

Jason M. Olson
***America's Road to Jerusalem:
The Impact of the Six-Day War
on Protestant Politics***

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Repeated throughout Jason M. Olson's *America's Road to Jerusalem* is an ambitious claim—that Israel's victory in the 1967 Six-Day War reshaped American religious life by empowering the evangelical wing of American Protestantism at the expense of the mainline denominations. Olson contends that the outcome of the war vindicated evangelicals' biblical literalism, giving evangelicals "the leverage they needed" to reverse decades of mainline Protestant dominance and "lead America's religious culture once again" (p. xi). In this way, Olson argues, the impact of the Six-Day War was comparable to the 1925 Scopes trial, which had heralded the temporary victory of modernist mainline Protestants over fundamentalists and evangelicals in leading American religious culture.

These are expansive claims, with potentially significant implications for the study of post-WWII American Protestantism. In actual execution, however, *America's Road to Jerusalem* has a much narrower focus, offering an examination of American Protestant attitudes towards a variety of issues related to the Arab-Israeli conflict, as expressed in a handful of Protestant periodicals between roughly 1966 and 1973.

Olson's analysis rotates at an oft-dizzying pace between five different Protestant perspectives. He identifies three within mainline Protestantism: Social Gospellers, Christian Realists, and liberation theologians. Olson uses the term "Social Gospellers" (an anachronism that Olson acknowledges) to describe ecumenically-minded liberal Protestants—the kind found in the leadership of the National Council of Churches and listed on the masthead of the *Christian Century*. Prior to 1967, such mainliners had been the most active in dialogue with Jewish organizations like the American Jewish Committee and the most accepting of Judaism as a religion. Inclined towards internationalism and pacifism in foreign

affairs, though, the Social Gospellers tended to be more questioning of Jewish nationalism. These views contrasted with those of the Christian Realists, who asserted the validity of both the Jewish faith and Jewish nationhood. Believing that Jewish sovereignty was essential to the survival of the Jewish people, Realists like Reinhold Niebuhr and Carl Hermann Voss had been at the forefront of Protestant support for Zionism and Israel since the 1940s, working through organizations like the American Christian Palestine Committee. Close intellectually and institutionally to the Realists were liberation theologians (Olson also uses this term somewhat anachronistically) like John C. Bennett, who argued that the Gospel charged Christians to identify with oppressed classes and communities and to work to overthrow oppressive systems. Prior to 1967, these liberation theologians tended to follow the Christian Realists in defending Israel as a needed haven for oppressed Jews.

Olson's analysis also focuses on two main divisions within the evangelical wing of American Protestantism—the New Evangelicals (as represented by Billy Graham) and the fundamentalists (as represented by Carl McIntire). While the New Evangelicals and fundamentalists had a number of sometimes divergent priorities, Olson argues that both rooted their understanding of Israel in literalist interpretations of the Bible. In particular, many adhered to the interpretive system known as premillennial dispensationalism, which held that Jews had a covenantal right to the Land of Israel and that prophecy pointed to the restoration of Jewish control of the land—especially Jerusalem—as part of God's plan for history. While such interpretations had not translated into active political support for Israel prior to 1967, they had encouraged many evangelicals to affirm Jewish nationhood and sovereignty in Israel and to anticipate the Jewish state's role in the future fulfillment of prophecy.

As Olson notes, the outcome of the Six-Day War—in which Israel conquered East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights from Jordan, Egypt, and Syria, and brought hundreds of thousands of Palestinians under military occupation—alternately challenged and reinforced these varied Protestant perspectives. It immediately strained the relationship between the Social Gospellers and American Jews, who were stunned when their partners in dialogue did not come to Israel's defense. It pushed the liberation theologians to increasingly identify with the Palestinians as an oppressed people and to support the Palestinian national cause. This, in turn, contributed to a growing rift between liberation theologians and the dwindling number of Christian Realists, who defended Israel's actions as both legitimate and necessary to its self-defense. Most significantly for Olson, though, the outcome of the war “vindicated” the evangelical wing's dispensationalist reading of the Bible by bringing territory roughly corresponding to the biblical Israel—including the Old City of Jerusalem—under Israeli control.

As noted above, Olson's central claim is that this vindication of dispensationalist interpretations of the Bible allowed American evangelicals to recover a cultural dominance they had lost in the 1920s. While many evangelicals certainly seized onto the events of 1967 as confirmation of their reading of the Bible, there are a number of problems with Olson's more ambitious claim that speak to larger issues in the work. First, Olson's framing of his argument is often ahistorical and

contextually flat. The work repeatedly refers to evangelicals attaining preeminence “once again,” phrasing that suggests an immutable evangelicalism, existing in continuity from the 1920s to the 1960s (p. xi). (The work’s frequent recourse to anachronistic terminology is another example of this.) Second, *America’s Road to Jerusalem* does not provide the evidence—or, really, the *kind* of evidence—needed to make an argument about the ascendance of evangelicalism in American culture. As noted above, in actual execution, the work is focused quite tightly on examining Protestant attitudes towards Israel in periodicals like the *Christian Century* and *Christianity Today*. Third, the work does not acknowledge or engage the wealth of historiography on postwar American evangelicalism relevant to its main argument. Instead, it only engages scholarship on American Christian Zionism. Here, too, there are problems, though, as the work includes a number of misleading claims about its own place in that scholarship. For instance, Olson states in the introduction that no previous scholar has “combed the pages of *Christianity and Crisis* to examine how the Arab-Israeli conflict caused such a conflict” among mainline Protestants (p. xiii). However, Caitlin Carenen’s *The Fervent Embrace* (New York: New York University Press, 2012)—which does appear in Olson’s bibliography—does just that. Altogether, *America’s Road to Jerusalem* reaches for an ambitious argument that it is simply not prepared to make. In doing so, it misses an opportunity to develop fully the more modest, focused arguments that it could.