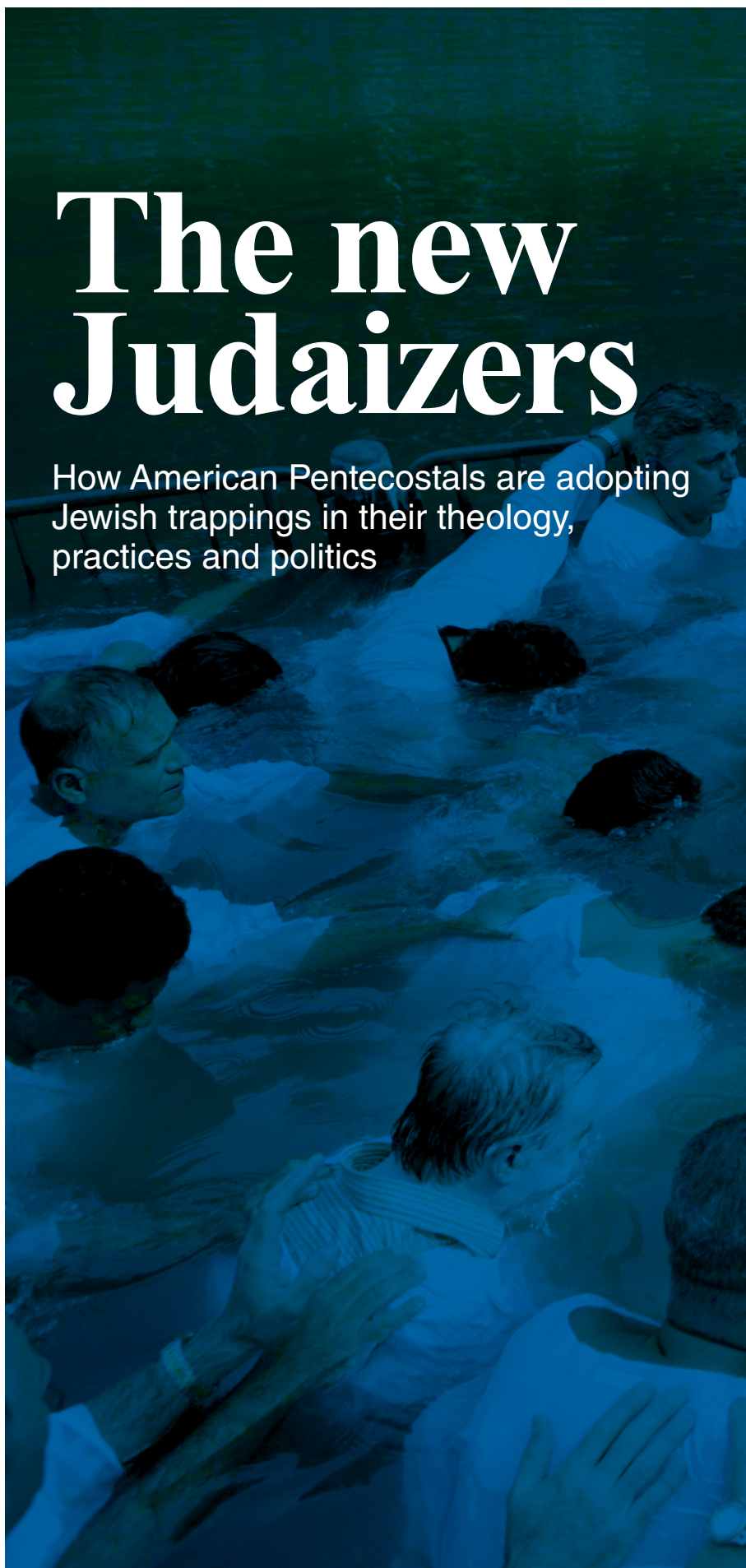


The new Judaizers

How American Pentecostals are adopting Jewish trappings in their theology, practices and politics



EVANGELICAL pilgrims perform a baptism ceremony in the Jordan River near Lake Kinneret in 2007.

(Yonathan Weitzman/Reuters)



• DAN HUMMEL

Millions of Americans saw Bishop Wayne T. Jackson for the first time on the first Saturday of September 2016. Jackson's church, Great Faith Ministries International in downtown Detroit, had agreed to host then-Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump as part of the candidate's outreach to African Americans. Trump's remarks made national headlines and so did Jackson's.

During the service, held on Saturday to coincide with the Jewish Sabbath, Jackson draped Trump in a tallit (Jewish prayer shawl), announcing that it had arrived "straight from Israel" and would convey "an anointing with the power of God." Jackson also handed Trump a Jewish Heritage Study Bible – a version, explained its editor, Dr. Everette Gaddy, inspired by Jackson's desire for a Bible that taught "all of the Jewish traditions."

The gifts struck many Christians and Jews as bizarre or offensive. Such reactions missed the growing trend that Jackson so clearly exemplified: the appropriation and adoption of Jewish symbols, practices and rituals among a growing segment of American Christians.

Jackson is a well-known Pentecostal Christian who, along with his large Detroit church, founded a television station, Impact Network, and is also a best-selling author. He is the quintessential Pentecostal leader in the early 21st century: fiercely independent – both institutionally and in how he interprets his faith – and convinced that Christians have historically ignored the Jewish roots of their faith at their own peril. His movement is part of the fastest growing form of Christianity, as Pentecostals number some 500 million followers worldwide.

Incorporating Jewish symbols and practices into Christianity has usually been regarded as dangerous to the gatekeepers of Christian orthodoxy. It is perhaps most widely known in English as "Judaizing," from Paul's rebuke of Peter to stop "forc[ing] gentiles to follow Jewish customs" (Galatians 2:14), which some translations rendered as "compel to Judaize." As early as the year 100 CE, church father Ignatius pitted Judaizers against true Christians.

"It is absurd to profess Christ Jesus, and to Judaize," he wrote in a letter to the church in Magnesia, "For Christianity did not embrace Judaism, but Judaism Christianity."

As Christianity matured, it came to define itself more sharply in contrast to Judaism and Judaizing took on a distinctly pejorative meaning. Judaism was portrayed as being about laws, legalism and a chosen race; Christianity about grace and faith. The latter rejected the theological separation between Jew and gentile.

The contrasts still define much of Christian thinking about Judaism (and Jewish thinking about Christianity), but are now being challenged by Christians like Jackson. He is part of a movement beginning in the late 20th century that harks back to the "Jewish roots" of Christianity and hopes to Judaize – on Christian terms – the global Pentecostal church. It sees embracing parts of Judaism not as a danger, but as an overdue return to the genuine roots of the faith.

Rethinking Jesus

The new Judaizers have been buoyed by longer-term outside help. Some of the most fundamental insights of biblical scholars studying the New Testament have legitimized their cause with increasing emphasis on the similarities between Jesus and the Judaism of Palestine in the first century.

One of the earliest contributors to this rethinking of Jesus was the Jewish historian Jacob Klausner, who completed a biography of Jesus in 1922 while in Palestine. Klausner claimed, “Jesus is the most Jewish of Jews... more Jewish even than Hillel” – a sharp break from centuries of pitting Jesus’s teachings against Judaism. Klausner was convinced of Jesus’s essentially Jewish character, though to the consternation of Christians, he depicted the Nazarene not as the foretold Messiah, but as an itinerant ethicist whom later followers turned into a demigod.

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Nevertheless, Christian scholars picked up on Klausner’s basic insight and used new archeological and textual discoveries to Judaize Jesus and early Christian history.

The famed mid-century archeologist William F. Albright, upon assessing the significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls for understanding the Bible, concluded that there was an “indissoluble bond between pre-Christian Judaism and early Christianity.” In light of the scrolls, he added, “the New Testament becomes more Jewish than we had thought – as truly Jewish as the Old Testament is Israelite.”

In recent decades, the trend to Judaize Jesus has moved to the mainstream of Christian – and especially Pentecostal – focus.

Brad H. Young, a professor at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma (founded and named after the Pentecostal evangelist) typifies this change. He was trained at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem under noted Israeli scholar David Flusser (who published his own friendly biography of Jesus in 1969). In books with titles like *Jesus the Jewish Theologian*, Young laments the process of “de-Judaization” that occurred when early Christians denounced their Jewish roots.

“Though the life of Jesus was originally compiled by the Jewish disciples and for the Jewish disciples,” Young writes, “it was preserved by the Gentile church and for the Gentile church.”

But the emphasis today is on the affinities between the two traditions. Scholars now compare Jesus, Paul and other early Christians to their contemporary rabbis; theologians insist on the compatibility of Jewish thought with Christianity; and Evangelical pastors speak of a “Judeo-Christian” tradition. All take as their basis a shared and enduring history, embodied in the Jewish identity of Jesus.

The Judaization of Jesus has set the basic parameters in other areas of religious life, including religious practice and politics. It isn’t confined to an intellectual debate among scholars and theologians: Instead, it now shapes how millions of Christians live their faith, from the places they travel to the religious objects they purchase.

Holy Land tourism and ritual objects

Mike Huckabee, the Republican politician and pundit, is also a veteran tour guide to the Holy Land. He has led dozens of tours to Israel – packaged as “The Israel Experience” – where the Jewish roots of Christianity are drilled into tourists.

Huckabee often takes his groups to the top of Masada, where the last holdouts of the Jewish Revolt made their stand against the besieging Romans in 73 CE. While Masada has deep meaning for most Israelis, Huckabee urges his



American Evangelical followers to see the ruins as part of their own religious history. He intones in his Arkansas drawl, “Welcome home!” before leading a rendition of the classic hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

In 2016, more than 300,000 Evangelicals visited Israel, making up more than 40% of all American Christian tourists. Many of them regard Israel as a “spiritual home,” evidence of a renewed appreciation for Jews and Judaism through their experiences. But Holy Land tourism is just one of the many Christian practices that reflect the influence of the new Judaizers.

Christian Evangelicals are increasingly drawn to Jewish ritual objects (including shofarot and tallitot), Torah study groups, Hebrew language for worship and prayer and observance of Shabbat.

Christians seeking to connect to their faith’s Jewish roots also have many products they can purchase along the way. They can buy kingly “anointing oil,” Hebrew-language Christian worship CDs, and even books by noted Jewish authors like Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. One online seller, New Day Christian Distributors, also offers an array of prayer shawls and shofarot.

Christian fascination with the Holy Land and the trappings of the Jewish religion are not confined to Pentecostals, of course. Holy Land tourism is popular among Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians and Protestants. Sites related to the Hebrew Bible are popular across the Christian spectrum. Many Pentecostals, however, have integrated these practices into the very fabric of their communal identity and practice.

At its most extreme, Judaization can shape the very struc-

THEN-REPUBLICAN presidential nominee Donald Trump wears a tallit during a church service with Bishop Wayne T. Jackson at the Great Faith Ministries International in downtown Detroit in 2016. (Carlo Allegri/Reuters)



tures of Christian communities, especially in marginal or upstart Christian movements.

In 1900, the Chicago evangelist John Alexander Dowie named his new religious community on the shores of Lake Michigan "Zion" and claimed to be a reincarnation of the prophet Elijah. Dowie owned and wore a complete set of priestly robes designed to approximate the Temple "Kohanim" and enforced various aspects of Jewish law in his community.

Similar extreme examples are visible today.

Take the self-appointed "Rabbi" Ralph Messer. In 2012, Messer officiated a "crowning ceremony" for the controversial Georgia megachurch pastor Eddie Long, recently at the center of sex scandals involving minors, by wrapping him in a Torah scroll, lifting him in the air and declaring that "kingship is in him."

Messer performed a similar ceremony in 2009 for Paula White, the popular televangelist and "spiritual adviser" to Trump. Though these ceremonies are only vaguely related to actual Jewish practices, Messer capitalized on the Jewish veneer to convey spiritual authority.

He is a fringe figure and has been condemned by Jewish and Christian observers. Long was forced to apologize to the local Anti-Defamation League after it protested Messer's claim to "speak for the Jewish people and the Land of Israel."

Messer identifies as a "Messianic Jew," a born Jew who regards Jesus as the prophesied Messiah. Messianic Jewish organizations, such as Jews for Jesus, are far less idiosyncratic than Messer, but they also represent a center of influence in the Judaization movement. To Pentecostals they are often purveyors of Jewish knowledge, experts in Jewish practice, and quite literally embodiments of the shared history between Jews and Christians. Messianic



- communicated -

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Jews have helped popularize “Yeshua” as the authentic Hebrew name to refer to Jesus among Pentecostals. Their Jewish heritage provides a compelling interpretation of Christian Judaization to the broader Pentecostal world.

Less extreme, but no less path-breaking, are the efforts undertaken by Orthodox Jews. Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, founder of the West Bank settlement of Efrat, has led the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding and Cooperation since 2008. Partnering with Evangelical tour groups and Christian Zionist organizations, Riskin’s organization hosts interreligious Bible studies and prayer events that emphasize the benefits of Jewish insights to understanding the Bible.

Political ramifications

Judaization also has political ramifications, especially for Evangelical Christian Zionists. Judaization does not necessarily entail a certain politics toward Israel, but Christian Zionists see it as a powerful force in their favor.

A brief look at the logos of Christian Zionist organizations makes clear that Judaization is not just a commercial or theological venture; it is also integral to Christian Zionist politics. Organizations like Christians Standing for Israel and the International Christian Embassy regularly merge Jewish and Christian symbols, including crosses, the Magen David and doves, in their advertising and merchandise.

The point is not just cosmetic. These organizations cite Christian love or “comfort” for Israel as a core, and underappreciated, Christian duty.

‘Israel is not a “take it or leave it” subject... It is a life and death matter – eternal life!’

Since 2015, longtime Christian Zionist and Messianic Jew Mike Evans has run the Friends of Zion Museum, located just a few blocks west of the Old City. Advertised as “the most unusual museum in Jerusalem,” the organization celebrates “the dream of restoration of the Jewish people to their historic homeland and the brave non-Jews who assisted them in realization of that dream.” In political terms, Evans sees his museum as a bulwark against antisemitism and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

In practical terms, Evans has thrown his lot in with the current US administration with a high-profile billboard campaign throughout Jerusalem thanking Trump and Vice President Mike Pence for their support of Israel.

Indicative of the way many Pentecostals have elevated support for Israel in their faith, the museum praises Christian “visionaries,” from 19th-century biblical scholar George Bush to Corrie ten Boom, the Dutch author whose family helped Jews escape the Holocaust, as underappreciated Christian heroes. These figures represent a tradition, according to Evans, of those who “courageously stood with, nurtured, and, in many cases, sacrificed their lives protecting the Jewish people” – a duty the museum asks each visitor to commit to as well.

The “everlasting bond” that the Friends of Zion Museum argues exists between Jews and Christians in fact sits at the core of the modern Christian Zionist movement.

John Hagee, the founder of Christians United for Israel, is perhaps the most famous Christian Zionist alive today. He is also an enthusiastic Judaizer. He has embraced Jewish symbols, including prayer shawls, anointing oils, and Hebrew-language singing (his church’s choir ventures into Jewish folk music, including “Hava Nagila”).

Hagee is also an avid supporter of Israel. Rejecting what he calls “replacement theology” that teaches Christianity and Judaism are opposed, with the church superseding the Jews in God’s plans in the first century, he insists, “The only theology God ever created was Judaism.” The State of Israel, still in covenant with God, deserves full Christian support, Hagee believes.

So central is Christian support for Israel that Hagee regards it as a decisive issue for salvation. “Israel is not a ‘take it or



leave it’ subject,” Hagee wrote in 2002. “It is a life and death matter – eternal life!”

When he founded Christians United for Israel in 2006, he identified “Christian antisemitism” – by which he meant replacement theology and a general Christian hesitancy to embrace Judaized Christian teachings – as one of the leading threats to Israel’s security.

But for Hagee, as for most Pentecostal Judaizers, politics are a consequence of a more fundamental reevaluation of the Christian faith as deeply tied to Jewish history.

“Jesus was a rabbi,” Hagee insists in his 2007 book, *In Defense of Israel*, “and the basis of His teaching was consistent with Hebrew scriptures, or the Torah.”

The extent to which this logic will permeate the fastest growing segment of Christianity will influence the future of Jewish-Christian relations, and Israel and the United States, in coming years.

The writer is a Robert M. Kingdon Fellow at the Institute for Research in the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is completing a history of the Christian Zionist movement to be published by the University of Pennsylvania in 2019.

(TOP) Mike Huckabee (right), a leading member of the Republican Party, visits an archeological site in Jerusalem’s City of David in 2009. (Ronen Zvulun/Reuters)

MOTORCYCLISTS FROM the US stand next to ultra-Orthodox men as they touch the stones of the Western Wall in 2011. The two motorcyclists participated in a 71-member delegation from the US that included evangelical pastors and military veterans in a show of support for Israel and the IDF. (Baz Ratner/Reuters)