence, many believed, had destined Americans to spread and overtake the entire continent. And, of course today, in a more secular form, the notion of American exceptionalism, with its hints of chosenness, circulates with relative ease. Armstrong’s somewhat more fantastical version, then, can be understood as another chapter in a long history of national self-conceptualization.

Armstrong presented his version of history and chosenness, which evangelicals ripped to shreds (Hopkins 1974; Benware 1975; Chambers 1988; Martin 2019), on his radio program more with bold and simple assertions than a detailed and evidence-based history. Simply put, Armstrong mobilized scant evidence. An illustrative example of how Armstrong established the links between the ancient Israelites and modern Europe, this time specifically with Ireland, comes from a radio broadcast on prophecy in which Armstrong asserted, “He planted the throne that he had torn down in Judah. He planted it in Ulster, in north Ireland. My friends, I was in Ulster in north Ireland. It’s a beautiful country. Well, Jeremiah finally went over there. But that isn’t the point I want to get to, that’s just in passing” (“Outline of Prophecy 03—A Prophet to the Nations—Part 1”). Here, Armstrong affirmed that the prophet Jeremiah had traveled to Ireland and set up the “throne” there, that is transplanted the authority and relationship with God to a new land. To justify this bold claim, instead of concrete evidence, Armstrong resorted to his authority as religious leader and to personal experience: the fact that he had been there and that it was beautiful. A trip and aesthetic appreciation were all that were needed on this occasion. Armstrong then moved on, saying this was not the main point he was trying to make. The tangent that Armstrong slipped down on his radio program that day most likely was rooted in the fact that after World War II his radio programs were unscripted; however, the tangent was highly profitable. For the idea had now been introduced into the attentive listener’s mind, the seed had been planted. To employ a phrase Angela Davis used in her exploration of mass incarceration of the United States, the picture that Armstrong painted of a connection between Ireland and Israel via Jeremiah now inhabited one’s “image environment” (2003, 18). The idea, following Davis’ thinking, neither needed to be confirmed nor necessarily accepted by the listener—the notion was now there, it had been made salient and had been normalized. A similar link was established between Israel and England. Using the occasion of Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation in 1953, *The Plain Truth* argued that the throne of the Biblical figure David “became the throne of England” (R. Armstrong 1953, 8). “Why was Elizabeth II Crowned Queen of ISRAEL?” the curious headline ran. The explanation given was that the Lia Fáil stone formed part of the British monarch’s throne and that this

stone, according to Herman L. Hoeh, a follower of Armstrong, had originated in Israel (Hoeh 1953, 9).

In one instance, the evidence put forward to support the assertion that the United States was part of Israel was often personalized and connected to Armstrong himself. Imagined personal experience, then, became the foundation for understanding nations and their histories. Collective figments were fed and sustained through personal imaginings. In a broadcast of *The World Tomorrow* (“Don’t ‘Assume’ the Bible Says!”), Armstrong affirmed:

“[M]y ancestors back in that time lived in England. And I traced my ancestry clear back to Edward I of England of whom I am a direct descendant. And I can trace my ancestry from Edward I clear back to Zedekiah, the king of Judah, mentioned in the Bible. And from the Bible genealogy, I trace my ancestry clear back to King David, of the house of David of the kingdom of Judah, and of the house, or the kingdom, of Israel. And from there, in the Bible, I trace it back to Adam. Can you do that? I don’t think there are very many. But I have my ancestry, every generation, from myself back to Adam, believe it or not.”

Evidence for a clear and unbroken genealogical history from Armstrong back to Adam has not yet been uncovered. In this broadcast, however, Armstrong did not need to muster convincing and reliable evidence to justify the claims of British-Israelism. The claim itself was enthralling and seductive. It said to all who heard, and could then read themselves into its narrative, that they were special, chosen amongst all the peoples of the world, and that they, despite the winding and perilous path of history, were partakers in a holy and ancient tradition. “Such models of the world make tolerable one’s moment between beginning and end,” observed Frank Kermode (2000, 4). The appeal, the seductiveness of the idea, rested not in the details or in the truth but in what it said about you, the listener, in the fact that it helped make sense of one’s moment in this world. This was especially true if the listener was of European descent. Ultimately, Armstrong’s message conveyed the notion that one’s identity had been lost and Armstrong with his truth, which had been “submerged under a rubbish heap of pagan tradition” for 1800 years (“Religion of Tradition”), had recovered it. In the first place, this message played on the basic assumption of European and American thought that one has a self, a true self, an individual self (Rosemont 2015), and that one can, as the popular adage goes, “find oneself.” The doctrine of British-Israelism also spoke to the anomie, the feeling of forlornness that many experienced in the United States during the Cold War. The sentiment was expressed vividly by the American filmmaker Emile de Antonio in an interview he gave in 1971 in which he lamented “the emptiness, the spiritual bleakness, the loss of meaning, the loss of purpose” that could be felt in American life and culture (de Antonio quoted in *The Black Power Mixtape* [Olssen et al. 2011]). To the extent that these words reflected the sentiments of many, British-Israelism filled this emptiness, banished this bleakness. Chambers did not view the ideology of British-Israelism as simply providing meaning. As a defender of evangelical orthodoxy, he saw this “romantic identification with Israel” and the appeal of Armstrong’s idea somewhat differently (1988, 31). To Chamber’s mind, the whole fanciful narrative was an example of a mental infantilization or “the breathless wonder of a child on the imaginary trail of buried treasure” (1988, 31). While Armstrong’s conspiratorial narrative of history might have been thrilling, it was perhaps more powerful and registered with people most profoundly in that it provided a framework for understanding the world and

at the same time exalted oneself above others. In another radio broadcast, this time explaining the origins of the United States and Great Britain, the religious leader probed his listening audience, “But where are our roots? Where are the roots of the American people, the Canadians, the English, and the people of North Western Europe, even of Germany? Why is our identity lost? Why is it we do not know where we are?” (“Roots of U.S. and Britain”).<sup>8</sup> Armstrong’s promise of a recovery of identity, an identity that was astounding and glorious, was the hook onto which people were skewered. The notion of a recovery of identity that was such an integral part of Armstrong’s British-Israelism had a wider berth than this specific doctrine. Indeed, it was a common theme of Armstrong’s radio broadcasts, though it sometimes appeared in varying forms. Armstrong, on *The World Tomorrow* for instance, promised listeners that he would show them their “purpose” (“Purpose of Life—Our Destiny”),<sup>9</sup> why they were born (“Why Were You Born? Part 1”); in short, supply people with ready-made answers as to who they were. Armstrong’s assumption that identity had been lost was not unique; it was an argument that also appeared in the conservative evangelical community during the Cold War. In 1960, Billy Graham, one of the most important conservative evangelists, also made a similar assertion on his own radio program: “We are becoming ‘organizational men’<sup>10</sup> and are conforming to the environment round about us. We are now numbers in a machine, we are losing our personal identity and getting lost in a maze of statistics.” There was also an alarming absence, Graham bemoaned, of “rugged individualism” (1960). In this regard, Armstrong and Graham’s thinking were rolling on parallel paths. For Graham, just as was the case with Armstrong, the notion of a crisis of identity was both felt and something being presented for consumption.

While identity and its supposed misplacement surfaced as themes in Armstrong’s theology and conservative evangelicalism during the Cold War, Armstrong’s British-Israelism, with the United States at the center of biblical prophecy, must be peeled back further, for these proclamations and rewritings of history did not sally forth into a void. Armstrong’s assertions necessarily crashed against the existence and place of the Jews in the world. His theory created a certain relational attitude towards the Jews. British-Israelism was a pretension to chosenness, something that was also deeply engrained in the evangelical ideology of the Cold War. Armstrong, it is important to clarify, did not simply claim Israel for himself and his nation; instead, Armstrong conducted an active campaign of displacing the Jews as part of the biblical story. Modern-day Jews, according to the workings of Armstrong’s mind, were not Israel, meaning they were not part of God’s ancient and chosen people. In the previously mentioned radio broadcast concerning the “roots” of Great Britain and the United States, Armstrong staked his claim on his interpretation of the Bible. For him, the division of the United Kingdom of Israel into two separate kingdoms (that of Israel and that of Judah), was the historical fork in the road, the dividing of a people. The prophecies of the Bible, Armstrong believed and advertised, were for Israel, while the Jews were simply something else. “As you read in II Kings 16:6, the first place where Jews are mentioned, they were at war against Israel,”

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<sup>8</sup> His broadcast is most likely from around 1984 for the reason that Armstrong mentioned the Los Angeles Summer Olympics.

<sup>9</sup> In this broadcast, Armstrong mentions that he is 83 years of age; the date can therefore be placed around 1976.

<sup>10</sup> William H. Whyte’s book *The Organization Man* had been published some four years before in 1956.

Armstrong proclaimed in the broadcast, “Now can you imagine that? The Jews at war against Israel. Why, doesn’t everybody think<sup>11</sup> that the Jews are Israel? But the truth is they are not. The Jews are not Israel at all. And it is time we get some of these identities straightened out” (“Roots of U.S. and Britain”). Armstrong, informs this section of his radio message, had arrived to clean house, to set things straight, to call a spade a spade. It was he, and he alone in his religious *Weltanschauung*, who had discovered this truth, this unique and powerful fact of identity. Armstrong’s utterance was designed to strike like a cleaver into the consciousness of those who heard him, separating the Jews from the notion of chosenness, severing the covenant between Jews and their God. At other moments on his radio program, he took this thinking a step further, stating that Judaism had become, in the ancient world, a “perversion” and “degeneration” of the true religion of Moses (“The Feast of Tabernacles and God’s Law—Part 2”). The notion that Judaism was somehow corrupt was very much in keeping with *Adversus Iudaeos* literature of the ancient church (Ruether 1974).

The question of the Jews, Christianity, and identity was complicated by another development in the United States. Sara Diamond observed that in the United States British-Israelism also morphed into something else: Identity Christianity. Some groups that came into contact with British-Israelism adopted the ideology and bent it to new and explicitly racist ends in the twentieth century. Identity Christians openly despised Jews and other ethnic groups. The Identity ideology found ready acolytes in some independent fundamentalist Christian churches, in various Christian ministries, and even the Ku Klux Klan (Diamond 1989, 140–41). Diamond offers an insightful understanding of this development. She argues that Identity ideology served as a positive point around which to rally for groups that had based their collective existence largely on the negativity of despising others. Now, with the Identity ideology, plagiarized from British-Israelism, adherents had a positive system of imagining and celebrating oneself, a new alloy of whiteness mixed in with a secret, hidden, and ancient history of chosenness. Identity Christian ideology can be more precisely defined using sociologist Michael Mann’s notion of immanence, a “means of ideological power,” which generates the “strengthening of the internal morale” of a specific collective (Mann 2012, 519). In such an ideological production, a group achieves an increased “sense of ultimate significance and meaning in the cosmos” (Mann 2012, 519). Identity Christianity attempted to achieve this by placing White Christian Americans at the center of a divine and holy plan. The same can be said of Armstrong and his movement. For many Americans, the distinction of salvation, being re-born, such a distinctive marker of American evangelicalism in the twentieth century, was no longer enough. An alleged blood-connection to Israel served as a powerful means of boosting the self-understanding of the Worldwide Church of God and its listeners, of imagining and sewing together a distinct and lofty collective identity.

The Identity movement in the United States had created such a stir that it was eventually investigated by the FBI. A partially redacted airtel<sup>12</sup> document from 1989 lumped the Christian Identity Movement in with “right-wing terrorism matters” and described Identity as “a major factor within the ultra right movement in the United States today” (“Christian Identity

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<sup>11</sup> There is a minor discrepancy between the audio and the transcript. Armstrong says “think” and the transcript reads “teach.”

<sup>12</sup> Airtel was a communication system used by the FBI.

Movement” 1989, 1). The FBI document mentioned that Identity and Christian fundamentalism shared a common thread in that both used the Bible as their primary source material and both believed in its infallibility and literal interpretation (“Christian Identity Movement” 1989, 2). The internal FBI communiqué also documented the Identity movement’s wanton racism, especially against the Jews, whom Identity Christians regarded as “children of Satan” (“Christian Identity Movement” 1989, 3). Though small in numbers, according to the FBI investigation, the document named certain groups whose organization rested wholly on the Identity ideology.<sup>13</sup> These groups, the FBI document claimed, were connected to a number of criminal activities. Over the period of the Cold War, many Identity Christians introduced anti-government and conspiracy theories into their ideological system (Sharpe 2000, 608). The important point is that Armstrong’s beliefs were not isolated but were part of a larger constellation of related thinking, which often took on a variety of forms. It is clear that Armstrong himself was not an Identity Christian, a fact that Lupo confirms (2002, 61). Armstrong, for example, took pains to speak out specifically against anti-Semitism, despite the fact that he plainly thought that he and his followers and fellow Americans were the true Israel. In a radio program explaining Armstrong’s version of the true history of the church, he lamented, “You know some people today are trying to tell you; some people that have an antisemitism in their minds, and who have hatred for the race of Jewish people, will try to tell you that today’s race of Jewish people are. . . not real Jews at all” (“History of the True Church—Part 5”). This sort of thinking Armstrong unequivocally condemned:

Now my friends, there is not a word of truth in that. I don’t know why we have to have such bigotry and race hatreds . . . I want to tell you that people that have that are not Christian. The very first thing in Christianity above everything else, is having love in our hearts for other people. And I want to say to you, my friends, I don’t care who you are and I don’t care if this makes you angry. If you do not have love in your heart for the Jewish people, if you have hatred in your heart for the Jewish people today, you’re not a Christian. I don’t care how much you profess. (“History of the True Church—Part 5”)

In this radio program, and in no uncertain terms, Armstrong rejected anti-Semitism as a mental crutch, even going so far as to count such ideas as disqualifying one from being a Christian. Yet, the portrait we can sketch of Armstrong is more complex. It is the portrait of a man who rejected anti-Semitism, on the one hand, but who attempted to dethrone Jews as the true Israel, on the other, which was a clear manifestation of the anti-Judaic midrash. Some might categorize this anti-Judaic midrash in Armstrong as an anti-Semitic attitude, even Ruether quite rightly saw a connection between the anti-Judaic midrash and later anti-Semitism. Yet, the anti-Judaic theme in which Armstrong cast down the Jews from the throne of chosenness, on its face and it at least publicly, seems to not fit the mold of anti-Semitism. One reason for this lack of congruency is that, it can be argued, these moments were only partially directed at the Jews *qua* Jews. Conservative evangelicalism was Armstrong’s main target and principal point of differentiation. Armstrong’s entire religious system was very

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<sup>13</sup> The names were partially scratched out in pen. Here, for whatever reason, the process of redaction was carried out halfheartedly: the names of the organizations are still legible. The Aryan Nation (AN), the Church of Jesus Christ “Christian” (in Idaho), and Elohim City, in Oklahoma (“Christian Identity Movement” 1989, 6).

much shaped with a mind to conservative evangelicalism in the United States. It was largely born-again Christians who were the recipients of Armstrong's religious critiques. And it was mostly against evangelical theology that Armstrong's own doctrines formed a sustained series of antitheses. Thus, in the particular case of Armstrong, the anti-Judaic midrash had become almost entirely dislodged from its original, ancient purpose. The content and form were largely the same—Jews could be conjured, tossed around, and then dismissed. However, now, in the heated theological controversies of the Cold War, the midrash was directed at other groups. The Jews, to the leader of the Worldwide Church of God, were no longer perceived as a religious or cultural threat as they had once been in the early church. The children of Abraham could be cited and used but they were largely secondary in the operations of Armstrong's mind.

### Conservative Evangelicals' Anti-Heresy Crusade and the Anti-Judaic Midrash

Conservative evangelicals revived and redeployed anti-Judaic themes. However, these few evangelicals, in their writings against Armstrong, were operating from the place of privilege and security of an established religious system. Evangelicals interacted with Armstrong to achieve a very clear end: to draw up a litany of his errors, condemn them, and issue their anathema. The spread of Armstrongism was clearly identified as a threat to their own religious movement. This process of heresy identification and its attempted arrest also became a space for the anti-Judaic midrash. Armstrong's generous appropriation of various socio-religious practices from the Old Testament opened the door for conservative evangelical critique. A useful starting point in the evangelical denunciation of Armstrong's movement that involved an anti-Judaic midrash is Charles F. DeLoach's *The Armstrong Error* (1971). Of the various books written in condemnation of Armstrong and his church's teachings, DeLoach's is the least sophisticated and scholarly. DeLoach was a member and eventually defector of the Worldwide Church of God, who later embraced evangelicalism. DeLoach's exposition and denunciation of what he understood as Armstrong's heretical errors follows the same pattern as the other evangelical volumes against Armstrong: there was a documenting and explanation of supposed error, coupled with the evangelical response. In Chapter III, titled "A Baptized Judaism," which spanned a mere two pages, DeLoach briefly surveys Armstrong's body of doctrine. According to the author, Armstrong had fastened together a bewildering mélange of ideas and doctrines, taking from Christian movements like Mormonism, Christian Scientists, Seventh Day Adventists, and also borrowing "liberally from Judaism" (1971, 18). All of Armstrong's "doctrinal errors," to DeLoach's mind, related to the New Testament and Armstrong's entrenchment in the Old Testament. DeLoach averred that "Armstrongism" was nothing more than the ancient Ebionite error: "a heretical group that went out from the early church . . . because of the poverty of their understanding of the true doctrines of Christianity" (1971, 18–19). The Ebionites also rejected the divinity of Christ. But it was also these Ebionites' insistence on the maintenance of the law of the Old Testament that marked them as heretical in the eyes of the early church. It was on this point that Ebionites became a useful point of comparison for DeLoach. What is remarkable is not DeLoach's rejection of Armstrong's teaching on the law but instead his revival of the notion that the ancient Jews (or "Judaizing" Christians) simply did not understand, they possessed a "poverty" of understanding. One of the anti-Judaic themes of early Christian theologians was, according to Reuther, "that the Jews would not understand the Scriptures" (1979, 118). Truth had been

revealed to them, the anti-Judaic thinking went, but Jews were incapable of apprehending it. In the twentieth century, the theme of the “Jewish” lack of understanding was being resuscitated and given new life no longer to differentiate emerging Christianity from Judaism or exalt Christianity over against Judaism as before in the ancient world. In the 1970s, it had become a tool, excavated and redeployed, in the conservative evangelical struggles against a supposedly renegade form of Christianity. The Ebionite error was also a device of theological critique and delegitimization that appeared in Chambers’ book *The Plain Truth about Armstrongism* (1988, 9).

To be fair, conservative evangelical authors did not always bring in Judaism in their maneuvers to undermine Armstrong’s movement. They accused Armstrong of a variety of theological sins and heresies in which Judaism was absent. Hopkins in *The Armstrong Empire*, for instance, charged that Armstrong had revived the ancient heresy of Gnosticism, an ancient system of belief that taught that one needed a special knowledge in order to obtain salvation—in Armstrong’s system it was the knowledge he alone possessed and was spreading (Hopkins 1974, 128–29). Despite the fact that these evangelicals focused the bulk of their ire on Armstrong’s deviation from major points of Protestant theological orthodoxy, other anti-Judaic midrashim occasionally crept in. Hopkins provided an example relating to the role of Old Testament law in Armstrong’s religious cosmos. Armstrong’s inclusion of the law in his church and his system of salvation (soteriology), Hopkins judged, “is merely the Galatian heresy with slavish conformity to the feasts and holy days” (1974, 136; see also Benware 1977, 61). Hopkins then cites Paul’s letter to the Galatians to prove his point that the law, through Christ and his redeeming sacrifice, was now defunct (1974, 137). While Hopkins’ specific statement was against the Galatians, judgment against Judaism had been passed. The significance of Hopkins’ statement lies not in the fact that he rejects Armstrong or the Galatians’ teaching about the law but rather in his almost passing comment about the “slavish conformity” to certain religious practices. Contained within this judgment was an ambiguity: was Hopkins only speaking of Judaism in the ancient world or could it be applied to twentieth-century Judaism as well? Following Ruether’s thinking, Hopkins’s condemnation can be viewed as an echo of the anti-Jewish literature of the early church. In the “negation of the Jews” that this early Christian literature attempted to effect, one important motif was the “inferiority of the law” (Ruether 1974, 117, 150). Ruether asserts that there was “the characteristic assertion that the [Old Testament] Law and the cult were intrinsically unworthy” (1974, 150). In other words, paraphrasing Ruether, the Jews and Judaism were attached to the letter, while Christians were seen and promoted as the spirit and the law’s fulfillment. Hopkins’ statement fixed and constrained himself within an architecture of anti-Judaic thinking, and he did not seem to be aware or particularly care about its implications. In another moment, Hopkins took issue with Armstrong’s selective appropriation of Old Testament legal practices, alleging that Armstrong had rejected “outmoded Temple rituals,” while maintaining other Old Testament practices (1974, 135). Two interpretations can be brought to bear upon Hopkins’ subtle jab, which conveyed the idea that Old Testament religion and the rituals surrounding it were passé vis-à-vis Christian revelation. First, it fits in perfectly with the New Testament. Hopkins, in his book, was continually mobilizing New Testament passages to support his position. Thus, it makes sense that Hopkins’ would arrive at these conclusions about the law and the relation between Christians and Jews. Second and nevertheless, the glib comment is a

re-enactment of precisely what Ruether encountered in the *Adversus Iudaeos* literature. Yet, there is one notable difference. The animosity towards the Jews that had fueled these discourses during the Roman Empire and Early Middle Ages was entirely drained from Hopkins' comments. These conservative evangelical Christians in the twentieth century no longer gave Jews much thought in these books, largely for the reason that Jews had, in their minds, been overcome and supplanted. Jews were no longer the objects of scathing critique, but the subtle features of the anti-Judaic midrashim could be deployed against new theological opponents. In other words, some evangelicals decided to counter a perceived Christian heresy through a casual dismissal of Judaism.

Other examples of the practice of belittling Judaism as a means of discounting Armstrong and his Worldwide Church of God were frequent in these evangelical texts. One of the most straightforward and the most revealing occurred, again, with Hopkins. In his effort to delegitimize the Armstrong movement, Hopkins maintained, "Mainstream Christianity took its cue from Paul and the Jerusalem Council and rejected the old wineskins of Jewish legalism in favor of new wineskins appropriate to the new dispensation of grace" (1974, 145). "Armstrong's error," Hopkins claimed, "is the same of the Judaizers in the early church" (1974, 145). In this passage, one beholds the miracle of resurrection: what was at least partially dead and buried was brought back to life. Hopkins took the historical example of the "Judaizers" and applied it to Armstrong. For him, there was a clear symmetry. Hopkins' remark of an old wineskin and "Jewish legalism" contain, in highly condensed form, anti-Judaic themes. The notion that Hopkins put forward against his fellow Christian Armstrong was nothing more than another iteration of something Ruether had identified in her study of the early church and its complicated relations with Jews. Hopkins' remark promoted the idea both that the Jewish religious system was inferior and, at the same time, that the old had been overcome and replaced by the new. In this vision of the world, Christianity was the spirit, ancient Judaism was the law. The old Israel had been discarded, and Christians, this thinking ran, were the new elect, the new chosen people of God. Some evangelicals decided to reassert this feeling of religious superiority over Judaism in their attempts to eliminate a growing Christian movement in the United States.

### **The Historical Context of Evangelical and Jewish Relations**

The anti-Judaic midrashim in Armstrong's theology and in the conservative evangelical responses to him bloomed against a backdrop of largely positive attitudes towards Judaism and a largely pro-Israel sentiment in the United States, particularly amongst conservative evangelicals. In other words, the anti-Judaic midrash, these negative attitudes towards Judaism, was deployed amidst a changing conceptual scenery that was largely favorable when it came to the question of the Jews in the world. This changing conceptual landscape manifested in two ways. First, some Americans in the United States, witnessing the Third Reich's consolidation of political power in the 1930s and the increasing use of violence and discrimination against Jews in Germany, began to use the term Judeo-Christian to strike an inclusive tone. After World War II, Judeo-Christian as a concept did not wither and die. As K. Healan Gaston points out, the concept Judeo-Christian began to enjoy wider circulation and became "a key conceptual resource" (2019, 1). The concept of Judeo-Christian or Judeo-Christian civilization was always a contested one (Gaston 2019). However, some evangelicals



did begin to use it for two clear purposes during the Cold War. On the one hand, in the domestic sphere, the term was deployed against the real and perceived secularism in American schools, society, and politics. One example was the removal of prayer from public schools—and eventually the reading of the Bible—in the United States that resulted from the Supreme Court decision in the case *Engel vs. Vitale* in 1962. A news piece from the flagship evangelical publication *Christianity Today* reported, “The wave of indignation over the court’s decision was bathed in the fear that it had opened a new precedent toward secularization of American culture” (“Church-State Separation: A Serpentine Wall?” 1962, 29). Years before this, in 1959, J. Wesley Clayton, writing in *Christianity Today*, decried secularism as the “avowed religion of the public school today” (1959, 15). In both of these instances from *Christianity Today*, there was evidenced a growing unease about the diminishing role of religion in American public education. More to the point, evangelicals were mobilizing the concept of Judeo-Christian, as Gaston points out, to thwart this perceived secularism. In this instance, Judeo-Christian stood as an attempt to invoke an American religious heritage, this time including Judaism, that was essential to preserve if the United States was to survive. Judeo-Christian and America were now ideologically entwined ideas. One meant, for some Americans, the other. But in this unexpected union, where Judaism for the first time has a place, there was something altogether peculiar. There was a subtle blending of the lines between Judaism and Christianity.

Various actors in the Cold War also used the concept of Judeo-Christian as an ideological tool in the struggles against communism with which evangelicals were undeniably entangled. Billy Graham, for example, Gaston observes, used the concept. Judeo-Christian became in the 1950s and 1960s an important part of conservative evangelical thinking. For this exploration of the anti-Judaic midrash, what is significant is not necessarily whether Armstrong, Hopkins, Benware, or others were themselves using the concept but the fact that as the concept was circulating and becoming an ever-more visible part of the American conceptual panorama, there existed at the same time subtle, imperceptible even, negations of it. Just as some evangelicals were speaking of a common religious past, never mind the centuries of persecution, harassment, and violence that reveal real adversarial attitudes, other evangelicals, in the secluded space of heretical debate, were proposing an altogether different understanding of Judaism and Christianity. For them, Jews were not linked by a common God and the same text. For them, on the contrary, their critiques of ancient Judaism give pigment to the reality that they still understood Judaism as something inferior, antiquated, primitive. Judaism, to them, was still burdened by the law. While some evangelicals, to achieve their ideological, social, and political objectives, blended the boundaries of Jew and Christian, other evangelicals followed behind them and strove to re-etch into people’s mind these stark divisions between the religion of Abraham and the religion of Christ.

Alongside this changing conceptual mosaic, other factors complicate the anti-Judaic midrash that surfaced in Armstrong’s theology and in the tracts against him. The second component of this backdrop was a complex relation towards Jews in general and the state of Israel in particular. The negative sentiments towards Jews evidenced in this article resurfaced in a historical context of expanding Christian Zionism, which eventually became a powerful force in conservative evangelicalism. In the seventeenth century, the first rumblings of Christian Zionism came to the surface (Ariel 2006, 75). One avenue through which Christian Zionism made its way into American evangelicalism was through the work of John Nelson

Darby (1800–1882). Darby, an Irish Anglican priest, developed a dispensational theology that divided human history into seven dispensations. His evangelizing in the United States helped spread this theology amongst evangelicals and would become an essential component in Christian fundamentalism. Darby's contribution to Christian Zionism was the idea that Israel, in this final dispensation, would once again become an instrument in the hands of God (Wagner 1998). After Israel was given statehood on May 14, 1948, evangelicals were washed over and refreshed with enthusiasm. They read these current events as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy (Ariel 2006, 80). To conservative evangelicals, the words of ancient prophets were materializing in reality. It was not just events like the establishment of Israel in 1948 or the taking of part of Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War that nurtured conservative evangelical support of Israel and piqued their interest in the Jews. The mere fact that the Jews had continued to exist at all was, to their minds, a testament of the truth of the word of God and the enduring power of God's covenants (Mead 2006, 40).

By the 1970s, a growing Christian Zionism piggy-backed off, amongst other things, a growing and expanding conservative evangelicalism in the United States. Such an intimacy helped establish unwavering support for the state of Israel in the political mainstream of the United States. In addition, Christian Zionists across the world created an institutional structure by which to promulgate their cause; they augmented their organizational power. One noticeable example is the International Christian Embassy, created in 1980 and located in Jerusalem. Christian Zionism also benefited from support at various points in time from political figures. The British government issued a statement in support of a Jewish state in 1917, Woodrow Wilson met with and supported Christian Zionists in the United States, and President Ronald Reagan was a Christian Zionist (Wagner 1998). The growing conservative evangelical wing of American Christianity translated into clear support for a foreign policy that favored the state of Israel. But beneath this unflagging support for Israel, the political proponents, the institutional forms, the clamor surrounding certain historical events, there lurked in the heart of Christian Zionism an uneasy ambivalence (Ariel 2006, 75). While the Jews were seen as heirs to the covenants of the Bible, many adepts of the Christian Zionist ideology, according to Ariel, could not come to a wholesale acceptance of Jews.

Indeed, this ambivalence towards the Jews is embedded right in the premillennial eschatology of American evangelicals. Ariel explains the events of trial and tribulation leading up to Christ's return, as evangelicals who espouse this apocalyptic theology understand it, saying, "Living in spiritual blindness, the Jews will let themselves be ruled by Antichrist, an impostor posing as the Messiah" (Ariel 2006, 76). Even in the premillennial apocalyptic theology that is used to support specifically the state of Israel and the Jews more generally, there is a lingering notion that the Jews are of lesser spiritual substance and remain in an inferior position vis-à-vis Christians. Christian Zionism in evangelicalism represents the most elaborate thinking about Judaism and also the most significant economic and political points of contact. But this notion of blindness, as Ariel expresses it, is an echo of a long and developed tradition of anti-Judaic midrashim in Christianity. In the twentieth century, as has been shown, these themes also appeared in the theological system of Herbert W. Armstrong, which meant to replace the Jews. Jews as blind also appeared in the evangelical denunciations of Armstrong's work. Thus, in the presence of the more inclusive concept of Judeo-Christian, amidst the ideological expansion of Christian Zionism, there lurked and resurfaced from time

to time amongst some American Christians the opposite, an ancient hostility, a cultivated derision, which, in its way, negated these two other developments in the intellectual and religious history of the United States.

### Conclusion

One conclusion that deserves to be reiterated is that these anti-Judaic midrashim appearing in American Christianity during the Cold War took hold in a changing climate after World War II. At the macro-level, this climate was characterized, generally, by a movement away from the anti-Semitism of the 1920s<sup>14</sup> and 1930s and a generally positive attitude towards the Jews and Israel. However, the vague but frequent use of the concept Judeo-Christian and the Christian Zionist movement within many conservative evangelical circles occurring on the macro-level were undermined and countered by the sentiments and attitudes towards Jews on the micro-level. The anti-Judaic midrashim highlighted in this article reveal a deep-seated, ingrained even, unease and negativity towards Jews, their history, and their place in the world. These utterances, this attempt to replace the Jews in the hierarchy of chosenness, these efforts at depicting Judaism as the old wineskin for example, could be spoken without causing much of a stir. Another point that deserves to be teased out is that the anti-Judaic midrash imbedded in Armstrong's theology and evangelicals' writings should be categorized as moments of striking similarity. Some conservative evangelicals did everything in their power to distance themselves from Armstrongism and condemn it. Yet, we see that the two groups were operating, in this instance, along the same lines, though they were moved to action by different motives. Evangelicals took up the tool of the anti-Judaic midrash to subvert Armstrong's movement in the minds of readers. Armstrong used the anti-Judaic midrash to elbow out the Jews and, therefore, mark his territory in the highly trafficked and competitive realm of American religion.

A final conclusion is that the twentieth-century anti-Judaic midrash was at the same time an example of historical change and continuity. One example of this change is that, in the hands of American Christians the interpretive instrument of the anti-Judaic midrash had been washed and purified of all its more unsightly and unseemly rhetoric regarding the Jews. In the utterances of Armstrong, Hopkins, Chambers, DeLoach, one finds a noticeable lack of the vitriol that spiced the sermons of, for example, the "golden-mouthed" Saint John Chrysostom (c. 347–407 CE). The anti-Judaic themes were present in the twentieth century but lacked altogether the rhetoric of fiery extremism that is so identifiable in the early church. In this sense, the twentieth-century purveyors of the anti-Judaic themes were much savvier actors. They employed the same basic ideas but steered clear of transgressing the line into openly anti-Semitic tropes and denigrating forms of speech. Another point of change is the fact that, for the actors in this historical scene, the Jews no longer really mattered. For what mattered was not the Jews, ancient or modern, per se but rather what one Christian was attempting to do vis-à-vis American evangelicalism and how certain evangelicals identified what they viewed as a heresy and how they sought to squash it. What was at stake to them was Christianity itself and the threats other Christians posed. In other words, the point of self-affirmation between

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<sup>14</sup> Henry Ford and his publication of *The Dearborn Independent* are supreme examples of a generalized anti-Semitism.

these American Christians was no longer between *ecclesia et synagoga* but was a struggle within Christianity itself. There was, in this history of religious infighting, one point where things had not changed all that much, a bridge spanned the ancient and modern worlds. Ruether wrote of early Christianity that “The Christians’ opponents are the Jews of Christian imagination” (1974, 120). In twentieth-century American Christianity, the opponents were no longer the Jews; however, the Jews could still be used as pawns in this game of identity, and they were largely still, in a remarkable instance of historical continuity and just as Ruether had so perceptively ascertained, the Jews of Christian imagination.

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