

## A Kinder, Gentler Teaching of Contempt?

### Jews and Judaism in Contemporary Protestant Evangelical Children's Fiction

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#### Abstract

This article analyzes contemporary American evangelical children's fiction with respect to the portrayal of Jews and Judaism. Some of the themes that appear in these novels for children include Jewish religiosity, anti-Semitism, Christian proselytizing, the Holocaust, the Jewishness of Jesus, Jews converting to Christianity, and the implicit emptiness of Jewish spirituality. The author argues that these books, many of which contain conversion narratives, reflect the ambivalence of modern Protestant evangelical Christianity concerning Jews and Judaism. On the one hand, evangelicals respect Jews and condemn all forms of anti-Semitism. On the other hand, evangelicals promote and encourage the conversion of Jews to Christianity through evangelism, which seems to imply a lack of respect or even a subtle contempt for Jewish faith and practice.

#### Introduction

[1] Utilizing Jews as major characters in religious Christian fiction written for children is not a new device. A number of children's stories were written in the nineteenth century depicting Jews who (in the course of the narrative) converted to Christianity (Cutt: 92). Throughout the twentieth century, Jews occasionally appeared in evangelical children's fiction (Grant; Palmer). Over the years, Jews have also been depicted in fictional settings in Christian Sunday School materials (Rausch 1987). However, the past twelve years have seen a proliferation of evangelical<sup>1</sup> Christian novels written for children and young adults that feature Jewish characters.

[2] In my research, I examined twenty-nine books published in the United States between 1992 and 2003 that fit this description. The publishers of these books include Bethany House, Tyndale House, Multnomah, Word, Moody, and Baker. There are a number of genres represented, including historical fiction (though I did not examine any books from the "Biblical fiction" genre), apocalyptic novels, and Holocaust narratives. In this paper I will analyze some of the themes that appear in these books, including descriptions of Jewish religiosity, anti-Semitism, Christian proselytizing, the Holocaust, the Jewishness of Jesus, Jews converting to Christianity,<sup>2</sup> and the implicit emptiness of Jewish spirituality.

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<sup>1</sup> By "evangelical" I mean that subgroup of Protestant Christianity, transcending denominational affiliation, which claims a "born again" experience, seeks a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ," and generally adheres to a conservative theological perspective (Davison; Marsden).

<sup>2</sup> A note about terminology is needed. In the books that I examined, converts to Christianity from Judaism are given various labels, including Jewish Christians, Messianic Jews, and completed Jews. These terms, however, are controversial and indeed perceived as tendentious in the Jewish community, given that they imply or assume various propositions about Judaism and Jewish status that are disputed or denied by rabbis, scholars, and other communal leaders. On the other hand, the word "conversion" or "convert" is almost never used in any of these books. It has taken on an almost pejorative meaning within some evangelical circles, especially in Jewish missionary work and

## Religiosity of Jewish Characters

[3] In the children's books that I examined, observant Jews are sometimes depicted as being very different from Christians, such as when ultra-orthodox Jews are described (McDowell and Hostetler: 20). Usually, however, Jews and Christians are portrayed as being only slightly dissimilar from one another. Indeed, Jews are generally seen as comparable to Christians in most ways, and Judaism is perceived as being related to Christianity, though incomplete.

[4] Various types of Jews are described, including American Jews (Littleton), Spanish Jews (Hunt), and Israeli Jews (McDowell and Hostetler). Different levels of observance, from secular to orthodox, are discussed. Some Jewish characters are knowledgeable about Judaism and some are ignorant. In one book, Jewish funeral and mourning customs and rituals are described and explained in detail:

The rabbi recited a psalm and read a passage from the Scriptures, and the group chanted a memorial prayer. The coffin was carried to the grave site and lowered. Chaya's father, weeping uncontrollably, took a shovel and placed some dirt on the coffin. Then people formed two lines, and the mourners passed through. "They're saying something to your father," Vicki said. A tear fell down Chaya's cheek. She recited the greeting, then translated it. "May God comfort you together with all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem," she said (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000d: 49-50).

[5] Jews are depicted as praying, often in liturgical Hebrew (e.g., the Shema, Shehechyanu, Kaddish, and the daily prayers) but sometimes in extemporaneous prayers in English; celebrating bar mitzvahs; observing Shabbat and lighting Shabbat candles; celebrating holidays such as Purim, Shavuot, Chanukkah, and Passover; keeping kosher; studying Torah and Talmud; and attending synagogue (Dunlop 1995; 1997; Elmer 2000; 2001; Hunt; Lutz; Littleton; McDowell and Hostetler). One character, Ethan Reis, is depicted as extremely pious and observant, but struggling with the loss of his family and the effects of assimilation:

"A Jew keeps the law," [Ethan] said, resting his hands upon his knees. "We honor God. We keep the Sabbath and the ancient festivals. We love mercy and try to walk humbly with God." . . . "I haven't been living as I ought. I thought that because I was not yet a man and because I was on this ship, God would understand if I didn't keep the Sabbath. But I think now I ought to follow the Law. My father would want me to. Even though I'm alone, I still need to keep the Sabbath and the holy days." . . . Ethan . . . slowly began to sing his morning prayers (Hunt: 119).

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among Jewish Christians. To convert to Christianity is (by implication) to become a "former Jew," which arguably describes the religious affiliation (though perhaps not the religious legal status) of many "Jewish believers in Jesus," but would be received as an insult nonetheless. More acceptable to Jews who become Christians are phrases such as "becoming a believer," "believing in Jesus," "making a decision for Yeshua," etc. Given the enormous amount of heat and emotion that these terms evoke, I will refrain from using debatable terms such as "Messianic Jew" or "completed Jew" in this paper. In addition, I will not use the term "apostate" to describe those who leave Judaism for Christianity. Although "apostasy" may be an accurate description in a technical sense, it is offensive to some and it sounds harsh and judgmental to those of us living in a pluralistic society where personal religious choices and changes are commonplace. I will generally use variations of the phrase "Jews who become Christians" or "Jews who convert to Christianity" in this paper. While even these words are troubling to some, they seem to be a reasonable compromise when navigating the current semantic minefield.

## Depictions of Anti-Semitism

[6] Depictions of anti-Semitism in these books are almost always accompanied by a Christian character's intervention (Dunlop 1997: 55), or at least a decrying of the hateful behavior or speech (Dunlop 1997: 28; Littleton: 60). When anti-Semitism is described without commentary, which occasionally happens, these books usually convey an unspoken editorial for the reader through redemptive outcomes such as Jewish escape from (or victory over) oppressors (Rue 1999).

[7] Anti-Semitic incidents are sometimes used as a dramatic device that allows fictional Jewish characters to reject Christianity. Since Christians have persecuted Jews over the centuries, why should a Jew accept this system of faith? (Dunlop 1997: 78). The evangelical response to this conversion barrier is invariably that "those people [persecutors of Jews] were not real Christians" (Dunlop 1997: 79), an argument which most of the fictional Jewish characters in these books do not find convincing.

[8] Evangelical Christians in these books seek to correct stereotypes or negative descriptions of Jews. This correction frequently takes the form of a wise and tolerant parent gently teaching a child, or a child rebuking a prejudiced friend (Dunlop 1997: 129; Rue 1999: 60; Lutz: 55-56). The charge of Jewish deicide (and subsequent hatred of Jews) is either rejected or ignored (Lutz: 55-56; Rue 1999: 45), although one book indicts "the Jews" for rejecting Christ and attributes the first century destruction of Jerusalem as their punishment (Lacy and Lacy: 112). But most of the negative stereotypes receive the following type of response:

"The truth of the matter is, each of us killed Jesus. He died for the sins of every man and woman; every girl and boy. He bore our sins for us, so it was our sins that killed him . . . Of course, we know from reading the Gospels that a group of Jews and Romans plotted together to do the actual killing. But don't forget there were hundreds of Jews at the same time who followed Jesus, who believed in Him, and who loved Him very much . . . In fact, it was that handful of Jewish followers who started the church after Jesus' resurrection . . . It was God's choice to have Jesus born into the Jewish race. In my opinion that means I owe a great deal to the Jews. God called them his chosen. I can do no less." (Lutz: 69-70).

## Jewishness of Jesus

[9] There are a large number of references in these books to the Jewishness of Jesus. Usually a statement is simply asserted that Jesus was Jewish (Rue 1997: 173; Travis: 140; Elmer 1997: 26; Lutz: 70; Page: 94-95; Lacy and Lacy: 32; Littleton: 90). Sometimes Jesus' Hebrew name is used, as when a rabbi who has converted to Christianity says: "Yeshua ben Yosef, Jesus son of Joseph, is Yeshua Hamashiach!" (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000a: 62).

[10] Occasionally examples of Jesus' Jewishness are given. A case in point is when a Christian character points out to her Jewish friend that Jesus celebrated Passover with his followers (Hunt: 176). The Jewishness of Jesus' disciples and the early Christians is also emphasized. St. Paul is called "Rav Sha'ul" and is referred to as "a famous rabbi in the Scriptures" (Elmer 2001a: 126).

[11] The Jewishness of modern day Jewish converts to Christianity is also underscored. A Jewish teenager on the verge of accepting Christ writes in her diary, "If Jesus is the Messiah, I'm not turning my back on the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000a: 66). An older Jewish woman who has just converted to Christianity declares, "I am still every bit a Jew"

(Page: 101). Another convert from Judaism states that Jews “do not understand that I still worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Page: 78).

### **Judaism and Christianity**

[12] Sometimes these books portray Judaism and Christianity as mutual admiration societies. Jews admire and respect Christians, and vice versa. Judaism is the older brother of Christianity and thus is to be respected. Christian characters frequently point out that the two religions share much in common, such as the Ten Commandments and indeed the entire Hebrew Bible.

[13] However, just as often the differences between Judaism and Christianity are emphasized. Thus, loving one’s enemies is mentioned as an important Christian trait (and something that makes Christianity superior to Judaism) (Dunlop 1995: 46). Judaism has law and Christianity has grace (Page: 111). Jews hold on to the old while Christians embrace the new (Lacy and Lacy: 33).

[14] Jewish characters at times instruct their Christian friends about Jewish customs and holidays. These holidays are given value by Christian characters, sometimes only for potential conversionary purposes, but other times in their own right (McDowell and Hostetler: 52). This conflicted view of Jewish holidays by Christians is seen in the following excerpt:

By this time Addy’s knowledge of Jewish holidays was growing. From Dvora she’d learned about the High Holy Days in the early fall when Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) and Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) were followed closely by the Feast of Tabernacles or the Ingathering. She . . . went home and looked them up in the Old Testament . . . “Amazing that these feast days have been kept alive for thousands of years” [said her father]. “Mr. Clausen told me that each of these feasts were fulfilled in Jesus,” Addy said. “For example, Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement. When Jesus died on the cross, He atoned for our sins.” (Lutz: 104).

[15] Christians in these children’s books are ambivalent about Judaism. Jews and Judaism are, on the one hand, given great respect as is due “the chosen people” (Lutz: 70; Page: 94-95). Christianity is the younger brother of Judaism (Lutz: 36). But, on the other hand, Judaism is seen as incomplete without Christ. A (Gentile) teenage girl speaks for many evangelical Christians and reflects this ambivalence when she states: “The Jews are God’s chosen people . . . And since I accepted the Lord Jesus as my Messiah, I feel sort of like an adopted Jew” (Page: 95). In other words, Jews are important to God, and being an “adopted Jew” is spoken of with honor and pride, but accepting the truth of Christianity is equally (if not more) important.

### **Jewish Perception of Jesus and of Christianity**

[16] There are three basic attitudes that fictional Jews take toward Jesus and Christianity in these books: antagonism, affirmation, or indifference.

[17] The first response or reaction that Jewish characters in these books often have to Christianity or overtly Christian behavior is a negative one. Jewish characters display anger, resentment, displeasure, and even violence when presented with Christian actions or beliefs (LaHaye and Jenkins 2002a: 3). One character accuses Christian children of blasphemy when they pray a simple prayer “in Jesus’ name” (Dunlop 1995: 26). Some Jewish characters assert that Christianity has historically brought pain to Jews, and that even today Christians continue to hate and persecute Jews (Dunlop 1997: 78). Other Jews offer the opinion that Christianity is

exclusivist and hateful, a Gentile religion that is really a “Gentile fable” (Hunt: 177). Jewish characters contend that “Jews don’t believe in Jesus,” and that Jews who do are traitors (Littleton: 89). Even walking into a church is considered an act of betrayal (Elmer 2002b: 26).

[18] The following excerpt (in which a Jewish child remembers what he was taught by his rabbi) is typical of those fictional Jewish characters who view Christianity in a negative or antagonistic light:

“. . . Jesus was an imposter, a truly wicked man, a sorcerer, idolater, and a false tempter . . . Christianity was the invention of an ugly little Jew by the name of Paul, a man who suffered from epileptic seizures and often hallucinated. Jesus himself . . . was an embarrassment to the Jews of his day . . . May his name be blotted out, and his memory” (Hunt: 105).

[19] There are a handful of affirming responses to Christianity, but these are tinged with qualifying statements, such as the assertion by one Jewish character that Jesus was a good man, perhaps even a prophet, but not divine (LaHaye and Jenkins 2001a: 25). It should be noted that some Jews in these stories react neither with disdain nor approval when interacting with Christians or when confronted by Christian traditions. These individuals do not comment on Christian rituals or prayers or the strength of Christianity in general. Their passivity and dispassionate attitude, however, generally corresponds to their lack of interest in Christianity, while the antagonistic Jews of these books more often end up converting to Christianity.

### **The Holocaust**

[20] The Holocaust is a common theme in these books. Various patterns emerge, such as the Holocaust as a barrier to conversion to Christianity (or indeed a stumbling-block to belief in any kind of God). For the Christian characters of these books, this obstacle is a poignant but not a compelling reason to reject Jesus. Holocaust experiences and memories create pain and bitterness for survivors in these books, and in one case paranoia and delusions (Rue 2001). One elderly character, Olive, describes her Holocaust memories:

“But for me it is like yesterday. The memories are born anew every morning. The sounds, the smells, even the acrid taste in my mouth. What happened fifty years ago is more real to me than what happened last week or last month” (Page: 15).

[21] These Christian children’s stories declare that Judaism does not solve the problem of the Holocaust. By contrast, Christianity is shown to remove the bitterness and anger from one Holocaust survivor who turns to Christ (Page: 101). In another book, Christian children weep as they watch Jews being herded into cattle cars by the Nazis, because these Jews (the children believe) will die without eternal salvation:

“And they all will die in the gas chambers. Some look so hopeful, too. They have probably been told lies about freedom and a new home. But they won’t even have a home in Heaven without Christ. Oh, Hans, I can’t watch any more!” . . . [As they watch the brutality, Hans asks:] “Dear God, why?” Hans wept (Dunlop 1997: 17-18).

[22] In several books (especially Robert Elmer’s *Promise of Zion* series), the Holocaust (and its aftermath) is included simply as a plot device and to provide historical context; as such it does not generate philosophical or religious existential questions.

## Proselytizing

[23] Many of the books that I examined have one or more scenes where “evangelistic activity” or proselytizing takes place. While “winning Jews for Christ” is usually not the main plot of any of these books, it is almost always an important subplot. Proselytizing is generally “successful” in these books, although it is invariably a long, difficult journey for the Christian characters (mostly children) to convince their Jewish friends of the truth of Christianity. The consequences of unbelief for the Jews are severe: souls “lost for all eternity” (Dunlop 1995: 27), suffering the torments of hell (Lacy and Lacy: 96). In some books the evangelism is subtle and low-key, but in most of these stories the proselytizing is direct and to the point. In every case, the evangelical Christian characters feel an ardent desire for their Jewish friends to become Christians, as witnessed by the following passage:

Mary Beth sniffed, wiping tears from her cheeks. “It was about Uncle Jacob. I dreamed he died, Mama! Died lost and went to hell! Oh, it was so awful!” “Well, sweetheart, we’ve prayed daily for his salvation and witnessed to him over and over again. The seed of the Word has been planted in his heart and been well-watered. We have to trust the Lord to take the darkness from him and open his understanding to the truth.” “I know, Mama. It’s just that . . . well, so few Jews ever see the truth about Jesus and come to him for salvation” (Lacy and Lacy: 96).

[24] Christians in these books (usually children or teenagers) who evangelize their Jewish friends or relatives pay a high price. They are subjected to the loss of friendship and family, angry words, accusations of blasphemy and betrayal, general displeasure, and physical violence (LaHaye and Jenkins 2002a: 3; 2000a: 76), as the following excerpt reveals:

“You blaspheme!” he accused them. “You blaspheme the holy name of God!” Hans took a deep breath, then replied, “Jacob, we pray in the name of Jesus, as the Scriptures instruct us to.” The Jewish boy spat on the cellar floor. “Jesus Christ was a traitor! He turned his back on the commands and teachings of Moses!” “Jesus came as your Messiah,” Hans replied softly, “if you will only receive him.” Jacob advanced toward Hans, his fist raised. Hans was certain the other boy was going to strike him. The Jewish boy was so angry he was trembling. But Jacob paused, exhaled sharply through clenched teeth, then lowered his hand. He spat again on the floor. “Believe what you want,” he told Hans. “It is none of my affair. But do not pray in – in that name ever again in my presence” (Dunlop 1995: 26-27).

[25] Modeling the Christ-like life of forgiveness and other Christian attributes is seen as important as quoting Bible verses, pointing out messianic prophecies, or general argumentation. Christian children who misbehave or who exhibit bad attitudes can inadvertently prevent their Jewish friends from accepting the truth of Christianity. One Christian character warns his sister, “Don’t let your hatred [for Nazis] keep Jacob from seeing that he needs Jesus as his Messiah” (Dunlop 1995: 86).

[26] Evangelism is not only achieved through informal conversations and an exemplary Christian life, but also (for many of these characters) through behind-the-scenes prayers that ask God to “work in the hearts” of their Jewish acquaintances (Dunlop 1995: 32). These fictional Christians often pray that God would remove the “darkness” from their Jewish friends’ eyes (Lacy and Lacy: 96). Jewish characters who convert to Christianity sometimes describe their previous state

of unbelief (in Jesus) as “blindness” (LaHaye and Jenkins 2001a: 29; Lacy and Lacy: 195). One Christian character expresses her hopes to her Jewish friend: “Ethan, God has provided answers for those who hunger and thirst for his truth. I am praying you will find them” (Hunt: 177). An example of this kind of prayer is the following:

“Dear heavenly Father, . . . Help me to know how to reach Ethan. He wants to please you, but he is so caught up in doing things that I don’t know how to reach his heart. He is one of your chosen people, God, so please pull him toward you” (Hunt: 143-144).

[27] This combination of patient conversation, faithful prayer, and consistent modeling of a moral life is found repeatedly in these children’s books as leading to the conversion of Jewish friends and acquaintances (Dunlop 1995: 85-86). In addition, sometimes the testimony of a fellow Jew who has become a Christian will motivate the potential convert to make a decision for Christ (Elmer 2002b; Page: 68).

[28] Many of these books reflect a standard evangelical methodology of proselytizing, a building block approach that can be viewed as an evangelistic syllogism: All people are sinners. God must punish sin. Jesus died as a sacrifice for sin. Therefore, accepting Christ’s sacrifice brings about forgiveness, a change in attitude and behavior, and eternal life in heaven (Lacy and Lacy; Dunlop 1995).

[29] One addition to this argument that is found in several of the books examined asserts that good works or religious practices will not save anyone from the consequences of sin; only faith in Christ will bring about forgiveness of sin (Dunlop 1997: 142; Hunt: 74-75). An example of this argument is found in the following excerpt:

“We agree on much, Kimberly, but we cannot agree upon the idea of Jesus. My father told me that Christians have hated the Jews for generations because they blame us for the man Jesus’ death.” “He was more than a man, Ethan,” Kimberly said, softening her voice . . . “Jesus was a man, yet he was God. He was your Messiah, and he came to earth to be a sacrifice for sin that would allow us to enter a loving relationship with God.” “I fear God,” Ethan said . . . “The Jew’s purpose is to live a good life, to fill the mind with knowledge and the heart with acts of loving-kindness.” “Christians study and perform acts of kindness, too,” Kimberly said . . . “but we know that our small acts of goodness are nothing compared to God’s holy purity. We can never measure up to his standards of perfection, so we trust Jesus to meet those standards for us. We place our trust in him, the Jewish Messiah, instead of in ourselves” (Hunt: 74-75).

[30] Another variation in evangelistic methodology is to focus on messianic prophecies foretold by the Hebrew Bible and fulfilled by Jesus (Hunt: 176-177; LaHaye and Jenkins 2000c: 94; Lutz: 104; Page: 78, 111; Rue 1999: 173; Lacy and Lacy: 33). Along the same lines, Jesus is frequently called “your Messiah” or in one case, “the Jewish Messiah” (Dunlop 1995: 26, 42; Elmer 2002b: 28, 109; Hunt: 74-75). Both methods (using Christological interpretations of the Old Testament and personalizing Jesus as the Jewish Messiah) assist the evangelistic effort by presenting Christianity as an authentic Jewish option. In the *Kids Left Behind* series (a children’s version of the popular “end times” Christian novels), a more extreme version of this “Christianity is Jewish” strategy arises when much of the proselytizing is accomplished by

144,000 Jews who have converted to Christianity in an apocalyptic scenario of the “last days” derived from the book of Revelation (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000b: 15).

[31] The Christian characters in these books engage in proselytizing based on beliefs that are so grounded and firmly held that they are often referred to as “knowledge” as opposed to beliefs. “I know that Jesus is the Messiah” and “I know that my sins are forgiven” are phrases that are commonly spoken (LaHaye and Jenkins 2002a: 10; Page: 101; Elmer 2002b: 109). The Jewish target of evangelism is frequently told that he or she has an “urgent need” to consider the claims of Christianity (Dunlop 1997: 142; Elmer 2002b: 109). Indeed, for the evangelical Christian the doctrine of eternal salvation (or damnation) truly is a matter of life or death.

[32] The fictional Jews of these books respond to Christian proselytizing attempts with various counter-arguments. A common objection is that “Jews don’t believe in Jesus.” The standard evangelical response in these stories is that everyone needs Jesus, and that some Jews *do* believe in Jesus (Littleton: 89; Elmer 2002b: 83; Dunlop 1997: 78). Another Jewish objection is that Christians hate Jews. The accompanying response in these books is that hateful and anti-Semitic people are not real Christians (Hunt: 74). A third Jewish objection is that “I could never betray my people.” The Christian response to this protestation is that accepting Christ is not a betrayal of Judaism; instead, it is the *fulfillment* of Judaism. A variant response to this objection is that even if believing in Jesus does not follow Judaism, it is the truth and thus must be accepted. As one Christian character says to his Jewish friend, “It’s better to find the truth and follow it than to live a lie” (LaHaye and Jenkins 2001b: 107).

[33] Other Jewish objections include the assertion that Judaism is satisfactory as a religious system (Dunlop 1997: 142); the problem of evil (LaHaye and Jenkins 2001a: 6); Jesus was just a good man, not the Messiah (LaHaye and Jenkins 2001a: 24-25); and that becoming a Christian will cause family dissonance (Elmer 2002b: 83-84). The evangelical response to this final objection is, first, that Jesus predicted family conflicts over faith issues, and second, that “the truth may divide you and your father, but it’s always best to stick with the truth” (LaHaye and Jenkins 2001b: 106).

[34] Most attempts at evangelism are simple back and forth conversations, but some take the form of the fictional Christian pleading with the “unbeliever” to accept Christ. Some of the proselytizing is confrontational in nature. For example, Chaya Stein repeatedly preaches to her father with impassioned fervor in the *Kids Left Behind* series (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000b; 2000c; 2000d; 2001c). It takes several books, many heated conversations, and the death of his wife and daughter for Mr. Stein to become a Christian. An example of one of these conversations is found in the following excerpts:

“Do not blame God,” Chaya said. “He has taken my wife,” Mr. Stein said. “He has ruined everything I have worked for. Why shouldn’t I blame him?” “God is still calling you to himself,” Chaya said. “He is merciful and gracious, even now.” “Mercy and grace are poured out with an earthquake?” Mr. Stein said. “Death and destruction are a display of love?” “If you turn to God, he will show you mercy,” Chaya said (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000c: 38).

“I am not afraid of the truth” [Mr. Stein said]. “Then hear it and believe,” Chaya said. “God is giving you one more chance to respond to his gift.” “This is a gift?” Mr. Stein yelled. “To have my wife taken from me and now my house and all my possessions destroyed?” “God gave his only Son for you,” Chaya said. “Just as



the lamb was slain and its blood put on the doorposts during the Passover, so Jesus died for you and me so we would not have to die. That is the gift of God” (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000c: 95).

[35] One theme that is found in some of these books is that of a Christian child giving up his or her life (or offering to do so) so that a Jewish adult may come to faith in Jesus. Chaya does this in the *Kids Left Behind* books so that her father may believe (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000c: 123), and in *Damascus Journey*, a child tells her Jewish friend Jacob that “I love you so much that if giving up my life would cause you to call on Jesus and be saved, I would do it” (Lacy and Lacy: 114). This is clearly a picture of Christ’s self-sacrifice, but it also sends the message that salvation through belief in Jesus is of utmost importance, more important than life itself.

[36] Another theme is that of a Jewish character dying soon after she comes to faith in Jesus. Chaya’s mother becomes a Christian and very shortly thereafter dies in a bomb blast (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000b: 122). In *A Bouquet of Goodbyes*, Olive, a Holocaust survivor, becomes a Christian late in life and soon after she dies (Page). This “deathbed conversion” motif finds its origins in the “thief on the cross” narrative of the Gospel accounts, and conveys the “just in the nick of time” doctrine, inherent in evangelical theology, that eternal salvation can be attained at any stage of life, even moments before dying.

[37] There is really only one book out of the twenty-nine that I examined that presents a negative picture of the Christian missionary. In *Truth Slayers* (McDowell and Hostetler), one of the Christian teenagers interrupts a group of traditional Jews praying on an airplane and tries to evangelize them on the spot. This tactic is seen as obnoxious and intrusive by the other characters and by the narrator. But in any event, it is the style of evangelism, and not evangelism itself, that is implicitly criticized. Most of the books examined, however, seem to condone almost any style of proselytizing, including methods that might be viewed as questionable (from a Jewish perspective) such as confrontational and argumentative tactics (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000c: 65), persistence in the face of continual rejection (LaHaye and Jenkins 2001c: 71-72), and preaching the evangelistic message to a person with emotional or physical vulnerabilities (Page; Lacy and Lacy). Methodological concerns seem to take a backseat to the primary goal, which is to bring about a change in beliefs. This is not to say that some narratives do not present evangelism as a natural and gentle process in the context of a true friendship. In fact, almost all proselytizing in these books is done by friends or family members. But while a lonely, isolated, or fearful person is not under the same kind of emotional duress endured by, for example, Jewish victims of the Inquisition, this needy and troubled person (as many of the fictional Jewish characters are portrayed) would still be in a state of psychological vulnerability that might (from a Jewish point of view) argue against any type of “persuasive evangelism” as being inappropriate or unethical.

### **Biblical Prophecies Related to Jews**

[38] Evangelical children’s fiction with Jewish characters frequently uses “Biblical prophecies” to demonstrate the truth of Christianity (Lacy and Lacy: 26; Rue 1999: 173; Page: 78; LaHaye and Jenkins 2000c: 94). This most often comes in the context of proselytizing conversations between Christians and Jews. For example, one character tells her Jewish friend that Jesus was pierced and striped with the lashes of a whip, just like Passover unleavened bread. Jesus was without sin just as the matzoh is without leaven. Jesus, the Christian character tells her Jewish friend, is the sacrificial Passover lamb (Hunt: 177; also see LaHaye and Jenkins 2000c: 95).

[39] Other “fulfilled prophecies” include the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E. (Lacy and Lacy: 112), the (future) rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000a: 16), and Jesus as the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement (Lutz: 104). In addition, several passages in Isaiah are interpreted as messianic prophecies fulfilled in Jesus, including the “unto us a child is born” passage in Isaiah 9 (Page: 111), the “behold, a virgin (or “young woman”) shall conceive” passage in Isaiah 7 (Hunt: 176), and the “suffering servant” passage in Isaiah 53 (Hunt: 176). When Jewish characters are confronted with messianic prophecies, they often respond with surprise and amazement that these predictions from their own Jewish scriptures have come to fruition in the Christian New Testament (Lacy and Lacy: 33). One Jewish character expresses his nagging doubts about his own rejection of these prophecies:

Jacob took a deep breath. “And dear God, this troubling issue that Hannah and Mary Beth have been pressing me with about Jesus Christ. Have I been blinded to the truth all along? I need Your help. I’ve got to know.” . . . Voices seemed to whisper to him from those shadows, saying that Jesus Christ loved him enough to go to the cross for him. They told him that Jesus fit every prophetic description of Messiah, including the love that Messiah would have, not only for his people of Israel, but for all the people of the world (Lacy and Lacy: 195).

### **Conversion to Christianity**

[40] Many of these books are at their essence conversion narratives. Christians present the gospel message to a Jewish person, who at first responds with resistance. This resistance is then overcome by logical reasoning, proof-texts from the Hebrew Bible, and an exemplary life of self-sacrifice and generosity. At the conclusion of many (though not all) of these stories, the Jewish antagonist becomes a Christian by acknowledging his or her personal sin, believing in Jesus’ atoning sacrifice, and accepting Christ as Lord and Savior. However, common benchmarks in Christian conversion, such as baptism and church membership, are almost never mentioned.

[41] The conversion process is usually initiated by the recitation of a prayer (often referred to as the “sinner’s prayer” in evangelical parlance), several examples of which follow:

“Jesus, I have been taught that you were a traitor to my people, but I no longer believe this. I believe that you are the Son of God, and that you died for me. I ask you to be my Savior and forgive all my sins” (Dunlop 1995: 116).

“I can help you with the prayer, if you’d like,” Conrad said. Mr. Stein nodded. “Just ask God to forgive you for the wrong stuff you’ve done. Tell him you’re sorry for not believing sooner.” Mr. Stein prayed. “Now tell him you believe that Jesus died for you and rose again. Tell God you don’t trust in anything you’ve done, but only what Jesus has done. Ask him to be your Savior and Lord.” Tearfully, Mr. Stein completed his prayer. “Oh God, please forgive me,” he cried. “Come into my life” (LaHaye and Jenkins 2001a: 29).

“Forgive me, God. Help me to live for you and for your Son, Jesus, the Messiah” (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000b: 122).

[42] Interestingly enough, none of these conversions takes place within the context of professional missionary activity. Almost all occur through normal friendships or family relationships developed in the course of everyday life.

[43] Jewish characters who are considering Christianity often agonize over the issue of rejection from the Jewish community (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000a: 66, 74). Guilt about betraying other Jews and Judaism is a frequent theme (Dunlop 1997: 79; Elmer 2002b: 109). For example, one Jewish character tentatively decides that he “just could not betray his people this way. Everyone knew Jews would not, could not follow Yeshua. Not even if it was . . . true” (Elmer 2002b: 84). Another, related theme is the insistence on the retention of their Jewishness by converts to Christianity (Page: 101). In addition, divine intervention and providence repeatedly play a key role in these conversion narratives.

[44] Faith in Christ is seen as a powerful tool to make one a better person. For example, converting to Christianity allows a Holocaust survivor to move “beyond [her] bitterness and anger.” Jesus is now her “friend and redeemer,” and God is now her “heavenly Father.” The love and kindness of a teenage girl caused this elderly Jewish woman’s heart to become tender enough to receive the gospel message. This character asserts that she is still a Jew, but now she “knows that [her] Messiah lives” (Page: 101).

[45] Other reasons that Jews convert to Christianity in these children’s books include being convinced of the validity of messianic prophecies (Lacy and Lacy); seeing or experiencing answered prayer (Dunlop 1995); experiencing the care and love of a Christian (Dunlop 1995); experiencing the friendship of a Jewish convert to Christianity (Elmer 2002b); being convinced of the “truth” of Christianity (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000a: 66); accepting the proposition that Christianity “completes” Judaism (Page: 67); experiencing forgiveness of sins (LaHaye and Jenkins 2001a: 29); and fear of eternal damnation (Dunlop 1995: 115). One character states that “I have finally found what I was looking for” (LaHaye and Jenkins 2001b: 109). Another character (this one a rabbi) proclaims:

“Jesus Christ is the Messiah! There can be no other option. I had come to this answer but was afraid to act on it, and I was almost too late” (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000a: 61).

[46] These conversion narratives should be placed in the context of American evangelicalism, which tends to be triumphalist, exclusivist, and literalistic in its Biblical hermeneutic (Hunter; Marsden), yet at the same time welcomes converts, especially Jews who have a special status as God’s chosen people and are thought to be resistant to conversion (Ariel 2000).

### **Spiritual Emptiness of Judaism**

[47] Despite the depiction of Jews engaged in prayer, Torah study, synagogue attendance, and other ritual observances, Judaism as a religious system is often portrayed as empty, bankrupt, and inferior. The fictional evangelical Christians in these stories argue, explicitly or implicitly, against the legitimacy of Judaism as a spiritual way of life.

[48] The following assertions are made: God does not answer prayers of non-Christians (Dunlop 1995: 32); only Christianity leads to eternal life in heaven (Dunlop 1997: 17, 142; Hunt: 151; Lacy and Lacy: 96); Judaism provides no answers to the problem of evil (Dunlop 1997: 77); Judaism is based on perfectly following the law of Moses, which is impossible (Dunlop 1997: 142; Hunt: 152-153; LaHaye and Jenkins 2000c: 109); Christianity provides its adherents with true peace and happiness, something that Judaism cannot do (Hunt: 146); and Christianity offers a meaningful spiritual environment, as opposed to Judaism which consists only of empty rituals (Hunt: 145).

[49] Other delegitimizing arguments in these books include: Jews are looking for a Messiah who has already come (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000a: 93). (In other words, the Jewish expectation of a (non-Christian) messianic hope is pathetic and hopeless). Christianity has a hope for the final resurrection, which (non-Orthodox) Judaism does not have (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000d: 50); Christians are forgiving, joyful, and peaceful, while Jews are bitter, unforgiving, and troubled (Page: 67, 101, 105); Christianity is about grace and light, while Judaism is about law and darkness (Page: 111-112); Christianity is about following Jesus, and not “man-made customs” (Schulte: 107); and Jews are ignorant of their own Scriptures (Lacy and Lacy: 113).

[50] One character is contrasted with his Christian friend in the following way:

He was a good Jew. He tried his best to keep the Law. Even if the Master of the universe took him down into the depths of the ocean, he had no reason to fear. Yet he was afraid. And Kimberly Hollis faced the fog with more confidence than he did. He had seen her nervous, upset, and angry, but in times of true trouble and danger, she had always worn a look of peace (Hunt: 144).

[51] In another conversation, Judaism is depicted as a failed religion, since only Christ can save us from sin:

[Miklos says,] “My people keep the Law of Moses . . . given to us at Mount Sinai.” “Jesus kept the Law of Moses perfectly,” Hans replied, “but He is the only One who ever has in all of history. He died for our sins because all of us have broken God’s laws. That’s what sin is . . . If you believe that you are a sinner, and that Jesus died for you and rose again, then you need to ask Him by faith to be your Savior and forgive your sins . . . Miklos, wouldn’t you like to ask Jesus Christ to save you . . . ? He wants to forgive your sins, if you’ll just ask Him.” Miklos shook his head. “I’ll have to think about that for a while.” “Well, just remember that according to the Bible, good deeds won’t take us to heaven, and religion won’t take us to heaven. You need Jesus to save you” (Dunlop 1997: 142).

[52] In a sharp exchange between a Jewish father and his Christian daughter, the two religions are again contrasted:

“Father, you are trapped,” she said. “You are helpless to save yourself . . . It is the same with your spiritual life . . . “No matter how many good things you try to do, or how much you try to follow the law, you know in your heart that there is sin . . . Only God can forgive sins, and that is what Jesus came to do,” Chaya said. “He was the perfect sacrifice. When we were dead in our sins, Messiah died for us.” “You are delirious,” Mr. Stein said. “I am telling you the truth,” Chaya said. “Jesus said he was the way, the truth, and the life. You can only come to God the Father through him. Please receive him now before it is too late” (LaHaye and Jenkins 2000c: 109-10).

## **Conclusion**

[53] Using my examination and analysis of these fictional children’s books as a grid through which to view a religious subculture, I would offer the following tentative conclusions about evangelical Christianity and its understanding of Jews and Judaism.

[54] In general, individual Jews are admired and respected by evangelical Christians for their accomplishments and abilities. Anti-Semitism in word or deed is condemned by evangelical Christians. The Christian response to anti-Semitism in evangelical children's literature is consistent with the "real world" sociological data that shows a decrease in evangelical prejudice toward Jews (Ariel 1995: 342).

[55] Evangelicals see the Holocaust as a horrible event, perpetrated by non-Christians, which might have been ameliorated for many Jews (both during and after the Holocaust) by conversion to Christianity. Evangelical Christians feel badly about the pain and suffering experienced by Jewish victims of Hitler, but they do not consider these experiences a compelling reason for Jews to reject the Christian message. Evangelical Holocaust memoirs and biographies (Ariel 1991; 2001) reflect the same attitudes as those displayed by the fictional Christian characters in these books.

[56] The Jewishness of Jesus and the early Christians is acknowledged and indeed emphasized by evangelicals. This fact is often utilized in ways that might be both acceptable and unacceptable to Jews. Christians can use Jesus' Jewishness to condemn anti-Semitism and to encourage the practice of Judaism by Jews. But, on the other hand, Christians can also use Jesus' Jewishness as a tool to proselytize Jews. Indeed, accentuating the Jewish identity of Jesus has been an established tactic among missionaries to the Jews for many years.

[57] On one level many evangelical Christians are fascinated with and respectful of Jewish traditions, including holidays, Sabbath observance, and dietary laws. Many evangelicals also believe that Jews will play a major role in the events of the "last days," which gives the Jewish community a certain amount of "spiritual capital" and goodwill among Christians. However, on another level Jewish rituals and traditions (apart from a "messianic" interpretation) are viewed with a subtle contempt by evangelical Christians because these practices are part of the entire system of Judaism, which is ultimately seen as defective in that it is unable to provide spiritual guidance or eternal salvation. This ambivalence toward Judaism among evangelicals has been noted by a variety of scholars (Rausch 1991; Ammerman; Ariel 2000).

[58] Evangelical Christianity, as observed through the fictional lens of the books examined in this study, remains an exclusivist religious system that allows only one way to find salvation. Proselytizing is an imperative for evangelical Christians (Mouw 1997). Evangelistic activity is not seen by evangelical Christians as arrogant or disrespectful; rather, it is viewed as saving the (eternal) life of another human being. Jews are thus not exempted from being the target of these evangelism efforts, as is the case with many more liberal practitioners of Christianity (Culbertson). On the contrary, proselytizing Jews is perceived by most evangelicals as essential for eschatological reasons if not for soteriological ones (Ariel 1992; 2000). However, there is by no means a unanimous consensus among evangelicals concerning the methods, the content, or even the desirability of Jewish evangelism (Grounds; Price). Some evangelical leaders recognize the controversial and charged nature of preaching the gospel to Jews, and have in recent years struggled with how to balance the sometimes conflicting values of, on the one hand, respect for the Jewish community and, on the other hand, persuasive evangelistic activity (which may imply disrespect) aimed toward that very same community (Grounds; Mouw 1997; 2001).

[59] Like many other children's books, these stories are morality tales that teach "the best way to live" through plot devices, character development, and dialogue. However, the best way to live, and the best way to believe, is apparently still a matter of debate between Jews and evangelical

Christians (Rausch 1991; Grounds; Greenberg). This debate, at least on the Christian side, is now being argued in a one-sided forum (evangelical children's fiction) that may be the only source of information about Jews and Judaism for many evangelical Christian children. While these books may, from a Christian perspective, succeed at teaching a superficial tolerance for Jews, they also convey the not-so-subtle message that Judaism as a religious and spiritual system is bankrupt and defective.

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