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“A Fool for Christ”

*Sense-Making and Negotiation of Identity in the Life
Story of a Christian Soldier*

Aron Engberg

More often than not, studies of Christian Zionism approach evangelical affection and support for Israel through the hermeneutical lens of dispensational premillennialism. From this perspective, Christian Zionism is characterized by its dispensationalist view of history and individual Christian Zionists motivated by this religio-political worldview in their political, economic, and moral support of the modern-day State of Israel. Historically, especially in the Anglo-American world, dispensationalist eschatology has been at the heart of Christian Zionist efforts to facilitate the restoration of a Jewish nation in the Middle East and to comfort and support the State of Israel.

Yet other aspects of Christian Zionism, perhaps aspects of equal analytic value, have been left largely unexplored. Contemporary Christian Zionism is held together by much more—and sometimes, I believe, much less—than a common view of history and the future. More specifically, I believe that the *present* is equally important as the past and the future to understanding the motivation of individual Christian Zionists and the attraction that millions of Christians around the world feel toward Israel and the Jewish people.

Emphasizing these themes, this chapter views Christian Zionism as a global *religious movement* in its own right. This implies a view of Christian Zionism as a religious and cultural milieu with shared (but contested) values, agendas for political and social activism, and ample possibilities for individual identity construction. It furthermore means that I understand Christian Zionism dynamically: as a religious movement, it is on the move.

This chapter is based on life story data of a Swedish Christian Pentecostal who decided to join the Israeli Defense Forces out of his conviction that God wanted him to protect the chosen people. In his life narrative, love of the people and the land rather than end-times theology occupies the central position. The analysis of Jacob's life story will be performed in three steps: First, I will analyze the formal aspects of the narrative as a whole, emphasizing the thoroughgoing pattern of calling, test of faith, confirmation. Second, I will analyze how Jacob makes sense of his pro-Israeli activism—that is, what he understands as his primary motivation. Finally, I will discuss Jacob's relationship to the grand narrative of Christian Zionism, especially with regard to biblical prophecy. As an ethnographic account, it attempts to offer a "thick description"¹ of his narrative identity and his understanding of the world.

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6-7.

The Narrative Study of Life

The ethnographic study of life narratives as a means to understanding identity formation processes arose from the belief that identity, as such, remains out of grasp in a postmodern environment. The notion of human agency was severely damaged by the structuralist assault, and once the smoke cleared it was difficult to find analytic space for human subjectivity. A decade or so later, the concept of narrative traveled from literature studies into sociological, anthropological, and ethnographic areas of research. In these new realms of narrative research, life stories were—and still are—understood as a possibility to study identity formation—that is, identity as a process that occurs within language rather than as a fixed entity beyond it. When we talk about lived experience, we adopt the form of narrative. In those descriptions of “lived time,” as psychologist Jerome Bruner calls it, we present our narrative identities.² Through the use of plots, characters, scenes, and settings—the primary categories for narrative analysis of life stories—we construct our narrative selves. Narrative identities—“the stories that we live by”³—are not identical to previous notions of identity; the way I employ the term in this chapter refers to the linguistic expression of personal identity as it is expressed in the life story. The extent to which this narrative identity reflects an actual identity “out there” is still covered in the smoke from the structuralist onslaught. What is “out there,” however, is the linguistic and cultural context of the story. Hence every life story provides a window into the specific context of its telling.

2. Jerome Bruner, “Life as Narrative,” *Social Research* 71:3 (2004): 691–711, esp. 692.

3. Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich, “Introduction,” in *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*, ed. Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 3–11, esp. 4.

Christian Zionism as a Religious Culture

One methodological advantage of doing ethnographic research (as compared with historical studies) is the opportunity to study *reception*:⁴ how participants in a religious (or secular) community interpret—and negotiate with—narratives, rituals, theologies, and artifacts intrinsic to their group. “This study of reception,” writes Thomas A. Tweed, “emerges from several related convictions—that meaning is constructed (not given), multiple (not univocal), contested (not shared), and fluid (not static). And, most important meaning is inscribed by readers, listeners, participants or viewers.”⁵ A religious master narrative of identity is a story that tells insiders who they are as a group and how they are to locate themselves in the world. As such, master stories are social identities in the form of narrative. As Tweed argues, devotees in a religious setting are not passive receivers of religious socialization but are instead involved in the continuous practice of interpreting theologies, rituals, and stories. Meaning is never entirely immanent in the ritual practice or religious story in itself but is constructed and reconstructed in the meeting between culture and individuals. Also, no master narrative, however powerful, has a monopoly on the identity formation of religious practitioners; other cultural narratives as well as biographical particulars also influence the process. This process can be investigated through ethnographic practice. The interpretative subject always constructs the self locally, in a specific language game, but various discourses (cultural, ethnic, political, gendered, theological, and so on) are used as resources in this self-construction. As such, these

4. Thomas A. Tweed, “Between the Living and the Dead: Fieldwork, History and the Interpreter’s Position,” in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, ed. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire (New York/London: New York University Press, 2002), 63–74, esp. 63.

5. *Ibid.*, 65.

discourses condition but never completely determine the outcome of self-construction. The relationship between the culturally available discourses and life story construction is captured in two terms coined by the two American sociologists James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium: “discursive practice” is the self-interpreting *practice* of the subject, and “discourses-in-practice” are the *resources* that the subject employs when it stories itself.⁶

Evangelical pro-Zionist culture in Israel constitutes such a religious culture, with a “canon” of possible stories, ritual practices, theological and political beliefs, and, as in any other religious setting, people on the ground enmeshed in the practice of interpreting these “signs from above.” The grand narrative of Christian Zionism in Jerusalem prescribes certain ways to understand yourself and the world around you. Through Christian Zionism, devotees learn that they are the “Watchmen on the Walls,” modern-day “Esthers” or “Cyruses,” the protectors of God’s chosen people, and sometimes that their practice of “blessing Israel” helps to facilitate the second coming of Christ. They come to understand that the State of Israel occupies a central place in God’s plan of universal redemption. This master narrative and the prescribed roles for different characters in the drama can be expected to influence identity formation processes for individuals exposed to this culture. I am concerned with the *reception* and *interpretation* of this master narrative of identity as it appears in individual life stories. This practice of identity negotiation probably varies widely from individual to individual; different cultural backgrounds, individual life experiences, amounts of exposure, etc., condition the amount and content of the internalized elements of the master narrative. How individual Christian Zionists understand

6. James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 92.

themselves in the practice of “blessing Israel” can be investigated through the analysis of life stories.

Methodological Perspectives on Life Story Interviewing

This chapter is based on a life story interview that I conducted during a pilot study in Jerusalem in October 2011. My approach is based on the premise that we cannot understand Christian Zionism purely as a theology of the end times separated from the practice and self-understanding of individual Christians who subscribe in whole or in part to Christian Zionist beliefs.

In an attempt not to control the performance of the life story, a very limited amount of structure was employed during the interview process. In the interview with Jacob,⁷ only one question was asked: “Can you tell me your life story up until the situation you find yourself in today?” I also asked Jacob not only to tell me a chronology of his past but also his thoughts and emotions relating to the events told. Once the story was finished, I asked him some follow-up questions that arose from the interview.

Before I retell Jacob’s story, two preliminary cautions are necessary: 1) Just as it would be pointless to argue that truth in Shakespeare’s Hamlet is solely dependent on its correspondence with extra-linguistic reality “out there,” the life story of Jacob is primarily not evaluated by correspondence criteria. His chronology of events might or might not be historically accurate; either way, his interpretation of the events today certainly differs from his understanding of them the moment they occurred. Also, I don’t doubt that his story would be different, perhaps crucially so, if we did the interview again one year later, if the interview had been carried

7. The interviewee’s real name has been changed and certain biographical details have been omitted.

out in Sweden instead of in Israel, or if the interviewer would have been someone else. The aim is rather to analyze how Jacob presents his identity to me, at this specific moment, what he chooses to highlight, and what he understands as important moments (turning points) in his life. The telling of his life story is a performance, a continuing construction of his narrative self; as such, there is no final version. 2) As this chapter relies solely on one interview, and as I don't employ any criteria to relate it to a larger population, the point here is not to generalize in the traditional sense of the term. I do not claim that Jacob is representative of Swedish Christian Zionism in Israel, or even less, of Christian Zionism as a whole. Instead, the analysis is best viewed as one example of how a Christian pro-Zionist individual understands himself and his love for Israel. “Ethnographic methods,” writes Amy Johnson Frykholm, “should disconfirm our assumptions and discomfort us with the complexity with which human beings construct their social worlds. They should detotalize, rather than sum up.”⁸ This chapter is an attempt at such a detotalization; its nature, therefore, is deconstructive rather than constructive. Yet since no life story is told in a vacuum, I also hope that this example will raise some questions about how the diversity of lived Christian Zionism can and should be interpreted. This chapter presents a *reception* of the grand narrative of Christian Zionism in one life story of a Christian soldier.

Jacob's Life Story

I meet Jacob for the first time at the small bus station in a town somewhere in northern Israel. It is a warm day, so we decide to carry out the interview in a café by the Mediterranean where we can sit outside in the shade, enjoying the gentle breeze and a nice

8. Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9.

cup of freshly brewed espresso. He is a tall man, well trained and with a full beard covering his cheeks. He is dressed in a laid-back fashion in long, brown trousers, a black tank top, and a cap. He seems very confident and displays no signs of the usual nervousness that prospective interviewees often show when they meet an interviewer for the first time. Once he starts telling his story, I begin to understand why. His achievement in Israeli society is remarkable, but his story depicts a person who is confident that this achievement was not only his own. His narrative is framed as a continuous dialogue with God, where the protagonist relies on divine guidance and at every juncture makes sure that his will is in line with the will of the Lord.

Jacob begins his story by recounting his family's longstanding tradition of a strong relationship with Israel. He tells me about ancestors, uncles, aunts, and grandparents who all "had a special relationship with Israel."⁹ Jacob's religious upbringing in this setting and as a son of a Pentecostal pastor is important, he says, for understanding his current relationship with Israel. At twenty, Jacob traveled to Israel for the first time along with his parents; this was a life-changing experience for him. It was "*love at first sight*," he says; "I just knew that this is the place where I am supposed to be and that this is the place where I am supposed to help." He identifies this as a turning point in his story: "My life really changed, in one split second."¹⁰ For the rest of his family's two-week trip to Israel, he stayed in silence and just marveled. When the trip was over, he decided that he wanted to return. He quit his job as a youth leader

9. J2011, 2. The interview carried out with Jacob on the October 3, 2011 will hereafter be referred to as J2011. All translations from the original Swedish are mine. For purposes of readability, oral language features such as non-lexical sounds, iterations, and syntactical peculiarities have been excised except when they are deemed to carry importance for the analysis. When English terms, words, or sentences occur in the Swedish transcription of the interview they will be written in italics.

10. Ibid.

in a church in Sweden and found a place in Israel to do volunteer work among Jewish messianic believers. This second stay in Israel coincided with the second intifada, so Jacob experienced the turmoil and violence of that period. He identifies one experience in particular as a second turning point in his life:

There were many attacks. One especially I remember: I wasn't there myself but I heard about the attack against the Dolphinarium in Tel Aviv.¹¹ At that point died, I think, 25 youngsters. I remember that this was one of those *changer, life changer* [experiences], because I felt, alright, people are dying, and that is not good. I will have to do something about it, I mean, simply try to prevent that people are dying.¹²

The “Dolphinarium experience” made Jacob decide that he wanted to join the army, but the way he narrates it the decision was not his alone; it was a calling from above: “I also felt that God, God said: join the army!”¹³ However, when the recruitment bureaucrats realized that Jacob was not Israeli, had never made *aliyah*,¹⁴ and that he wasn't even Jewish, he was refused enrollment in spite of his dedication to the army. This caused a minor crisis and made him question God: “God, now what? You wanted me to join the army, *what else?*” The response, however, was reassuring: “I felt go on, keep on trying.”¹⁵

Unable to join the army, Jacob searched for other possibilities to help the army defend the country and found Sar-El (an acronym for Service for Israel), an Israeli organization that organizes volunteer work, amongst other things, in the Israeli Defense Forces. Jacob was accepted into Sar-El, but even though he was happy to contribute to the defense of Israel, repairing tanks and gas masks was not enough.

11. The attack against the Dolphinarium in Tel Aviv occurred June 1, 2001. The official death toll was 21.

12. J2011, 3.

13. J2011, 4.

14. Hebrew for “ascent,” the term commonly used for Jewish immigration to Israel.

15. J2011, 4.

Jacob felt that, as he said, “My child is still sick,” and described what he thought at the time: “I do what I can but I still feel that it’s not enough. . . . I wanted to join the army as a soldier.”¹⁶ Jacob wanted to be on the front lines.

He had decided already in 2001 that he wanted to join the Golani Brigade, an Israeli infantry brigade associated with the northern command. However, as he was refused enrollment he went back and forth between Sweden and Israel for several years. In Sweden, he worked to earn money just to be able return to Israel for more volunteer work. After some five years, “People within the Ministry of Interior began to . . . hear my *story*”¹⁷ and contacted Jacob to find a way to help him. As a result of this contact, Jacob was granted a temporary residence permit that lasted for two years. However, enrollment was still impossible because a permanent residence permit is required to join the army.

After two years of work, Jacob decided to gather his credentials from his time as a volunteer and write to the Israeli supreme commander. When he told his plan to a friend, she urged him to also send a letter to the prime minister, Ehud Olmert.¹⁸ For Jacob, this high point of his story was more than a bureaucratic affair. The way he tells it, the letters to the supreme commander and the prime minister were a way for him to “*reconfirm*”¹⁹ that he had understood God’s will properly:

I told God: God, I am ready to wait, I have been waiting, but I am ready to wait more and do whatever I can but only if you want me to. I have been here for six or seven years and I haven’t earned any money, I haven’t studied, I haven’t done anything, except worked as a volunteer and for minimal wages. I want to serve you. So . . . if you want me to

16. J2011, 5.

17. Ibid.

18. This occurred in 2007.

19. J2011, 6.

be anywhere else in this world, I can go to Africa tomorrow! I mean, I love Israel and I still want to stay here, but if YOU [oral emphasis] want me to be somewhere else entirely, *let me know*, and I'll go. I just want to serve you; I am not the one to stubbornly cling to the country.²⁰

Jacob's retelling of his struggle for permanent residency in Israel is embedded in a dialogue between Jacob and God where Jacob asked God to “*reconfirm*”²¹ that this was the place where God wanted him to be.

Ultimately, his wish was granted; as a result of the letter to Ehud Olmert, Jacob was given a residence permit for reasons that he does not know. Immediately he went to the recruitment office to sign up for service in the Golani Brigade. He was accepted, entered basic training, and finally passed the tests to join the Golani. In the Golani, he was assigned to a reconnaissance unit where he served as a machine gunner. His telling of his time in the military centers on meetings with his fellow soldiers, most of them Jews who were very surprised to learn that a Christian Swede wanted—and was allowed—to do military service in Israel. His narrative then develops into a more theological discourse, where his Christian faith is contrasted and compared with that of his Jewish peers.

Finally, Jacob completed his military service, and once again after a “*reality check*”²² with God decided not to continue his military career even though he had offers to enter training for command. After his military service, Jacob once again reconsidered his life and evaluated his options:

What am I really? I am a Swedish guy, a Christian Swedish guy that understands a whole lot about Israel, Judaism, and what happens down here. . . . There are not many Swedish Golani soldiers. I still love the country; how can I continue to help? And then I felt that I could explain

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

to the world what is happening in Israel. I can try to be a *bridge-builder*, either between Israel and Europe, or between the Christian world and Jewish society.²³

Jacob decided to continue to work for Israel but in another capacity: he would no longer be a soldier but a “bridge-builder.”²⁴ Today, Jacob, now an Israeli citizen, is enrolled in a university program studying politics and diplomacy. He considers himself a bridge-builder, if one with an unusual story.

Calling and Confirmation

The protagonist in Jacob’s life story is an admirable character. He stays true to his convictions in the face of severe disappointment because he believes that he follows the will of God. This belief is eventually “reconfirmed” on several occasions.

The story begins with a depiction of the pro-Jewish/pro-Israeli environment in which he grew up. The way this background is employed to create a convincing beginning for the narrative seems to suggest that the succeeding story should be understood in light of this origin. The protagonist’s identity is marked from the beginning by this atmosphere, almost as if his future were somehow meant to be.

The story then gains momentum at Jacob’s first meeting with the land that he had presumably heard so much about. Even if he was already intellectually convinced of Israel’s theological centrality, his arrival in Israel creates an *emotional attachment* to the country that was not salient before. At this point, his relationship to Israel becomes highly personal. In fact, he falls in love. This scene is a central turning point in the story; suddenly “he knew” this was the place where God

23. J2011, 12.

24. Jacob is still in the military reserve, however, so in case of war he will be called up.

wanted him to be. The meaning of this scene is not related only to the protagonist’s newfound love for Israel; it is also a spiritual awakening, a divine calling. Israel becomes intimately connected to Jacob’s individual spiritual purpose. From now on, a central theme in Jacob’s narrative is an ongoing dialogue with God (the impression that it is a dialogue and not only an inner monologue is reinforced by Jacob’s rhetorical usage of a dialogical linguistic form) in which the protagonist iterates his submission to the divine will, and where God “*reconfirms*”²⁵ that the protagonist has understood his calling correctly.

At a second scene of election, the Dolphinarium scene, the hitherto primarily spatial calling (“I just knew that this is the place where I am supposed to be”) is concretized and filled with content. The protagonist, until now a self-labeled “pacifist,”²⁶ suddenly decides that he has to join the army, and is convinced that God wants him to do so. More specifically, he decides that he wants to join the Golani Brigade.

Even in the face of several disappointments (the enrollment refusal, the difficulties in gaining a residence permit) and economic hardship (seven years of unpaid or poorly paid work), the protagonist continues to follow his calling. It is as if Jacob, in a way similar to the biblical patriarchs, is put to the test. The moment where he finally gains the permit that allows him to join the army is marked by its embeddedness in theological language. This scene, too, is highly biblical: if the protagonist were the one being tested during the seven years of work, he now confronts God and puts him to the test by offering him an ultimatum. Having done everything possible in his human power, he now asks God to confirm that he has understood his calling correctly: “If you want me to stay in the country [and] join the army, make them give me a permanent residence permit.”²⁷ This

25. J2011, 6.

26. J2011, 3.

is one of several scenes where the protagonist's calling is evaluated and reconfirmed.

A similar, and highly cinematic, scene occurs early in basic training when the surprised recruit is asked by his hardened company commander to tell his story in front of the whole company during a morning flag-raising ritual. He accepts and tells how he, a Christian Swede, became enrolled in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in front of the gathered soldiers, commanders, and the Israeli flag. When he reaches the conclusion of his story, "Suddenly . . . especially one *sergeant* who is the tough, hard-nosed, commander, he starts to clap his hands. And everybody else joins in so suddenly I find myself standing there and everybody is just clapping their hands. And I [just said] well okay, thank you! [laughter]."²⁸

These scenes are thematically connected through the central narrative pattern of calling, test of faith, confirmation. Understood in the light of this theme, the meaning of the scenes can be interpreted as confirmations of the morality and righteousness of the protagonist's quest. If the first "confirmation scene" was a highly *spiritual* event—plotted prefiguratively on familiar biblical narratives and with God as the character granting the confirmation—the second scene depicts a *social* confirmation where the protagonist is embraced by Israeli society, represented by his fellow soldiers in the Golani.

Both scenes confirm that the protagonist is on the right path, but at different levels. There can be no more doubt for him that the quest has received approval, both from Israeli society and, maybe even more importantly, from God. The honorary awards that he receives during his military service also contribute to this theme of confirmation: one for his dedication in the *Kurs nativ*—a pre-conversion course offered to "lonely soldiers" to strengthen their

27. J2011, 6.

28. J2011, 9.

Jewish identity—and another one as the “best role model” in his unit. A final confirmation scene also occurs when he has finished his military service and is granted a large scholarship to study in Israel, thereby ensuring his continued involvement with Israeli society. This scene also is discursively embedded in a dialogue with God, where the protagonist asks for God’s will to be done, and as an answer receives a scholarship large enough to let him enter the university program.

It is not unusual that evangelical life stories follow biblical patterns and that storytellers employ tropes and metaphors found in the Bible to explain religious life journeys.²⁹ In a religious culture where the Bible occupies the most central role as a reservoir for stories, it is hardly surprising that the Bible is employed in individual life story narration. What is notable in Jacob’s story is how the voice of God is thematically connected to the land of Israel. It is in Israel that God speaks to Jacob, and it is here that God calls Jacob to embark on a spiritual journey. Moreover, God’s response to Jacob’s insistent questions is mediated through Israeli people (politicians, bureaucrats, soldiers) or Israeli society. In Genesis 32, Jacob the patriarch-to-be wrestles with God/an angel/a man and receives a blessing and his new name, Israel. In the modern Jacob’s narrative, it is not the protagonist who becomes identified with Israel so much as God. The voice of God speaks modern Hebrew and is incarnated in Israeli society. It is here that Jacob wrestles with God and prevails.

The central role in Jacob’s progressive narrative is played by love. In both of Jacob’s “calling scenes”—the “love at first sight” scene and the “Dolphinarium” scene—the protagonist experiences strong affection toward the country and its inhabitants. In the first scene,

29. A very well-written analysis of American fundamentalist language emphasizing this theme can be found in Susan F. Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

it is the love of someone who has unexpectedly—almost miraculously—fallen in love, and in the second it is the protective love that a parent feels for a child. In other words, “love” has a sense-making function in the narrative; it is employed to explain the protagonist’s motivation.

Motivation and Sense-Making

From the theoretical perspective employed in this chapter, it is neither possible nor necessary to determine whether Jacob *actually* feels love towards Israel, only that love plays a crucial role within his narrative. Within the story, love is the term that Jacob employs to make sense of his life journey, without which Jacob would not be able to explain his narrative identity or the choices he has made. For example, already from the beginning of the narrative, “love” is identified as the central element motivating his personal engagement with Israel. His passionate “love at first sight” scene is identified as the reason for his decision to quit his job in Sweden, his return to Israel, and his subsequent determination to join the IDF.

Consequently, it is crucial to point out that in Jacob’s story *emotion* rather than theological *reason* (in the form of covenant theology, biblical prophecy, or fidelity to Scripture) is the explicit point of departure for his pro-Israeli engagement. This theme recurs throughout the narrative. Even the (theo-)logical *rationale* of Jacob’s life story is explained in terms of love: “I love God and God loves Israel, and that is the way I see it. Consequently, I say, okay, if I love God, then I ought to also love Israel.”³⁰ Love of Israel and the Jewish people is not a unique theme for Jacob; Christian Zionists often explicitly identify with the philo-Semitic tradition and claim

30. J2011, 2.

that their political and social action on behalf of Israeli society is the concrete expression of this love.³¹ Love is, however, a vague term that can signify much, and “love” is applied differently in different areas in Jacob’s narrative. So how shall we understand the protagonist’s love of Israel?

One hermeneutical key occurs in a passage where Jacob tries to make sense of his “conversion” from pacifist to prospective soldier. Here, Jacob compares Israel to a “sick child”—not in the sense that there is something infantile or pathological in the Israeli national character (the source of the sickness in the metaphor is clearly external: Palestinian violence), but in the sense that he felt that being in the Sar-El was not enough to bring lasting “healing” to Israel. Being involved in the Sar-El was like treating the symptoms “to give your [sick] child a glass of cold water.” What he really felt called to do was stop the violence from occurring in the first place, and this meant joining the military and serving at the front.

The metaphor of Israel as a “child” is useful also for understanding his love discourse. Whenever Jacob discusses Israeli military violence (often in sharp contrast to Palestinian violence), it is interpreted as *imperfection* (while Palestinian violence is depicted as evil, or described as carried out by “people who only want to kill”).³² However imperfect the Israeli military is (“they are not totally perfect, they make mistakes”)³³ and the Jewish people are (“they are just as corrupt as we non-Jews”),³⁴ his love and dedication to Israel are unshakable. This gives the impression that Israel is not evaluated according to its deeds or its national character; his love for Israel is not a *consequence* of its nature, at least not solely. Rather, Israel is loved regardless of its

31. The same point is argued by Stephen Spector in *Evangelicals and Israel: The Story of American Christian Zionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 29–31.

32. J2011, 5.

33. J2011, 4.

34. J2011, 17. From the context it is clear that the corruption that Jacob refers to is theological.

character. In other words, his love for Israel is *unconditional*, like the love for a child.

In a sense, Jacob's love for Israel is also an expression of his Christian discipleship. The central narrative pattern of calling, test of faith, confirmation is bound together by the notions of love and duty: "I felt that I *ought* to be here, and I also felt a *love* for the country; these are the two things I felt by then."³⁵ The protagonist in the story is a servant, a caretaker, a "helper" of the Jewish people. But through his activity of "blessing" Israel, he also expresses his love for—and his devotion to—God. For Jacob, love for Israel and love of God are not only logically consistent; they seem to mutually reinforce each other. He loves Israel *because* God "put Israel on his heart," and his love for God is concretized and expressed through his life journey in Israeli society. In Jacob's story, Israel is the very place to experience God, as a locus for evangelical self-expression.

The theme of love and the virtue of simple faith are summarized in Jacob's self-description. Asked to identify a unifying theme for his life story, Jacob immediately answers, "*a fool for Christ*."³⁶ This Pauline allusion³⁷ seems almost unbelievably apt to describe Jacob's story, and it is well in line with the general narrative pattern of calling, test of faith, confirmation. In his subsequent explication of this theme, it becomes clear that, for him, it means to expect the impossible from God, to "allow God to be God."³⁸ This is an implicit reference to the argument Karl Barth had with liberal theology, a theology that Barth believed divinized human thinking and morals. Later on, conservative theologians picked up this theological approach from Barth in an attempt to counter liberal theological forces. For Jacob,

35. J2011, 2.

36. J2011, 18.

37. 1 Cor. 1:18, 23; 4:10. Jacob does not explicitly refer to the Bible or to the apostle Paul.

38. J2011, 19.

similarly, the “fool for Christ” is a metaphor of love and simple faith. By applying the term to his narrative self, he points to the centrality of those virtues in the interpretation of his narrative identity.

So far, there has been a harmonious relationship between Jacob’s narrative identity and common Christian Zionist themes. Jacob’s story about a Christian who decides to join the IDF out of his love for Israel captures core Christian Zionist ideals and values. Furthermore, he has clearly internalized large parts of the Zionist narrative and identifies his Christian identity as crucial to understand his pro-Israeli activism. This harmony, however, is disrupted as Jacob starts to discuss concrete politics and biblical prophecy. In the final part of the analysis, I will examine these tensions between Jacob’s narrative identity and the grand narrative of Christian Zionism. I propose that this disruption can be understood as an identity negotiation between Jacob’s narrative identity as a lover of Israel,³⁹ on the one hand, and his identity as a bridge-builder on the other.

Negotiating with the Master Story of Christian Zionism

Themes of biblical prophecy commonly identified with Christian Zionism have not yet surfaced in the analysis. This is because in Jacob’s narrative he only confesses a belief in biblical prophecy at one point, and even then it is in passing. Except for this reference, biblical prophecy, dispensationalist philosophy of history, and end-time scenarios seem altogether peripheral to Jacob’s narrative identity. Even if biblical prophecy was a prominent theme in his religious socialization before he came to Israel, he doesn’t mention

39. Even when asked explicitly after the interview, Jacob refused to label himself a “Zionist” because he believes it can be misunderstood and because he dislikes labels in general. However, I have chosen to use this term, as many of Jacob’s beliefs are clearly related to Christian Zionism.

this in his story; his version of Christian Zionism, as it appears in his life story, is much more down-to-earth.

Surprised by this apparent absence of apocalypticism, I ask him, once he has finished his narrative, what he believes about biblical prophecy with regard to Israel. His answer is consistent with his down-to-earth approach to theology and faith: “[To] theorize [about biblical prophecy], oh, that is fun . . . to sit down with a beer . . . [with] your friends and, you know, talk . . . God has given us the prophecies, there is a cause for that, but people go a lot into detail.”⁴⁰ Some things, he claims, we know to be true—for example, that the creation of the modern-day State of Israel was an eschatological event—but it is problematic to speculate too much about the end times. He definitely believes that God has a plan for the end times that is related to the modern-day State of Israel, a plan that includes the rebuilding of a third temple. He also mentions the parable of the fig tree in Matthew 24⁴¹—which has been applied by Hal Lindsey, among others, to the creation of the State of Israel—as an argument for the validity of biblical prophecy. All these beliefs should qualify him as a Christian Zionist in the traditional sense of the term, even if he seems to consider apocalyptic speculation as a theme better dealt with in the bar than in the pulpit.

The master narrative of Christian Zionism, which clearly constitutes one of the building blocks in Jacob’s narrative identity, prescribes the role of the Christian as a facilitator of the Jewish return to, and the continued well-being of Jews in, Israel. Generally, in the Christian Zionist narrative there is not much space for a Palestinian

40. J2011, 16.

41. “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matt. 24:32-35).

people (or state) other than as an obstacle to the return of the Messiah. Jacob, however, claims to support a two-state solution and to carry no animosity toward Palestinians. Furthermore, he is involved in Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation programs and considers himself a “bridge-builder.”⁴² These two aspects of Jacob’s narrative identity seem hard to combine. How does Jacob negotiate his identity to encompass a Christian Zionist approach that seems to make little room for peace with the Palestinians and his professed dedication to peace-building and reconciliation?

To address this question, we need to take a closer look at one passage where this negotiation occurs. The narrative context of this passage is Jacob’s current attempt to understand more about the Middle East conflict, particularly, he claims, the Palestinian perspective. Interestingly, Jacob cites Thomas Aquinas in an attempt to reconcile his identity:

He [Aquinas] had a theory of two swords. And I very much believe, in line with that theory, that we are Christian soldiers, I mean *spiritually*, but we live in the world also. So, I am a soldier in the Israeli army, and now I [try to become] more and more involved in diplomacy. But I am still a Christian. So, I pray for the salvation of people and things like that. But both things are important to me. I am a Christian soldier—I mean a *spiritual soldier*—and faith is very important to me. But I also believe that you just can’t, like some Christians and many Jews do, say that, “Ahh, God has given us this country!” And [that] “the West Bank is also given to us from God.” I try to see, okay, I believe that God has prophecies, if he prophesies that Israel will be restored again, I definitely believe [so], because we are here. . . . I believe that Israel is, modern-day Israel is from God. It is not perfect; it is still being led by corrupt people. God’s plan is that Israel shall exist, but where the final borders are to be drawn, if it will be with or without the West Bank [I don’t know]. My focus, why I joined the army was to protect Israel and to protect the Israelis, Arabs

42. In the paragraph quoted above, this term only refers to the improvement of Jewish-Christian and Israeli-Western relations, quite similar to “Bridges for Peace” understanding of bridge-building. In other passages, however, Jacob applies this term to Israeli-Palestinian relations.

and Jews alike, [to] protect the Israeli population. But if you ask me personally, I believe in a two-state solution, because you can't just say, "Well, it is [in] the Bible that there will be an Israel." But the borders are not stated there. Some people say, "Like Solomon's [kingdom]." Okay, does that imply that we should start a war with Lebanon? And invade Lebanon because God has [told us so]? I am not a person that wants to start wars to fulfill something I believe is a divine prophecy. If it is a [true] prophecy from God, it will happen anyway. But I don't believe that God says, "Go to war! In the name of God! Go to war to occupy the land!" Sure, he said that to Joshua, okay, but ehh, I can't see that right now at least. It's the same thing with Syria; it was also a part of Solomon's [kingdom]. I view the West Bank in the same way . . . the Palestinians live there! So my hope is: two countries, with Arabs living in Israel and Jews living in Pal—future Palestine,⁴³ and we live in peace."⁴⁴

Jacob's discourse on the separation of the spiritual from the worldly sphere in this quotation does not really reflect the medieval doctrine of the two swords, which predates Thomas Aquinas. Jacob's discourse is in fact more in line with the Protestant doctrine of two governments (the spiritual and the worldly) than medieval theories of the separation of political power. However, the point here is to investigate how Jacob employs this "theory" to make sense of his dual identities.

Jacob confesses on the one hand his belief in biblical prophecies, that God is the cause behind the modern-day restoration of the State of Israel, and (once again) his dedication to protect Israeli citizens. On the other hand, he affirms his hope for a two-state solution and his disagreement with warmongering Christians and Jews who claim that God's biblical promise also includes Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank. Furthermore, he moves back and forth between these two beliefs—sometimes within the same sentence—most particularly with his references to Solomon's ancient kingdom and Joshua. At

43. It is interesting to note that every time Jacob mentions Palestine referring to the contemporary situation, he corrects himself by adding, "future Palestine."

44. J2011, 14.

the end of the discourse, it is not entirely clear what Jacob believes about the future of the West Bank, or more exactly, *why* he claims to support a two-state solution. By framing the discourse within the “theory of the two swords,” however, Jacob connects his different, conflicting identities to different realms of governance. His religious identity is connected to the spiritual realm (“We are Christian soldiers, I mean, spiritually”) and his identity as a bridge-builder to the worldly sphere (“But we live in the world also”).

It is clear that within the grand narrative of Christian Zionism, he finds no support for his dedication to peace building and his will to “surrender” the West Bank to Palestinian rule. Time and again in the passage, Jacob tries to break free from what he seems to experience as a nonconstructive, arrogant approach to the conflict, a move that he legitimizes theologically: “I don’t believe that God says, ‘Go to war! In the name of God! Go to war to occupy the land!’” Yet this move is difficult for him to integrate with his religious identity as Christian Zionist discourses continue to execute influence on his narrative identity construction: “Sure, he said that to Joshua, okay, but I can’t see that right now at least.”

The Christian Zionist discourse-in-practice seems to *condition* but never entirely *determine* Jacob’s discourse. The influence of the grand narrative, furthermore, seems to operate both constructively and restrictively on Jacob’s attempt to form an integrated narrative identity. It suggests possible interpretations (constructive) but also limits his attempt to express his dedication to a two-state solution (restrictive). Nevertheless, ultimately it allows enough freedom of movement for Jacob to reflect on different ways forward. In the end, the tension is never entirely resolved, and Jacob’s attempt to reconcile his narrative identities⁴⁵ ends up in what could be called

45. For a discussion on unity vs. multiplicity in life stories, see McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich, chapters 1–4.

a *compartmentalization* of identity. By understanding his identity in light of “Thomas Aquinas’s theory of two swords,” Jacob partly disconnects his bridge-building identity from the spiritual sphere. As such, bridge-building for him primarily represents a pragmatic, secular activity, and yet one that is central in his identity construction.

Conclusion

The life narrative of Jacob illustrates the extraordinary length to which an individual who identifies with the Christian Zionist narrative is prepared to go to protect the chosen people. Yet Jacob’s story also shows a great amount of negotiation with the Christian Zionist narrative. The Christian story of the Jewish return serves as an anchor of identity for him, yet the chain is long enough to provide plenty of room for discursive movement in the particularities. It also shows the distance between the normative form of a master story and its reception. Rather than simply internalizing and retelling the Christian Zionist narrative that Jacob had presumably heard since childhood, he is involved in an intense process of *narrative engagement*⁴⁶ with this story. Some themes of the story seem nonnegotiable (particularly the belief in the divine hand behind the Zionist movement, the identification between the scriptural Israelites and modern-day Israelis, and the uniqueness of this people), while others are open to negotiation (the specific plan of the end times, the borders of the promised land). This is an example of the contested meaning of Christian Zionism. As a religious movement, it encompasses a multiplicity of individuals with different theological beliefs, moral values, political agendas, and interpretations of their

46. Philip L. Hammack, *Narrative and the Politics of Identity: The Cultural Psychology of Israeli and Palestinian Youth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 22.

religious tradition. At the very least, Jacob’s example should caution us about generalizing too broadly about Christian Zionism and the beliefs held by members of this movement.

In accordance with the theoretical perspective employed here, I will not offer any generalized conclusion to this analysis. Instead, I would like to point to three areas where the study of *lived* Christian Zionism could enrich the study of Christian Zionism as a whole. First, many writings on Christian Zionism have emphasized the theological distance between this worldview and Christian tradition—how Christian Zionism as an “ideology” has departed from Christianity by emphasizing the continued validity of the Jewish covenant, a dispensationalist reading of the Bible, and by supporting the State of Israel on Christian theological grounds.⁴⁷ Partly this is due, I believe, to these writers’ own normative views about what Christianity is and what it should be. In my reading of Jacob, I have instead emphasized how his “Zionism” seems to be an integral part of his Christian identity. For him, being a soldier in the Golani Brigade is to follow his Christian calling. Being a soldier in the IDF is for him a righteous, moral, transformative, emotional, and highly spiritual experience; as a soldier in the Golani Brigade he is experiencing God. Without recognizing this rather obvious point and what it means for the study of Christian Zionism, there is a risk of oversimplifying the phenomenon. Jacob is first and foremost a Pentecostal Christian and

47. For example, Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Roadmap to Armageddon?* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2004); Gary M. Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told About Israel and the Palestinians* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003); Donald Wagner, *Anxious for Armageddon: A Call to Partnership for Middle Eastern and Western Christians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995); Grace Halsell, *Forcing God’s Hand: Why Millions Pray for a Quick Rapture and Destruction of Planet Earth* (Beltsville: Amana, 2003); Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land? The Continuing Crisis over Israel and Palestine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); Naim Ateek, “Introduction to Challenging Christian Zionism,” in *Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics and the Israel-Palestine Conflict*, ed. Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis, and Maurine Tobin (London: Sabeel Liberation Theology Center Jerusalem, 2005), 13–19.

only secondly a Zionist. His Zionism is understood, experienced, and expressed through his Christian identity.

Second, as was pointed out in my reading of Jacob's life story, the Rapture, various end-time scenarios, and apocalypticism in general played a peripheral and indirect role in his narrative identity formation. One possible interpretation of this might be his Swedish cultural background and the generally disenchanting atmosphere in Sweden; even within Pentecostal churches in Sweden apocalyptic theologies and elaborate end-times scenarios are not very common. Yet the self-evident character of his understanding of the role of Israel in God's master plan suggests the importance of biblical prophecy as a framework for interpretation. To explore this theme further, and to determine whether Jacob is an isolated case or he represents a changing emphasis in Christian Zionism in Israel and globally from the future to the here and now, we need to examine the precise social and psychological role of apocalypticism in contemporary Christian Zionism in its various contexts and expressions.

Finally, until now much research related to the consequences of Christian Zionist belief and practice has focused on the ideological level.⁴⁸ Perhaps this is because so much of the literature is produced in the United States, where the political influence of Christian Zionism has been the strongest. On a more individual level, however, academic research has been sparse. Christian Zionism constitutes a unique social world—a hermeneutical lens through which events

48. For example, Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The Politics of Apocalypse: The History and Influence of Christian Zionism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006); Rammy M. Haija, "The Armageddon Lobby: Dispensationalist Christian Zionism and the Shaping of US Policy Towards Israel-Palestine," *Holy Land Studies* 5:1 (2006): 75–95; Clifford A. Kiracofe, *Dark Crusade: Christian Zionism and US Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Timothy Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Stephen Zunes, "The Influence of the Christian Right in US Middle East Policy," in *Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics and the Israel-Palestine Conflict*, ed. Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis, and Maurine Tobin (London: Sabeel Liberation Theology Center Jerusalem, 2005), 108–120.

in the world makes sense. From this perspective, Christian Zionist devotees are *literally* living in the end times. The confessional, emotional, psychological, and intellectual consequences of inhabiting this world can be examined through ethnographic practice. Conducting research in that direction would, I believe, greatly enhance our understanding of the attraction of contemporary Christian Zionism.