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Walking on the Pages of the Word of God

Self, Land, and Text Among Evangelical Volunteers in Jerusalem

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Walking on the Pages of the Word of God

Self, Land, and Text Among Evangelical Volunteers in Jerusalem

ARON ENGBERG

CENTRE FOR THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES | LUND UNIVERSITY



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Self, Land, and Text Among Evangelical Volunteers in Jerusalem

Aron Engberg



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To Liv and Lovisa

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There are people that are tremendously spiritual, like they spiritualize absolutely everything—I'm not sure if you understand what I mean? And yet, here [in Israel], *it's just more real*. I don't consider that those were Bible times [before]; I consider that we're in Bible times [now] and that we're literally *walking on the pages of the Word of God*.

Karen, 2013

1. Introduction

Jerusalem, October 10th 2011, Thursday, 19:30

It is a special night in *Binyenei HaUma*, the International Convention Center in western Jerusalem. There is great excitement in the air as multi-colored spotlights slice through the hall accompanied by a massive soundscape of catchy Evangelical praise music. On stage, the songs are performed by a highly professional 25-piece orchestra and choir, while the 6,000-strong Evangelical audience contributes to the atmosphere by singing the lyrics projected onto three huge television screens that flank the stage. It is the early stages of fieldwork and I have chosen a spot up on the higher balcony with my audio recorder and note book, looking down in fascination at the gathered Evangelicals that are here for the opening night of the Feast of Tabernacles 2011. The theme of this year's conference is "Israel – light of the Nations": a title which, according to the accompanying booklet, speaks to the "enormous blessings which emanated from the people of Israel out to the gentiles" and the debt of gratitude that gentiles owe the Jewish people.¹ From the stage Jürgen Bühler, the newly appointed executive director of the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ), announces, "Salvation came from Israel".

The steady flow of praise music is interrupted as the flags of all the represented countries are paraded, each accompanied by a cheer from a section of the audience as their own national symbol appears on stage. In my notebook I reach a total of 80-something different flags, from all continents, before a major roar from the gathered Christians erupts as the *Degel Yisra'el* enters the stage. As the band resumes playing and the crowd of Evangelicals stretches their hands towards the heavens in praise I, slightly bewildered by the performance, reflect upon what brings all these Christians from so many countries together here, and what occasions this massive show of solidarity and support. A dance company in traditional-looking Jewish clothing whirls over the stage in a performance that symbolically connects the founding of the state in 1948 with themes centered on

¹ Welcoming text by executive director Jürgen Bühler, Feast of the Tabernacles program 2011, p. 7. Published by the ICEJ.

restoration and rebirth. It is a professionally choreographed and highly entertaining spectacle, more resembling a gala event or the Eurovision Song Contest than any charismatic service that I have ever had the chance to visit before. It is a powerful manifestation of the energy and momentum of an emerging global Christian movement.

As I leave the event, I am unable to find a taxi driver willing to take me all the way from the convention center in West Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives in the eastern part of town where I rent a room at the Augusta Victoria. Instead the driver drops me off by the Damascus gate and leaves me to walk the last kilometers up the hill by the northern side of the Old Town wall, the valley of *Al-Sawana*, and through the Arab neighborhoods that climb the slope of the Mount of Olives. As I stroll through the more-or-less silent Jerusalem quarters the sense of wonder still has not left me and I return to my previous musings: What is it about Israel that invokes such strong religious emotions? What is it that makes thousands of Evangelicals travel here to express their solidarity with a state, its culture, and its politics, a state to which they do not belong?

Empirically speaking, there is something enchanting about Israel. Throughout the centuries, the land has occupied an important place in the religious imaginaries not only of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, but also of Bahá'ís, Samaritans, Rastafaris, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, African Hebrew Israelites, and many other groups. The land is profoundly intertwined in the religious narratives of several of the world's major religions, both as a holy location that God selected as His special dwelling place, and as the locus of the final judgement and the eschatological endgame. These imaginaries have also been enacted in cult and ritual, remembered in testimonies, and praised in liturgies and hymns. In some of these, the "Holy Land" continues to represent a place of particular and unique divine presence. Periodically, Israel has also been a frequent destination for pilgrims from different religious orientations undertaking journeys that were sometimes recorded in text and often in turn became embedded in the cultic use of the land through narrative representation. Historically, however, the land was more often imagined than visited and, outside its borders, often became a mental representation rather than an actual place where people lived and worked. In Christianity, the actual territory to some extent became detached from religious imaginaries and the role it served in religious discourses and practices; the myth often eclipsed the facts (Bowman 1991b). The place also has a considerable history of intermittent religious strife during which religious imaginaries have been translated into a wish for political-territorial control: visible, for instance, in the history of the crusades, as well as in some aspects of the contemporary conflict.

The long religious history of the land is still evident in Jerusalem to the contemporary visitor, not only in the architecture left by different rulers and peoples, but in the multitude of religious, ethnic, and cultural identities that still are represented. In its streets walk Arab Christians and Muslims, Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, Hassidic Jews of different schools and orientations, and Ethiopians, Armenians, Syrians, Serbs, Russians, and of course tourists and pilgrims of all kinds, religious and secular. This multitude of different and sometimes overlapping identities are, Montefiore writes, “the human equivalent to Jerusalem’s layers of stone and dust” (Montefiore 2011, 16). Some of these groups have lived here for many generations, some for decades, and some are recent immigrants but all these different religious and ethnic identities leave a mark on Jerusalem’s townscape and all have different stories to tell about the city and its special significance.

A relative newcomer to Jerusalem’s mosaic of religious identities is that of Evangelical “friends of Israel”, or what have come to be known as “Christian Zionists” among journalists and researchers. People from this group of Christians—predominantly from Evangelical and / or Charismatic backgrounds—travel to Israel not only because this is the land where Jesus walked, but also because this is the land of the “restoration”. Here God, in the 20th century, restored His special people to the land where they belong, and here Jesus is expected to come again sometime in the near future. For Christian Zionists, Jerusalem’s significance is derived not only from its biblical past but also from its present and expected glorious future.

The contemporary trend of Evangelical travel to Israel is substantial; Faydra L. Shapiro reports that the Israeli Ministry for Tourism “estimates that Evangelical Christians account for a third of American visitors to Israel” (2008, 308). But Americans are far from the only Evangelical visitors; they also come from Europe and increasingly from countries in the Global South: Nigeria, Brazil, Colombia, and the Philippines. Evangelicals often travel to Israel as part of different “biblical” or “prophecy” tours that are tailored to help travellers simultaneously visualize the biblical narratives and the role that Israel will play in the eschatological future (Feldman 2011). Some Evangelicals, however, are not satisfied with taking occasional biblical tours to Israel but instead come to live in the country more permanently as volunteer workers for one of the many international Christian ministries in Jerusalem. These Evangelical volunteers work in many different areas: giving aid to the poorer segments of Israeli society, helping in elderly homes for holocaust survivors, assisting Jewish immigration, or undertaking media and advocacy work. Some of them stay for months, some for years, and some of them go back and forth between their home country and

Israel as part of an annual schedule. They see their voluntary work as a practical expression of the love and appreciation they feel towards the Jewish people and Israel, sometimes as a way to participate in sacred history, but almost always as an answer to God's individual calling. This book is about them.

Walking on the Pages of the Word of God

During the last thirty years, the Evangelical relationship with Israel has drawn much academic and popular attention. Early academic research which focused on this relationship emerged primarily from theological circles that were openly antagonistic towards Christian Zionism, and generally interpreted the phenomenon as a theological departure from sound Protestant doctrine and tradition: a politicization of the gospel rooted in (mis-)interpretations of biblical prophecies (Burge 2003, Chapman 2002, Halsell 2003, Sizer 2004, Wagner 1995, Weber 2004). Later historical works have often criticized this writing as overly ideological, while at the same time keeping the analytic lens focused on *discontinuity* and the historical development of specific prophetic traditions that have been seen as the main explanatory factor for contemporary Evangelical affinity with Israel (Carenen 2012, Lewis 2010, Smith 2013, Spector 2009, Stewart 2015). Recently, some attempts have also been made to bring this later research together into a more coherent and defined field of inquiry (Gunner and Smith 2014).

The vast majority of these historical works on Christian Zionism have shared a concern with explaining the growth and development of the phenomenon, often, in order to account for its impact on American political culture. Thus, to date, the most influential works have focused on the "roots" of Christian Zionism, creating a historical narrative which, it is felt, explains contemporary manifestations (Lewis 2010, Smith 2013, Weber 2004). While some of these have been very important in revealing some of the theological and hermeneutical currents underlying the development of Christian Zionism, and the extent to which these ideas have permeated North American political discourse, this research tradition has had very little to say about how Christian Zionists experience their dedication to Israel today, and how this particular orientation relates to Evangelical religious forms more broadly. For a more ethnographically oriented observer such academic representations of Christian Zionism also leave many questions unanswered: To what extent can early 20th century prophecy beliefs account for the religious importance many contemporary Evangelicals

ascribe to Israel? In what ways are the views of the leading figures also representative of individual believers? What role or roles does Israel play in the formation of Evangelical identities? How does the encounter with Israel as an empirical reality shape Evangelical faith and practice? What are the continuities and discontinuities between broader Evangelical traditions and contemporary manifestations of Christian Zionism? As Hillary Kaell (2014) has recently noted, research that has taken Christian Zionism as its explicit object of study has often prioritized top-down approaches, focused on people in leading positions, and emphasized prophecy-derived politics and the impact of Christian Zionism on American foreign policy towards the Middle East.

Since I began this project, a largely separate and—in quantitative terms—much more limited strand of ethnographic research on the Evangelical relationship with Israel has also developed. The most important works in this field have approached the relationship primarily through the anthropology of pilgrimage (Feldman 2016, Kaell 2014) or inter-religious relations (Shapiro 2015). These works have generally provided a welcome remedy to the dominance of top-down approaches in studies of Christian Zionism, and often provided more sympathetic accounts of Evangelicals engaged with (and in) Israel. As a fieldwork-based project set among Evangelicals in Israel, this project is closely related to these ethnographic accounts but also contributes an original perspective via its focus on the discursive practices and linguistic ideologies of Evangelicals who have profound and extended religious engagements with Israel. This discussion focuses on Israel not only as a place but also as a religious category in itself, and the ways in which this category is integrated with, and negotiated in, Evangelical faith and practice.² Faydra L. Shapiro (2015), who also takes Christian Zionism as her explicit object of study, has conceptualized the phenomenon as a new—and particularly Evangelical—iteration of ways to navigate the “Jewish-Christian border” which has been so troubled historically. This approach has benefits, but in my view does not sufficiently address Christian Zionism in relation to the forms of religion from which it emerges, and the ways in which it is confronted with the need to negotiate parts of this

² Since a fundamental feature of these discursive practices is the multi-layered, opaque, and symbolically loaded meaning of “Israel” it is not always analytically possible or even beneficial to terminologically separate Israel as a state from Israel as a nation, as a land, or as a people in the text. Sometimes I employ a distinction between “Israel-of-the-Bible” and “Israel-of-today”, while at the same time recognizing that these two concepts are fundamentally and often unambiguously connected by the Evangelical voices herein. When I have been able to, I have made such terminological distinctions, but in other cases I have followed the “emic” use of “Israel” as a consciously multilayered concept. I hope that what I lose in terminological clarity by this choice will be outweighed by what I gain analytically.

heritage. The border-crossing tendencies of Evangelical Christians engaged with Israel is not only a reordering of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism but also a more fundamental reordering of the ways in which God is understood to relate to the world. Were it not so, I suspect, it would not give rise to so much controversy within and outside academia.

Part of the cause of the problems outlined above is that most previous studies of Christian Zionism have been largely disconnected from broader conversations about contemporary forms of Evangelicalism taking place in other disciplines, particularly in the emerging Anthropology of Christianity (Cannell 2005, Engelke and Tomlinson 2006a, Jenkins 2012, Robbins 2007). This has left this strand of research poorly equipped to move beyond totalizing characterizations of Christian Zionism as a particular configuration of beliefs centered on biblical prophecy and textual literalism, thereby failing to account for the sociocultural dynamics by which Israel becomes integrated as a central part of Evangelical faith and practice. On the other hand, anthropologists that have participated in this conversation have so far paid very limited attention to how Evangelicals relate to the state of Israel, and what this relationship might have to say about Evangelicalism more broadly. This is a somewhat surprising silence considering both the religious importance many Evangelicals ascribe to Israel, and the relevance this relationship has for many of the theoretical questions that have defined this field of inquiry. As Jon Bialecki and Eric Hoenes del Pinal have recently argued (2011), one of the most sustained and productive areas in the Anthropology of Christianity has been language use and the ways that “language ideologies” and discursive practices shape experiences of faith, agency, and identity. Language ideologies, generally understood as “a culturally determined, historically grounded set of interpretative standards” (Parmentier 1994, 142), enable the interpretation of signs and their functions in the world. Protestant ideologies are naturally actualized, but also negotiated in relation to Israel’s peculiar role as a signifier of divine intent. As I demonstrate throughout this thesis, for many Evangelicals contemporary Israel is understood to have a unique relationship with the biblical text and with God, a relationship which must be recognized by anyone who holds to principles of scriptural fidelity and God’s active involvement in history. This means that whatever else it is, Israel is also a religious category that is constructed by discursive means, particularly through an ongoing attempt to relate the state, its national ideology, and events in Israeli history to Christian narratives. This process involves questions of biblical reading practices and the meanings of signs and their social functions, and it invites Evangelical Zionists to negotiate the proper location of human and divine agency as well as the relationship between materiality and divine presence.

The aim of this project is to describe this process as it occurs in the discursive practices of Evangelical volunteer workers as well as to explain what it contributes to the construction of Evangelical faith and identity.

Walking on the Pages of the Word of God brings two areas of research into conversation with each other through an in-depth ethnographic account of Evangelicals working in Israel and their stories about themselves, the land, and the biblical text. In doing so, this project contributes both to the emerging ethnographic research about Christian Zionism *and* to the current anthropological conversation about the forms and functions of Protestant language ideologies. The project is based on fieldwork carried out between September 2011 and May 2013 among volunteers at three Christian ministries in Jerusalem – the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ), the Bridges for Peace (BFP), and the Christian Friends of Israel (CFI) – all of which consider their work in Israel a natural consequence of biblical promises to Israel and their responsibility as Christians to “bless the Jewish people”. Throughout fieldwork I spent time at the organizations’ headquarters and at other venues where the volunteers gather in Jerusalem: messianic congregations, evangelical workshops and conferences, bus tours in “Judea and Samaria”, sports events, cafés, and bars. I also conducted around thirty in-depth life story interviews with the volunteers and with some of the organizations’ leaders.

Since the narratives of the volunteers are the primary focus of the project, relatively little attention will be paid to the Christian Zionist ministries as institutions, their internal and external power dynamics, their role as domestic and international actors, and the ideological and theological distinctions between them. In Chapter Two I present a brief history of how they have developed in relation to Israeli society and Christian discourses but this narrative is largely offered to provide a context for the volunteers’ stories. Similarly, the actual work of the volunteers and the organizations is not examined here in any depth; while I have spent time at all three organizations and in some cases taken part in their work, this participant observation was not extensive enough to form the basis of profound analysis. Interesting as these questions are, they will have to be left for another project.

Instead I primarily rely on an up-close portrait of the discursive practices of the volunteers to explore a central problem of Zionist Christianity: the narrative production of Israel’s religious significance and its relationship to Protestant language ideologies. In other words, I take Christian Zionism as a legitimate object of academic study but at the same time consider the continuities and discontinuities between this phenomenon and Evangelicalism more broadly a question of empirical investigation. Meanwhile, even though I opt for close,

qualitative readings rather than a broad quantitative sample, the voices explored in the following chapters should not be understood as isolated cases. A central part of my argument is that these voices—albeit highly personal and individual—draw extensively on culturally salient narrative traditions in their effort to make sense of Israel, the world, and their own place in it. Through an exploration of the volunteers’ narrative practices, broader themes about this tradition become visible and light is cast on the ways in which it both emerges from—and also renegotiates—Evangelical religious forms.

Towards an Ethnography of Christian Zionism

While designing and conducting this project it has not been uncommon for my choice of topic to meet with surprise, reluctance, and even disapproval from friends and colleagues: why would I want to study “crazy fundamentalists” who conflate a literalist understanding of the Bible with territorial rights and right-wing political policies? Why would I want to engage in an area of research that is so permeated by ideology that whatever terms one uses, whatever narratives one tells, one is bound to be identified with one or the other end of the political spectrum? In fact, does not this ever-presence of ideology make a nuanced picture of a phenomenon—particularly *this* phenomenon—nigh on impossible?

To some extent I believe these objections reflect what Susan Harding has described as a modernist bias against the wrong kind of “cultural otherness” in her well-known essay “Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other” (1991). Harding was perhaps the first to direct the spotlight onto the antagonism between modern academia and fundamentalist or conservative Christianity, as well as some of the difficulties this antagonism presented for ethnographers, but since then several other researchers have reported and discussed similar issues (Coleman 2015, Dalsheim 2013, Howell 2007). In her article, Harding articulates a strong argument for the need for more nuanced, local, and partial accounts of the fundamentalist Other that could successfully deconstruct “the totalizing opposition between us and them” (Harding 1991, 393). However, as Simon Coleman has recently pointed out, at the same time she also commits—perhaps somewhat in tension with her de-totalizing aim—to “the project of designing effective strategies to oppose the positions and policies advocated by conservative Christians” (Coleman 2015, 277). Harding’s project of nuancing representations of the “fundamentalist

Other” is framed as an instrument for more sound, and perhaps more effective, political judgement.

While I certainly share Harding’s assessment of the need for nuanced and de-totalizing accounts of conservative Christianities I am less inclined to perceive this task as one in the service of a more effective politics *vis à vis* such belief systems. In this work I am neither interested in criticizing nor defending Christian Zionist understandings of the Bible, of theological tradition, of Israel, or of the content of “proper” Christian politics. Although I personally do not share many of their understandings in these particular areas, I am genuinely interested in exploring how they imagine the relationship between the biblical text and the world, and I try to represent their perspectives as fairly and honestly as I can.

A second aspect of the wariness of academic colleagues arises more specifically from the context of Israel / Palestine, and especially from the problems associated both with intractable conflict and with the potency of this particular conflict in the Western religio-political imagination. It is frequently assumed, often implicitly or even unconsciously, that wanting to study this context is somehow *different* from an interest in other contexts: that the interest ultimately emerges not from academic concerns but from political motives or some hidden ideological agenda. However, while it is not difficult to find scholarly accounts dealing with this context that privilege certain narratives over others, or that are overly embedded in ideological discourses, *generally speaking*, this presupposition seems to me unfounded. I do not mean to deny that researchers come to this field with pre-suppositions, with understandings of right and wrong, with political, religious, and cultural subject positions and identities that structure research and interpretations in particular ways; what I do reject is the inference that this methodological problem is *qualitatively different* in Israel compared to any other geographical or cultural context. To engage with Israel as though it were somehow methodologically unique is, in my opinion, a position that easily lends itself to the very same cultural dynamics that have historically guided Western representations of the Jewish people as fundamentally different from other peoples, as possessing an identity defined by a cosmological otherness (Bauman 1998, 2009, Haynes 1995). While these historical traditions certainly play a role in Christian Zionist understandings of Israel, and thus are included in the following discussion, the analytic perspective taken here is that uniqueness is something that is produced through discursive processes, not an inherent quality of any people or situation.

At the same time, empirical contexts subsuming ongoing armed struggles and contested historical narratives tend to be permeated with ideology, and present

particular problems that call for reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Fran Markowitz et al. (2013a) have described some of these problems—such as the politics of language, the influence of religious and political subject positions, and the profound entanglement of the “religious” and the “political”—in the fine anthology *Ethnographic Encounters in Israel*. How such questions are approached impacts on how an observer both perceives and presents religious as well as political identities, the terms chosen for these identities, and how they are explained or analyzed. My basic approach here is constructivist: I approach all identities and boundaries as performed and produced in discourse. In relation to Evangelical Zionism this means that I address their discourses about themselves, about the land, and about the biblical text as not merely reflecting a reality but as contributing to the production of that reality. No doubt, such a perspective might also be perceived as ideologically flawed by readers who have invested interest in particular religious identities, and who wish to construct clear boundaries around themselves and others. Nevertheless, this seems to me a better option than to contribute to the essentialization of particular identities, often at the expense of others.

In my case, the interest in Christian Zionism has both a personal and an academic angle to it, which I suppose is the case for most researchers in the humanities and social sciences. I grew up within the Swedish Baptist Church, which is probably best compared to a liberal Evangelical congregation; it put considerable emphasis on the Bible and baptism by immersion, and existed in some small—yet palpable—cultural tension with what at the time was the Swedish national church and wider society. I was baptized as a teenager but, since my mid-twenties, have not been a particularly active member of any congregation. As in many churches in Sweden, Israel had a special significance and invoked a particular interest among members of the congregation. The older generation in my family shared this fascination, could at times mention Bible prophecy, called Yassir Arafat a “horrible terrorist” as soon as he appeared on the 9 o’ clock news, and supported, appreciated, and admired whatever political leadership Israel had at the time. In other words, the State of Israel was considered by some family members both as worthy of special religious interest and as something that should be politically supported. Yet this was never a particularly salient theme and I cannot remember that I ever paid much attention to it in my youth, or could even distinguish Israelis from Palestinians before I grew older and started to become interested in religion in the Middle East.

The academic interest emerges most directly from my interest in inter-religious relations, the relationship between religion and politics, and Evangelical

forms of Christianity, dating particularly from when I was travelling and studying in Lebanon and Israel in the mid-2000s. Through these journeys in the Middle East I came into contact with a wide variety of different Christian opinions about Israel and almost immediately became fascinated with the fact that this particular topic seemed to be able to evoke such strong emotions and opinions on both sides of the fence, something which I recognized from my childhood. This is a fascination that has stayed with me until today and probably accounts for much of the academic interest that underpins this research project. When I later started to examine what was written about Evangelicals and Israel—at that time not very much—I was surprised to find how limited the picture of this relationship was, how much it emphasized a rather obscure eschatological tradition to explain contemporary manifestations, how overtly negative the accounts often were, and how little understanding various authors seemed to have for the nuances, dynamics, and heterogeneity of Evangelicalism. When entering the doctoral program in 2010, I was already determined to conduct field research in Jerusalem, not because I was particularly attached to the place—although I certainly had nothing against it—but because others were, and I was interested in understanding how that came to be.

“Christian Zionism”: Belief and Practice

There are of course numerous cultural, religious and political reasons for a Christian to feel a particular affinity with the State of Israel and the Jewish people: a familiarity and identification with the stories of the Bible; an interest in the land’s long and winding history; a fascination with its character as a meeting place between the “East” and the “West”; a sense of shared “Judeo-Christian” political and moral values; or simply because one is fond of Israeli culture, food, music, and literature. Many Christians have also, like me, grown up with stories of biblical Israel in Sunday Schools and Bible camps, sung about “Israel” in hymns and praise songs, celebrated the occasional *Pesach* in an attempt by Bible school teachers to immerse students in the story-world of the Bible, and encountered the metaphorical use of “Israel” in prayer, theological conversations, and Christian education. Additionally, many churches, at least in the West but also increasingly in the Global South, organize biblical tours to Israel where participants can walk in “Jesus’ footsteps”, visit the biblical sights, and get to know contemporary Israel and the peoples that live there (Kaell 2014). In short, for many Christians probably no other country in the world—

with the possible exception of their own—has the same place in religious imaginaries as Israel.

In relation to how embedded Israel is in Western Christian culture, contemporary academic representations of “Christian Zionism” have struggled to find an analytical space that at the same time limits the area of inquiry and yet does not exclude this vast and vibrant cultural terrain. Although emphases in these representations differ, there have generally been two defining components in academic understandings of Christian Zionism: a particular configuration of *religious beliefs*; and *political action* on behalf of Israel and / or the Zionist movement. The term itself has more than one hundred years of history, first referring to Christians who supported the Zionist movement politically and appearing in the writings of Theodore Herzl who referred to his Christian associates as “Christian Zionists”. Stephen Spector notes that the term was in print as early as 1903 “when it began to appear in the *New York Times*, first in letters to the editor and obituaries, then, twenty years later, in news stories” (Spector 2009, 2). It was probably first used in a scholarly publication in 1919 in Nahum Sokolow’s *History of Zionism 1600-1918* in which he employed the term to describe Christian precursors of Jewish Zionism, in an unusual display of willingness to include Christians in Zionist historiography (Sokolow 1969 [1919]).³ The term surfaces again in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, from 1971-72, in an entry by Yona Malachy where Christian Zionism is simply understood as “the active support of Christians for such a movement [i.e. Zionism]” (Malachy 1971-1972, 2007). Sokolow’s and Malachy’s point of departure was the history of (Jewish) Zionism and, therefore, self-identified Christians who showed sympathy towards the Zionist movement—such as Lord Balfour, Rev. William Hechler, and William E. Blackstone—were understood as “Christian Zionists”.

Throughout the 1900s, the term also had weight amongst Christians who identified with the phenomenon. For instance, a partly similar understanding to that held by the historians of Zionism was also demonstrated by the circle surrounding the Christian Embassy. During the ‘80s two “Christian Zionist Congresses” were organized by the ICEJ: the first in Basel in 1985—in the same hall as Theodore Herzl had convened the first Zionist congress almost a century

³ In contrast Shimoni (1995) employs the term “restorationist” when describing Christian supporters of the Zionist movement. Considering the scope and detail of his history of Zionism, the Christian restorationists play a very limited role in his account and are frequently dismissed as rather unimportant for the larger picture. While acknowledging that the subject await further research Shimoni sums up the Christian contribution with “in our present state of knowledge, at any rate, a comprehensive historical explanation of the genesis of Zionist ideology can assign to the Christian restorationists no more than a peripheral role” (Shimoni 1995, 64-65).

earlier—and the second one three years later in Jerusalem. The third and fourth conferences were also held in Jerusalem in 1996 and in 2001, but the latter had changed the central term to “Biblical Zionism”: a terminological variation that reflects both an awareness of the polemical use of the term that had emerged in some theological circles in the late ‘80s-‘90s, and a willingness to emphasize the *biblical roots* of Zionism. Among workers at the ICEJ and the other Christian Zionist ministries in Jerusalem these terms continue to be used more or less interchangeably, primarily to denote a particular religious orientation within Evangelicalism that identifies with Zionism.

Early understandings of Christian Zionism, both among insiders and observers, thus emphasized Christian *political action* on behalf of the Zionist movement, but rarely expounded on what made these activities “Christian” beyond the obvious fact that they were practiced by self-proclaimed Christians. Even though for the ICEJ and other Christians who identified with the term it was always implicit that this support was derived directly from their readings of the Bible, the category “Christian” was rarely problematized. When the term entered more regular academic usage in the ‘90s, however, this wide application of it led to a shift in definitional emphasis to a particular configuration of beliefs that was understood to *lead* Christians to support Zionism. For instance, Donald Wagner, one of the first who wrote about the ICEJ from an outsider’s—yet essentially polemical—perspective, defined Christian Zionism as “a movement within Protestant fundamentalism that understands the modern state of Israel as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy and thus deserving of political, financial, and religious support” (2003, 12). Part of this semiotic shift is visible in the frequent emphasis on “biblical literalism”—or, in Wagner’s case, “fundamentalism”—and the history of prophecy interpretation that these academic commentators on Christian Zionism saw as constitutive of the phenomenon (Chapman 2002, Sizer 2004, Wagner 1995). This emphasis on religious beliefs also served to distinguish the phenomenon from Evangelical and Protestant culture more broadly, and it is an emphasis that has remained dominant even in recent accounts of Christian Zionism.

As already mentioned, the vast majority of these works have been primarily historical in nature. The dominant narrative in this tradition has traced contemporary Christian Zionism from John Nelson Darby’s Plymouth Brethren in the United Kingdom, before moving on to various Dispensationalist preachers in turn-of-the-century North America—most notably William Eugene Blackstone with his 1891 “Memorial” and C. I. Scofield and his eponymous footnoted Bible editions of 1909 and 1917. The story then typically leaps—more or less abruptly—to Hal Lindsey’s and Carole C. Carson’s *The Late Great*

Planet Earth (1970) and the runaway bestsellers that comprised the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. The general picture painted is one where US Christian Zionism—which is often understood as paradigmatic of Christian Zionism globally—is predominantly prophecy-focused, rather obsessed with Armageddon, essentially political, somehow vaguely sinister, and more or less synonymous with premillennial dispensationalism. However, some recent works have displayed more awareness of problems with this narrative, particularly its dependence on dispensationalism. For instance, Robert O. Smith remarked in his *More Desired than Our Own Salvation* that “American attitudes are informed more by what George Marsden has called ‘cultural fundamentalism’ than by adherence to particular doctrinal systems, including premillennial dispensationalism” (Smith 2013, 27). Shalom Goldman arrived at the same realization in *Zeal for Zion*: “the majority of Evangelicals do not subscribe to dispensationalism; nevertheless they are moved to support Israel, for they see its establishment as the fulfillment of the Biblical promise” (2009, 37, see also: Stewart 2015, Westbrook 2014).

Despite these recent critiques of the paradigmatic focus on dispensationalism in the ideational history of Christian Zionism, most characterizations of the latter still come with an underlying epistemological assumption, namely, that *religious beliefs explain political behavior*. Belief is understood to lead to practice rather than the other way around, something which is often expressed in terms suggesting an unambiguous and transparent causal relation. As a consequence, the political and religious practices of Evangelicals are presented as secondary; they are the outcome of certain propositions. Stephen Spector, for instance, writes that Christian Zionism denotes “Christians whose faith, often in concert with other convictions, emotions, and experiences *leads them to support* the modern state of Israel as the Jewish homeland” (Spector 2009, 3, my emphasis). In Spector’s otherwise nuanced account of contemporary American Christian Zionism the political activity of adherents is taken as a more or less direct application of Darbyite dispensationalism (Westbrook 2014, 65 ff.). Another frequently cited example is Smith’s definition of Christian Zionism as “political action informed by specifically Christian commitments, to promote or preserve Jewish control over the geographic area now comprising Israel and Palestine” (Smith 2013, 2). Admittedly, in Smith’s formulation emphasis has moved back from belief to practice, and the causality between the two is less pronounced than elsewhere: “*informed* by specifically Christian commitments” might be taken to imply that these “commitments” are not the cause of “political action”

but rather embedded in the dialectics of interpretation.⁴ Nevertheless, the dichotomy between Christian beliefs and political action that has been a cornerstone of previous definitions of Christian Zionism is also present in Smith's work.

Biblical Literalism

Related to the question of propositional belief as an analytic category, and one of the main ways the influence of this perspective is visible in much previous literature on Christian Zionism, is the explanatory value given to “biblical literalism” in much research about the phenomenon. Historian Yaakov Ariel, for instance has argued: “Motivated by a literal reading of the Bible, and adhering to a Messianic faith, many Evangelical Christians view contemporary Jews as heirs to biblical Israel and the object of prophecies about a restored Davidic kingdom in the messianic age” (Ariel 2002, 1). Similar claims have been repeated over and over again in literature on Christian Zionism (e.g. Baumgartner, Francia, and Morris 2008, Clark 2007, Durham 2004, Goldman 2009, Mayer 2004, Perko 2003, Phillips 2008, Shindler 2000, Spector 2009).

It is easy to see where the association arises; Evangelical Zionism emerged—particularly in the American context—within conservative Christian groups that were antagonistic towards the biblical criticism that had become influential within academia in the early 1900s, and these proponents of Bible prophecy frequently argued for “literalism” as an alternative to “allegorical”, “spiritual”, or “historical” readings of the Bible (Ammerman 1994, Marsden 2006). Even today, claims to literalism and antagonism towards allegory are highly salient in Evangelical Zionist milieus (see Chapter Five). One of my first encounters during my fieldwork in Jerusalem, for instance, was with Benjamin, who described himself as a “biblical fundamentalist” and explained that this meant

⁴ There are, however, several other problems associated with Smith's suggestion, particularly the emphasis placed on territorial control. In Smith's formulation, Jewish territorial control and resistance towards a two-state solution (as long as this can be said to be informed by subjective “Christian commitments”) is posited as the central characteristic of Christian Zionism. Even though many of the Evangelicals figuring in the following chapters would, when asked directly, claim to support Jewish control over the territory mentioned by Smith, few of them place much emphasis on legal, administrative, or military control, know much about the details and implications of particular political options, or could even point to any of the borders involved in the negotiations if asked. In my view, the explicit support for “Jewish control” by Christian Zionists is often more a question of a loosely organized eschatological imagination than carved-in-stone religio-political doctrine.

that his “feelings towards people who call themselves ‘Christians’ but treat the Bible like a salad bar, taking the parts they like and ignoring the parts they don't, are a mixture of pity and exasperation.”⁵ At first glance, Benjamin’s description of himself as a “biblical fundamentalist” seems to confirm common scholarly identifications of Christian Zionism with “biblical literalism”. What Benjamin’s self-description does confirm, however, is not necessarily that these scholarly understandings of Christian Zionism are correct, but that they are also largely *shared* by many self-identified Christian Zionists, which includes many of the volunteers in Jerusalem. In this particular area scholars and the people that they are studying have been in substantial agreement (even when they have not agreed on the legitimacy of those readings).

The empirical objectivism of this approach can be traced, as Marsden has done (2006), to the influence of Baconian empiricism on the emerging fundamentalist movement in the early 1900s. Baconian common-sense philosophy was (in theory) dedicated to the observation and classification of facts and argued that reality could be understood through a detached application of an allegedly universal “common sense”. Evangelicals at the turn of the century, Marsden argues, found this epistemological approach fascinating since they believed that an observation of facts, untainted by theoretical (or theological) assumptions, would inevitably lead to a confirmation of the truth of the biblical Scriptures. This theoretical heritage from Baconian ideals is very much alive in the volunteers’ evaluation of Bible reading practices, and understandings of what the Bible says. The “plain reading” of Scripture reflects a Baconian common sense.

While I do not question that different Bible readings might lead to different theological (or political) beliefs, it seems to me that there are several problems involved in taking these emic accounts too literally: first, *any* textual engagement requires some level of hermeneutic activity, at the very least in the sense of identifying what the phrases and terms of a particular text signify. This assertion is precisely what is denied by appeals to “biblical literalism”. Second, particularly in relation to Bible prophecy, “literalism” is an incomplete (and often inaccurate) description of the hermeneutic practices involved in Christian Zionist interpretations of the Bible because it is with regards prophetic interpretations that they stray furthest from the norms of literalism with its emphasis on immediately obvious and ultimately decidable referential meaning (Crapanzano 2000, Coleman 2006). Examples of this can be found, for instance, in the highly allegorical readings of “the fig tree” in Mt. 24:32-34, “the

⁵ Benjamin 2012.

valley of dry bones” in Ezek. 37, “the time of Jacob’s trouble” in Jer. 30 and the readings of many other biblical passages that are taken to refer to the relationship between Jewish national restoration and the end times. Third, even with regards to foundational texts such as Gen. 12:1-3, “literalism”, if understood as a description of actual hermeneutical practices, fails to capture the processes involved in these textual engagements.

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (NRSV)

Among Evangelical Zionists in Jerusalem, this passage is perhaps the most important in terms of motivating their political and religious activities in relation to Israel. Yet to interpret it as referring to a religious obligation to express political, moral, and financial support for a contemporary state, and the ways in which divine blessings (and curses) are tied to these practices, is, hermeneutically speaking, very far from a literal interpretation. One might of course well argue that Abram in this text *represents* “the Jewish people”, and by implication perhaps even “the state of Israel”. One can, furthermore, argue that the meaning of “blessing Abram” is manifested in advocacy work, moral and political apologetics, and charity work on behalf of Israel and the Jewish people, and thus that divine blessings and curses are connected to the ways in which people and nations treat the state. But this is neither a literal interpretation, nor one that is directly accessible from a so-called “plain reading” unless one subscribes to a similar Baconian credo. To interpret it thus is closer to a figurative, or even a typological reading, but one where the signified is the State of Israel rather than the Church as it has been throughout much of Christian tradition. This is a reading that is dependent on an interpretative history and the links between the signifier and the signified that this history has established; the reading can only be seen as “plain” or “literal” when one makes that history, and the interpretative practices established by it, invisible. Like any other interpretative practice then, this reading relies on a specific hermeneutical tradition, the inherited conceptual links between specific biblical referents and specific real world (or theological) objects, and a careful selection of relevant passages, as well as theological and ideological preferences.

Thus, treating the self-proclaimed literalism of Christian Zionists as transparent and self-explanatory risks naturalizing what is essentially an ideological claim. For Evangelical Zionists, claims about reading the Bible “as it is”, about the “literal meaning” of Scripture, and about having a “biblical perspective” are all rhetorical—and ideological—arguments in favor of a certain position in an intra-Christian debate about textual ideologies and their applicability in Israel. Consequently, when scholars shorthand Christian Zionists as hermeneutical “literalists” despite evidence to the contrary, this not only naturalizes their ideological position but also effectively hides the impact of the interpretative history, and the social and psychological processes involved in constructing biblical rationalizations in support of political positions.

Christian Zionism as Narrative and Process

While I share the assessment that both Bible prophecy and a culture of biblical literalism are salient and important features of contemporary Christian Zionist formulations of faith and practice, I still find these characterizations of the phenomenon problematic in so far as they analytically separate beliefs from practices and perceive the relationship between the two in causal terms. This, in my opinion, has often led to an over-determination of the beliefs Christian Zionists are supposed to hold, which allows for too little heterogeneity and multiplicity in cultural expression. Moreover, the category of belief, as many authors have noted (Asad 1993, Keane 2009, Lindquist and Coleman 2008), is far from transparent. Not only is belief something interior, invisible, and thus ultimately inaccessible to an observer, it is also a term with a broad palette of entangled meanings. One of the more comprehensive discussions about the problems surrounding belief as an analytic category is provided by Galina Lindquist and Simon Coleman. Drawing on Malcolm Ruel they argue that

... we can see, then, how in Christian history [how] “[t]rust in a personified God becomes conviction about a certain event, the Christ-event of history, becomes an initiatory declaration, becomes a corporately declared orthodoxy, becomes an inwardly organizing experience, becomes values common to all men” (Ruel 1997, 109). All of these connotations are implied when we label orthodoxies, received ideas, collective representations, or ontological foundations of other people’s worlds as ‘beliefs’. It is these implications that make the use of ‘belief’ as applied to others so pernicious, because it carries certain significant and limiting

presuppositions. Ruel lists some such fallacious implications: that people's ideas are necessarily formulated as coherent orthodoxies; that people are committed to them and hold them unquestioningly; that these ideas are experienced as inner states; that they form grounds of personal commitment or group identity and can be cited as explanations of personal and group behavior; that the referents of people's words and behavior are imaginative projections rather than substantive 'reality'. (Lindquist and Coleman 2008, 8, Ruel 1997)

While it is certainly difficult to get around the concept, particularly when studying Evangelical Christians who have often been staunch defenders of "belief", Lindquist and Coleman argue that the solution to this conundrum might be to write "against" rather than "with" the term (Lindquist and Coleman 2008, 15). Among other things, this calls for us to avoid understanding beliefs as propositional statements that are representative of a particular culture; to approach "cultural perception and practice" as mutually constitutive; to examine critically the ways in which our interlocutors use the term and the meanings it carries in local contexts; and to be reflexive about the ways in which we use terms such as "belief" in our writing and analysis.

While the question of how a religious phenomenon such as Christian Zionism should be defined is of less interest at the onset of an ethnographically oriented project—since most fieldworkers prefer definitions and categories to emerge from ongoing empirical observation rather than being specified beforehand—the question of belief and practice in Christian Zionism is still important in terms of reflexivity and analytic transparency. When I started fieldwork I simply searched for places where I thought it likely that I would find Evangelicals identifying with Zionist narratives and with long-term commitments to Israel. Since the ICEJ, BFP, and CFI are the largest and most influential self-identified Christian Zionist organizations in the land, and since a large part of their staff is constituted of volunteers, these organizations seemed like a good place to begin. For me it was not necessary at this stage to determine whether these organizations or the volunteers working there could be considered to fit prevalent categorizations of Christian Zionism, whether they conformed to a certain set of doctrinal statements, or extent to which they were involved in "political action ... to promote or preserve Jewish control over the geographic area now comprising Israel and Palestine" (Smith 2013, 2). My departure point was, rather, Christian Zionism as a socio-culturally transmitted "narrative tradition" (Bruner 1991a) concerned with the connection between contemporary Israel, its formative ideology, and Christian sacred history. As the

organizations actively draw upon, and contribute to, the production of this narrative tradition, and as the volunteers are confronted with a need to take part in this conversation, I considered this setting suitable for the exploration of contemporary forms of Christian Zionism.

In what follows Christian Zionism will be approached as a process rather than as a product, thereby indicating that a specification of beliefs purportedly held by Christian Zionists is not only unnecessary at this stage but also limiting and counter-productive. Doing so would severely limit exploration of the heterogeneity of the phenomenon and the ways in which cultural practices are made meaningful by practitioners. From a processual perspective Christian Zionism can be understood as the *ongoing production of connections between the State of Israel, its formative ideology and Christian sacred history*.⁶ For an ethnographic project this approach has two tangible benefits: (i) it situates (visible) practices rather than (invisible) beliefs as the primary focus of analytic inquiry; and (ii) it makes the connections between “Christianity” and “Zionism” that have haunted many previous definitions of Christian Zionism a matter of empirical investigation rather than something to be defined beforehand. The particularities of those connections—the forms they take, how they are made, which are important, how they play out in individual stories, how they correlate with biblical and theological traditions—are ethnographically observable processes that I describe in the following chapters. However, while I focus primarily on linguistic practices I do not consider beliefs irrelevant to the topic; in fact, belief is a central concern for these Evangelicals and the narrative tradition in which they take part. But as I demonstrate in the following chapters, rather than being the source or explanation of Evangelical practices in the land, belief is *continually being constructed through these activities*. Belief or faith, in other words, represents as much the end point as the beginning of Christian Zionist activities in relation to Israel.

⁶ In other words, anyone who simultaneously identifies as a “Christian” and a “Zionist” would not necessarily qualify as a “Christian Zionist”. The defining quality, rather, is the production of links between them and the ways in which Zionism is felt to contribute in the production of Christian identities or to better articulate what it means to be a Christian.

Meaning, Language, and Narrative

Writing “against belief” and approaching Christian Zionism as a process obviously involves exploring the locations where this process occurs. Although solid arguments can be made in favor of a focus on different kinds of nonlinguistic or semi-linguistic practices in which the state of Israel is produced as religiously meaningful, the main emphasis in this work is on how this happens within narrative performance. Admittedly this focus is selective, but it is not completely arbitrary. Language is often a central concern for religious, not least Christian communities, and it is one of the main mediums in the production of religious meaning. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, questions of language use and the underlying ideologies that condition how language is used have been a particularly fruitful avenue in explorations of contemporary forms of Evangelical and charismatic religiosity. Before turning to questions of data and methodology it will be useful to outline how these theoretical perspectives pertain to this project.

Meaning & Symbol

A central idea in this project is that Christian debate concerning Israel and Palestine can be understood as expressing a conflict over religious meaning: the ways in which words, material objects, and historical events signify (or do not) divine intentionality. This debate involves questions of how to read the Bible, its applicability to contemporary events, and the ways in which God acts upon and through the material world. The Evangelical discourses about Israel that are explored here consequently take place in the midst of these broader contestations over meaning.

This perspective can be illustrated with a fundamental claim that separates Zionist Evangelicals from their theological opponents.⁷ Evangelical Zionists frequently describe the founding of the State of Israel as a “sign of the times”, in

⁷ Such opponents to Christian Zionist readings can be found both within Evangelical, Pentecostal, and liberal denominations. For some time the Palestinian liberation theological center *Sabeel* has been an important hub for such voices and more recently the Bethlehem Bible College and its “Christ at the Checkpoint” conferences have gathered many Christians who identify with the Palestinian narratives. See for instance *Challenging Christian Zionism* (Ateek, Duaybis, and Tobin 2005) for theological critiques of Christian Zionism from different perspectives and (Feldman 2011) for a comparison between Zionist and non-Zionist Christian tour groups. To date, little research has been conducted amongst pro-Palestinian Christian groups in Jerusalem.

other words as an event that *signifies* God's redemptive purposes. By keeping an eye on the State of Israel it is therefore possible to gauge the progress of redemptive history and to understand the ways in which God acts in the world. In these eschatological readings events in the history of the modern state can be linked directly to biblical passages as fulfillments of prophecy. Christian opponents, on the other hand, consider this indexical reading of the state of Israel not only an improper use of the Bible, but of words, and thus a fundamental displacement of meaning. In the eyes of the latter group, attributing this kind of spiritual meaning to a contemporary state is a case of "fetishism"; it attributes a "false value" to a material object (Keane 1997a).

Evangelical Zionists, however, do not only refute this claim but counter it by associating fetishism with their critics. In their understanding, this specific critique of their activities evidences a displacement of meaning that has occurred throughout Christian history. The inability to realize Israel's spiritual significance is a symptom of developments within the Christian Church starting with the emergence of allegorical hermeneutics which, in their reading of history, led to replacement theology and anti-Semitism.⁸ Replacement theology, in other words, inappropriately attributes meaning to the Christian Church which should be reserved for Israel. The influence of Hellenism on Christianity (see Chapter Five) is generally understood among Evangelical Zionists to be the underlying cause for this Christian failure to recognize Israel as a sign of the times. From a Christian Zionist horizon then, the claim that the situation in Israel / Palestine is not about religion is symptomatic of this displacement of meaning. For them, the conflict is fundamentally religious; ultimately, it concerns not the clash of national ideologies or contestations over land but God's plan for the redemption of the world (Hedding 2004) and the opposition to this plan by malicious spiritual agencies. There is a religious "deep structure" that determines the grammar of the conflict.

⁸ Broadly understood, "replacement theology" or "supersessionism" is usually defined as any theology that claims that the Christian Church has "replaced" or "superseded" the people of Israel in the covenantal relationship with God. This definition, however, is straightforward in theory but very complicated in practice. For much of Christian history this view, in one version or another, has been dominant in Orthodox, Catholic as well as Protestant formulations of faith. However, post-WWII and in the ensuing development of Jewish-Christian dialogue, the term, and theological formulations associated with it, has developed strong negative connotations. Moreover, even today, there is considerable variation in exactly how the relationship between Israel and the Church, and the "Old" and the "New" Testaments, should be conceptualized. Consequently, the precise meaning of "replacement theology" is the subject of much debate. For Evangelical Zionists, the term is usually used in the broadest possible sense virtually to include all theologies that do not accept the covenant between God and the Jewish people (including the land component in Gen. 15:18) as eternally valid.

From an analytic perspective, I believe it is necessary to recognize these contestations over religious meaning as an important part of the dynamics by which contemporary Evangelical Zionism operates. Meaning, however, is a concept fraught with difficulties. What, after all, does it mean to say that a particular practice, word, or thing is meaningful? Yet, while the term might raise certain problems, to abandon the concept of meaning altogether would be to abandon one of the most important (and historically productive) tools in the empirical study of religion (Engelke and Tomlinson 2006b, 1). Meaning has been at the heart of much anthropological and other social scientific study in this area for the past fifty years, partly due to Clifford Geertz and his widely disseminated essays, *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture* and *Religion as a Cultural System* (both included in Geertz 1973). In these essays, Geertz argued that cultures—and by implication, religions—should be understood as “semiotic systems”: structures of interrelated and meaning-carrying symbols by which humans orient themselves in the world. Human beings, he claimed, live their lives “suspended” in those “webs of significance” (1973, 5). At the center of religious systems Geertz located the “problem of meaning”: the desire to construct convincing explanations for a set of fundamental human problems which he described as “bafflement, pain, and moral paradox” (1973, 109). A religious system is dependent on its capacity to provide these explanations, and an analysis of these systems must grapple with how specific religions accomplish this. Consequently Geertz argued that the study of culture and religion was “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning” (1973, 5).

Although some of the original optimism might have faded, it is fair to say that Geertz’s position has been enormously influential, particularly within cultural anthropology and empirically oriented religious studies. Yet the approach has also suffered considerable criticism, particularly for the emphasis on religious beliefs in the definition of religion, the claim that this definition has universal applicability, and for alleged inattention to questions of history, authority, and power (Asad 1993, Engelke and Tomlinson 2006b, Schilbrack 2005, Throop 2009). As I have already discussed the question of belief in the previous section I focus on the latter two objections in what follows.

Talal Asad criticized Geertz for not recognizing that his definition of religion, with its focus on questions of meaning, was in itself dependent on a specifically Christian history. The attempt to find a universal definition of religion, Asad claims, needs to be understood in the light of “[modern] Christian attempts to achieve a coherence in doctrines and practices, rules and regulations” (1993, 29). In his attempt to formulate a universal definition of religion, Geertz becomes

complicit in this Christian endeavor to produce religion as a “trans-historical essence” centered on questions of meaning (1993, 29). However, there can never be universal definition of religion according to Asad, “not only because its constitutive elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes” (1993, 29). A central aspect of this critique concerns how the meaning of concepts, practices, rituals, and symbols are produced in—and through—social and historical processes. To isolate the meaning of symbols from these processes would be to separate religion from questions of power and authority. In other words, if a religious symbol is experienced as meaningful, it is always so by reference to a particular discursive history, in a specific social situation, and for specific people. Thus, studying questions of meaning always implies studying how particular meanings are produced and why. In the context of this book, although I frequently discuss questions of meaning, and refer to Israel as a religious symbol, I do not mean to imply that “the meaning of Israel” can be isolated and analyzed apart from the processes in which this “meaning” is produced. As I argue throughout this book, the meanings of religious symbols, such as Israel, are never fixed but, rather, frequently contested and continually negotiated both within and without the religious communities that utilize them in religious discourses and practices.

Recognizing the particular Christian inheritance in how the category of religion has been formulated, however, does not necessarily equal the subordination of questions of meaning to questions of power and authority, particularly in the study of contemporary Christian phenomena. While recognizing Asad’s critique of Geertz, Joel Robbins (2006) has argued that a general feature of Christian symbolic systems is precisely the centrality of questions of meaning. Drawing on Roland Barthes, Robbins describes how the “problem of meaning ... confronts Westerners [through Christianity] as an imposition, is experienced with a compulsive force; finding and making all of life meaningful is not an option, it is a duty” (2006, 212).⁹ In other words, even if the problem of meaning is not necessarily a universal feature of cultural

⁹ Elsewhere, it has been suggested that part of the explanation for the centrality of meaning in Christianity emerges from its “translatability” (Sanneh 1994), which historically has resulted in its “energetic sacralization of new languages” (Engelke and Tomlinson 2006b, 21). If religious expression is not bound to a particular language or dialect, semiotics rather than phonological, grammatical, or stylistic features of the text becomes the prime bearer of the text’s “spirit” (Keane 1997b, 55). The importance Christians have traditionally placed on interpretation of their central text would, in this understanding, be a consequence of the possibility of translating it, thereby allowing it to travel across cultural and linguistic contexts.

systems, it certainly demands attention in many contemporary Christian contexts.

Thus I do not perceive the perspectives of Geertz and Asad, focusing on meaning and on power and authority respectively, as incommensurable or mutually exclusive. A similar middle way between these approaches is also advocated in the aforementioned volume edited by Engelke and Tomlinson (2006b). However, in order to avoid approaching meaning as a given in religious systems they have suggested that scholars interested in Christianity and the problem of meaning need to pay close attention not only to moments when the production of meaning is successful but also when it fails. By analyzing these “moments of failure ... scholars can approach meaning not as a function or as a product, but as a process and potential fraught with uncertainty and contestation” (2006b, 2). This suggestion to pay particular attention to moments of failure, however, is not only a methodological choice but also something that has to do with the specifics of the production of meaning in Christianity: a process which is often dialectical, functioning through the production of meaninglessness. This theme is developed by Robbins in the same volume who describes that this dialectics is produced through a series of ruptures—which Robbins consequently sees as paradigmatic for Christianity: the break from previous lives visible in conversion narratives, the break between the Church and the outside social world, and the break with historical time as this is presented within many Christian eschatologies, particularly premillennial and apocalyptic ones (2006, 214). These staged ruptures are generally framed as transitions from meaninglessness to meaning and are thought to mark the way for genuine Christian lives. While the various instantiations of Christianity naturally place their emphases differently, and have different ways of creating these ruptures, as a general observation this drive for meaning seems to apply to most forms of Christianity.

As we shall see in the following chapters, Evangelicalism in general and Christian Zionism in particular are good examples of the Christian preoccupation with meaning. Evangelical life stories are saturated with meanings and are often plotted around themes of divine intentionality and the protagonist’s ongoing attempt to live his or her life in accordance with the divine plan (Williams 2013). Christian Zionism builds upon this Evangelical concern with meaning, expanding it to apply to the entire course of human history. Contemporary events are made meaningful in relation to an eschatological telos and the final reckoning that these eschatological narratives project. In the above mentioned article, Robbins describes “millennialism” as “perhaps the most effective of Christian strategies for keeping meaninglessness at

bay” when adopted wholesale (2006, 217). After having spent months among the volunteers in Jerusalem, it is easy to appreciate Robbins’ estimation of the effectiveness of “millennialism” in meaning-making practices, but it is also necessary to point out that these processes require a great deal of interpretative work. Keeping “meaninglessness at bay” is not achieved by simply adopting a millennial framework; it requires an ongoing attempt to relate personal experience and events in the world to surrounding eschatological and biblical narratives. Among Evangelicals in Israel a great deal of this cultural labor is conducted in narrative performance.

Language Ideology

The interpretative work by which meaning is produced is guided by assumptions about “what signs are and how they function in the world” (Keane 2003, 419) which are often summarized under the rubric of “language ideology”—alternatively, “semiotic ideology” (Parmentier 1994) or “linguistic ideology” (Silverstein 1979). As already mentioned, the question of Christian language use has also come to occupy a central place in the Anthropology of Christianity as it has developed over the past fifteen years, perhaps primarily because the approach has been considered to provide a mediating link between language and the various social formations and practices of Christian communities (Woolward 1997). It has been argued that it offers “a robust model through which to examine how contemporary life is shaped and experienced dialogically” (Bialecki and Hoenes del Pinal 2011, 578). In a sense, the focus on language ideology in the anthropology of Christianity brings together a Geertzian focus on the meanings of semiotic systems—without presuming these constellations to be universal or uniform—and Asad’s emphasis on the social and historical processes that condition these meanings. Meaning, as it is depicted in much of this literature, is something that emerges from sociocultural practice in a process that is heterogeneous, contested, and often unpredictable.

The academic conversation about Christian language ideologies is useful here since it situates the meaning-making practices of the Evangelicals in Jerusalem in the context of broader Protestant and Evangelical assumptions about what language is and how it works. Bialecki and Hoenes del Pinal (2011) have provided a useful overview of much of the research on Protestant language ideologies up to the present. In their view, the picture of Christian—or perhaps

more accurately, Protestant—language ideology presented in the literature to date have been surprisingly uniform.

[It] could be identified by a rather small though recurrent constellation of features, chief of which are a marked predilection for sincerity, interiority, intimacy, intentionality, and immediacy as an ethics of speech, and a privileging of the referential aspects of language. Concomitant with this, there is a tendency towards discomfort with, if not an outright rejection of the social, material, and historic substrate of language (among which we might count ritualized speech genres), which sometimes extends to a suspicion of fixed texts and other non-personalized instances of language use. (Bialecki and Hoenes del Pinal 2011, 580)

This “recurrent constellation of features” has been exemplified in a variety of different religious speech genres such as witnessing (Harding 1987), conversion narratives (Coleman 2003, Stromberg 1993), preaching (Bauman 1983, Wharry 2003), Bible study discourses (Bielo 2009), and prayer (Robbins 2001). In this study, I take this literature as a point of departure in the study of Evangelical language about Israel. Yet, as Bialecki and Hoenes del Pinal later emphasize, although Protestant language certainly shares a family resemblance across various local contexts, is not uniform since historical circumstances and different social formations also influence understandings about language and what language can (and ought to) do. Although the features mentioned by Bialecki and Hoenes del Pinal are influential in the Jerusalem context, it is also in relation to these Protestant understandings of language that the special role attributed to Israel comes to the fore. As I argue in the following chapters, talk about Israel constantly negotiates the boundaries of Protestant language in an attempt to account for the religious significance attributed to the state of Israel and whether, and to what extent, Israel is supposed to be read as a signifier of divine intentionality. The answer to this question is entangled in different culturally transmitted approaches to the biblical text, to intentionality and agency, and to the ability of words and material objects to function as mediators of divine presence.

Religious Language & Narrative Performance

As Webb Keane has pointed out, in periods of contestation both reformers and traditionalists tend to pay particular attention to religious language, the proper use of words, and the ways in which they signify (Keane 1997b). To me, the aforementioned contestations about the meaning of Israel suggest both that this is precisely one such context, and also that any observer interested in analyzing these meanings needs to make a conscious decision to take religious language, its forms of signification, and religious models of reality seriously. Failing to do so would not only risk missing a central aspect of the relationship between Evangelicals and Israel but also mean slipping into simplified materialist models wherein religious language is reduced to mere rhetorical rationalizations of other concerns. A minimalist definition of “religious language”, Keane suggest, might be “linguistic practices that are taken *by practitioners themselves* to be marked or unusual in some respect” (2009, 118 emphasis original). Although it is admittedly difficult to theoretically separate “religious” from “non-religious” language and to draw any definite boundary between them, these differences are often visible in ethnographic contexts. Religious language, whether in the form of prayer, ritual, preaching, or witnessing often exhibits features that mark these practices as different from practitioners’ other uses of language. These features can be phonological, where the tone or dialect of a preacher changes when he begins to preach; morphological, which includes changes in speech patterns, syntax, and inclusions of archaic language; and, sometimes, indexed by “metapragmatic” (Silverstein 1993) comments that somehow identify them as special. Often shifts between religious and non-religious speech genres also reflect the prevalence of multiple and sometimes conflicting language ideologies that exist in the same cultural context at the same time (Stromberg 1993). Keane’s minimalist definition is obviously not exhaustive, and it does not set any clear or unambiguous boundaries around religious language, but it does offer a way to begin to explore the particularities of religious language games without construing them as an entirely separate sphere.

The production of meaning, although personal, does not takes place in a cultural vacuum. Contemporary Christian Zionism in Jerusalem is an immensely storied world, and one which is heavily dependent on the repetition of tropes that have been more or less the same for the past half-century. This narrative tradition portrays Israel as “a miracle”, as the “land of the Bible”, as transformative, and as something that “brings the Bible to life” and makes you experience God in a uniquely intimate way. In these narratives the Jewish people

are historical heroes: the eternal protagonists in a covenantal relationship with God who are suffering vicariously on behalf of mankind.

Rather than understanding the frequency of these tropes, the repetitions in narrative architecture, and the influence of this narrative tradition on individual stories in terms of flawed methodology—one that is unable to get “beneath” the surface—or as a mark of inauthentic speech, I approach this story-world as the primary field site of this project. The narrative tradition that is reflected and sometimes negotiated in individual stories is the locus in which a big part of the production of religious meaning occurs. The approach I advocate here takes these stories as religious speech in Keane’s sense; they are a language game that is understood by practitioners themselves as somehow different from other speech genres. It is the world of god-talk. Entering and exiting this world may at times be reflexively or metapragmatically indexed (as “Christianese” or “spiritual talk”) but even when it is not, it is recognizable by its profound negotiation of human agency, the frequency of direct reported speech (Briggs 1986, Parmentier 1994, Stromberg 1993), and the ways in which the language of the Bible bleeds into speakers’ discourses. In similarity to Harding’s methodological approach in *The Book of Jerry Falwell* (2000) then, I advocate entering this storied world—or what Harding calls “narrative belief”—and taking these stories not so much as representations of something else beyond the discourse but as *performative* practices that produce effects (2000, xi-xii). Religious language, whether about self or other, God or world, does not only reference experienced realities but also produces these realities in discourse (Keane 1997b, 56). Meaning is not derived strictly from denotation, or from the intention of speakers, but from how words function in local communicative contexts. By listening carefully to speakers—to what they do with their words, and the ways in which they employ cultural tropes in their own discourses—it becomes possible to explore the production of the State of Israel as a vessel of divine agency, and the ways in which Israel is implicated in the production of personhood, truth, and faith.

While I have emphasized god-talk as the main location here under survey, I do not mean to suggest that it is the only language game available in the context, or the only language the volunteers employ. While some volunteers rely almost exclusively on religious language in their life stories—effectively framing the interview situation as an act of witnessing—other volunteers frequently shift between “religious” and “secular” sense-making practices in their stories. By presenting religious language here as a “language game” (Stiver 1996, 61) I aim to capture something of the playfulness and ease with which many of the volunteers inhabit several linguistic spheres simultaneously. I do not consider any of these spheres to have a definite claim to the identity of the volunteers;

several narrative identities often co-exist within the same life story (Raggatt 2006). Yet focusing primarily on religious language is a methodological choice in the sense that I consider the construction of Israel's religious significance to occur primarily within religious language. It is here that the divine agency behind the Zionist movement becomes visible; it is here that the unique character of the land of Israel is most pronounced; and it is also here that themes such as the transformation of the religious self in relation to Israel are expressed.

The Scene in Jerusalem

Between 2011 and 2013 I spent three periods in Jerusalem throughout which I conducted interviews in the organizations with both leadership and volunteers, participated in work and worship, helped out at the distribution centers, visited media events in which the organizations participated, and took part in conferences organized by them or other related organizations. Although much of this type of activity took place within the realm of the three organizations, most of my time was spent in the larger scene of Evangelical Zionism in Jerusalem: in churches and messianic communities where the volunteers go for worship, at sports events on weekday evenings, and in cafes or bars during the weekends. I was invited to homes and parties and I invited some volunteers to my place. In some cases I travelled with volunteers across the country and talked with them about the land and the situation, and I also joined a tour to Israeli settlements on the West Bank organized by the *Christian Friends of Israeli Communities*.¹⁰ Consequently, much of the data that informs this work, and the analysis that emerges from this broader context, is not directly linked to the organizations. The scene in Jerusalem and the organizations' location within it will be further discussed in Chapter Two so for now it suffices to say that I largely view it as the broader context in which this study is placed. While the organizations, communities, and individuals that make it up come from several different countries and denominations, they share a basic fascination with Israel and Judaism, a theological understanding of the contemporary state as somehow eschatologically significant, and many of the venues in which these understandings are performed, preached, and practiced. Apart from that,

¹⁰ Christian Friends of Israeli Communities (CFOIC) is a Christian-Jewish organization which is focusing on establishing partnerships between Christian congregations and Jewish settlements in the West Bank. The tour went to several different settlements in different stages of development.

individuals in this culture naturally differ, sometimes substantially, in practices and theological understandings as well as in their location on the political spectrum. All my observations during informal and formal settings were written down at the end of the day and saved for analysis.

In addition to participant observation and interviews, I conducted archival research in Jerusalem to learn more about the history of the organizations and the context in which they operate. The main sources for this endeavor were the media review archives available at Caspari Center, a Christian organization which has collected articles written about Christians and Messianic Jews in Israeli and Palestinian newspapers since the late '70s. I also went through what material I could find at the Central Zionist archives, the Israeli national library, and the ICEJ's internal archives to which I was kindly granted some access. Finally, the books available in the book stores at the organizations as well as their other publications, media reviews, and newsletters have provided me with additional data which has been useful in contextualizing the interviews and observations that provide the main empirical source for this study.

This combination of different ethnographic data gathered through participant observation and interviews, along with the archives, allows for triangulation between the different sources. Comparing observations and interview responses to other kinds of data is of course very common in field-based projects, and often provides a way to cross-check information and observations, and generate early-stage interpretations (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 127-128, Flick 2009, 444-453). In my case archival research often generated new and more pointed questions that I subsequently tested in informal talks and interviews, and it also allowed me to check the information gained in interviews.

The Volunteers

Organizationally, financially, and practically, the Christian Zionist ministries in Jerusalem function more or less like Christian NGOs and are registered as Israeli charities (*amutah*). Their funding comes almost exclusively from private donations and Christian communities that sympathize with them and the work that they do in Jerusalem. Consequently, an important task of their leaders consists of speaking and fund-raising in churches and conferences abroad. In order to function financially a large part of the organizations' day-to-day activities in Israel have always been conducted by Christian volunteer workers.¹¹

¹¹ The ICEJ report that they have around 45 people on staff, 30 of whom are on volunteer visas. The Bridges for Peace have around 50-60 volunteers among the 70 members of staff in

While the board members often have Israeli residency permits or cleric visas that allow them to stay long-term, most volunteers only have one to two year volunteer visas, though many renew these and stay longer than the two years they first planned; it is not unusual to meet volunteers who have remained in Israel for most of the past decade, effectively making them a form of expat or migrant. Accommodation and communal lunches are often provided to volunteers, and in some cases they receive some pocket money from the organizations, though most live either on their savings or support from their congregations at home.

The volunteers are involved in every part of the ministries' work. Some engage directly with Israeli society through one of the many social services the ministries provide and others have desk jobs in the media departments at the headquarters, mainly reading newspapers and compiling newsletters. Some take care of Christian tour groups visiting Israel while others organize upcoming events such as conferences, the Feast of Tabernacles, or youth summer camps. Some volunteers are professionals that have been hired because they have a specific skill that the ministries needed: graphic designers, staff writers, proof readers, or technicians, for instance. Other volunteers are involved largely in unqualified work such as packing food in the food banks or janitorial tasks at the headquarters in Jerusalem.

Volunteer work, no matter how mundane its nature, is most often articulated in a religious framework, in terms of a calling, or as part of the Christian walk. This religious framing of the volunteer experience is also explicit from the organizational point of view in published material and pamphlets advertising the possibility of working in Jerusalem. The BFP, for instance, advertises their volunteer program with Isaiah 61:5: "Foreigners will work your fields and vineyards"; and the catchy prophecy slogan: "Why just read about prophecy when you can be a part of it?"¹² Naturally, for many—especially younger—volunteers, working for a year or two in Israel is an adventure, an opportunity to get to know another country and a foreign culture, to meet new friends, and to develop an international network. It also offers the chance to perform one's religious identity and to commit a part of one's life to service. Such sentiments are a large part of younger volunteers' aims and motivations. The specificity of the Israeli context, however, also adds something extra: it makes you "part of prophecy", part of history as it unfolds. Cindy, for instance, a European woman

Jerusalem and in northern Israel where they run a large food bank. The CFI is smaller than the ICEJ and BFP, but their staff is also predominantly made up of volunteers.

¹² "Volunteer in Israel", Bridges for Peace, Jerusalem.

who has been employed in the organizations for several years, describes her work with a strong sense of historical mission.

I feel this season more than any [that] it's an absolute privilege because I feel that God is absolutely doing something through the [organization] in the nations, concerning this nation. And so, to be a part of that. It's really about making the nations and the body of Christ aware of their responsibility to this nation because this is God's chosen people and God has a plan and He's working out His plan. And according to the Bible, we have a responsibility, you know. So I feel that it is, it's an absolute privilege to be a part of this organization now and I see it as a specific assignment from God.¹³

The volunteer work, in other words, is often made meaningful by articulating it as a historical project: as taking part in something that is historically unique: the miraculous return of the Jewish people to their land. Another volunteer, Ruth, who we will meet again in Chapter Three, describes living and working in Israel as a “miracle”:

If you have the chance to live your life as part of a miracle how do you walk away from that? And I really see Israel as a miracle. It's a miracle of God's faithfulness. And my life here is a miracle, just day by day not knowing, you know, how it's all going to work out. But I think it's exciting to be a part of what God's doing and I guess that kind of, obviously that leads to the understanding that I think this is something that God's doing in this time—establishing Israel as a nation. And there is a purpose, and there's a redemptive purpose in it despite all of the challenges surrounding the conflict here and all those different things.¹⁴

For many volunteers, such religious articulations lie at the heart of what it means to be a volunteer in Jerusalem. Yet a strong counter-cultural sentiment also prevails in the volunteer environment. Even if politics is seldom placed at the center of one's motivations, the volunteers are of course highly aware of political discourses concerning the Israel / Palestine conflict, and the various Christian views of Israel. Many of them have also been challenged by friends or relatives taking a different approach to the conflict. Being on-the-ground in Israel, however, situates the volunteers as experts who know what is “actually” going

¹³ Cindy 2013.

¹⁴ Ruth 2013.

on. Often this is framed in contrast to people who criticize Israel without knowing the full picture or who have only a limited experience of the country. In their stories, the volunteers often make distinctions between themselves and “less committed” travellers to Israel such as Christian pilgrims, tourists, activists, and journalists. Nonetheless, it is hard to avoid the notion that the volunteer context is also partly an “environmental bubble” (Feldman 2016) that privileges particular narratives about the land and the conflict, and that few volunteers have actually explored alternative interpretations or challenged their own assumptions. It is uncommon to meet volunteers with any extensive experience of Palestinians, or their narratives, and it is even more uncommon to meet anyone who has visited the West Bank or Palestinian villages. Additionally, many volunteers also have a limited experience of (non-messianic) Israelis since they spend most of their time within the Evangelical Zionist scene in Jerusalem: at the organizations, with other volunteers, and in Messianic communities or churches. This obviously does not go for everyone, but in many cases the expertise of the volunteers is quite limited to a particular linguistic and social environment that has very clear boundaries with regards the rest of the society—and the various narratives about that society—in which they live and work.

Interviews

The analytic part of this work draws mainly upon the interviews that I conducted with leaders and volunteers at the three organizations in Jerusalem. I interviewed twenty-eight different people (4 leaders, 23 volunteers, and 1 person currently unconnected to the organizations); in some cases I interviewed the same person several times.¹⁵ The total quantity of recorded data amounts to about thirty-five hours. The distribution between men and women is almost equal (13 men, 15 women) and the interviewees are rather equally divided between the different organizations (8 ICEJ, 9 BFP, 10 CFI, 1 independent). In terms of age the distribution is wide, ranging from approximately twenty-five years old up to between sixty and seventy. The biggest group is aged between fifty and sixty. In terms of country of origin, slightly above half of the interviewees are North Americans, and the rest come from Latin America, South Africa, or Europe. There are two main reasons for the large proportion of North

¹⁵ The Executive Director of the ICEJ, David Parsons was interviewed once in 2012 and once in 2013. Among the volunteers, “Jacob”, “Anna” and “Ben” were interviewed twice, Jacob and Anna in 2012, and Ben in 2013. All other volunteers referred to in this work were only formally interviewed once, most of them during 2013.

Americans: their English language proficiency, which allows them to be interviewed comfortably; and the fact that the two of the organizations (CFI and BFP) are numerically dominated by North Americans.

Interviews with leaders were designed primarily with the goal of understanding the organizations, their history, their theological and political underpinnings, their socio-political locations in Israel and globally, and their practical work as institutions in Israel. I felt this aspect of research was necessary as there are very few scholarly accounts that deal with the organizations' work in depth (Ariel 1997, Leppäkari 2006, Merkley 2001, Westbrook 2014). Secondly, I wanted the interviews with the leaders to provide a context to which the interviews with volunteers could be related and contrasted. Therefore I also asked them about the administrative aspects of the volunteer work, the process of recruiting volunteers and whether the volunteers underwent any kind of pre-field training, how leaders view the motivations and the purpose of the volunteer work, and different kind of meta-data questions concerning the volunteers. In one case, I underwent "pre-field training" as a participant (see Chapter Five). This too was recorded and transcribed. In all cases I used the interviews with the leaders to cross-check the data in their publications, their newsletters, or the archival sources.

The interviews with the volunteers were different. As I am interested in Evangelical faith and identity as articulated in relation to Israel I opted for a life-story-oriented approach with the volunteers (Ammerman and Williams 2012, Mishler 1986, Riessman 1993). Prior to the interview, respondents were informed about my interest in the life stories of volunteers in Israel so in most cases they already had an idea about how to gear their narratives towards my particular research questions. While some narrative scholars argue for very open-ended life story methodologies (Horsdal 2012), others have developed sophisticated and quite detailed interview methods (Hammack 2011, Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998, McAdams 2006). My own approach was close to the one proposed by Ammerman and Williams (2012), in which methodology is neither overly-detailed in terms of structure and analysis nor "utterly free form" (2012, 119). I started every interview with a similar request to the participants (with some variation):

Tell me your life story up until today in such a way that you find it explains why you are here and the person that you are today. I would also like you to tell me not only what happened during particular moments in your life but also how you felt, and how you experienced what was happening at the time. Start where you want to start and take your time. I have all the time in the world.

After that I could usually sit back and listen until the interviewee felt that the story was complete; this varied between a minimum of fifteen minutes and a maximum of almost two hours. Once the story was finished, I asked follow-up questions arising inductively from the interview, and—if they had not developed the themes themselves—some general questions that I had formulated beforehand. For instance, I usually asked them about their views of the future, their understanding of other Christian approaches to Israel, their understanding of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, how it was when they first arrived in Israel, and how they felt about their work there.

Obviously, life-story interviewing requires participants that are comfortable telling stories, or possess what Horsdal has called “narrative competence” (Horsdal 2012, 85). Generally speaking however, life stories often play a big role in Evangelical faith practices such as witnessing and conversion stories (Harding 2000, Stromberg 1993) and many Evangelicals have previous practice at recounting them; a few of the volunteers had even told their “Israel-stories” in church settings before. This experience often helped during the interview situation, though not always. Some of the interviewees had difficulties knowing how much to tell me, what I was interested in, or even where to start. When this happened I mentioned that other interviewees often began with where they grew up, but that they could pick any other starting point; many observers have noted that the life-story situation is a socially contingent event of co-creation between the interviewer and the interviewee (Ammerman and Williams 2012, Horsdal 2012, Mishler 1986, Riessman 1993). Obviously, life stories can be told in a multitude of different ways; all life narratives are partial, selective and highly contextual, and the interviews that I conducted in Jerusalem were no exception.

Even though the volunteers are fully anonymized in this work they might still be recognizable by those closest to them in Israel: their friends and the organizations. Life stories are often—to some extent—public knowledge and it is not possible to anonymize the stories in the same way as I anonymize the storyteller.¹⁶ When contextualization in terms of background might risk

¹⁶ All names of volunteers in this work are pseudonyms. Names of leaders at the organizations are not anonymized.

jeopardizing their anonymity I have chosen to leave that background out, even in cases where it might have been analytically interesting. In spite of this caution some parts of the stories might still be identifiable by their immediate context, though where I have deemed it particularly crucial I have done my best to ensure that this is not the case.

Certain limitations with the approach and the data should be mentioned. The most important is that while I consider the narrative tradition which characterizes the Evangelical scene in Jerusalem to be the linguistic locus of this study, almost all the interviews take place in an organizational context with volunteers employed by the ministries. In most cases, representatives of the ministries were also involved in organizing the interviews and selecting the interviewees. Given the ideological tension of the situation, it would not have been possible to conduct this research without this cooperation, and without relinquishing a certain control over the research. This organizational participation might have meant a more homogenous selection and fewer participants with “unorthodox” ideological views than would have been the case had they not been involved, resulting in the relative homogeneity of the narrative tradition that I outlined above. However, there are two reasons why this is not necessarily a problem given the nature of this study. First, the prime concern from the organizations’ perspective was not how the volunteers’ stories might relate to broader Christian debates about the State of Israel, or indeed, the Protestant traditions which I have highlighted here. In my understanding, their caution had more to do with the ministries’ social status in Israel, a concern which is well-grounded considering their history in Jerusalem—and Israeli media representations of them in the past—discussed in Chapter Two. Second, my approach here is geared more towards the “canonical stories” (Bruner 1991a, 2004) than towards those that breach cultural convention. The ministries are hugely influential in the part of the Evangelical world that considers the State of Israel to be of religious significance, and they occupy an important discursive location both in the Evangelical scene in Jerusalem, and in the broader Christian contestations about the meaning of Israel. In other words, these organizations are centrally located in the narrative tradition that I have here set out to explore.

Self, Land, and Text

In my view, analysis—in the sense of reviewing the data, looking for patterns, interpreting, and formulating categories and hypotheses—starts in the field and is not a separate process that begins after all the data is collected. Despite

previous experiences with both Evangelicals and Israel, before going into the field I did not have a strong idea about what kind of stories I would encounter in the interviews. I am not a trained anthropologist, and I had not developed a detailed interpretative framework beyond my interest in Evangelical self-understanding, the role of narrative, and the relationship between the state of Israel and religious identities. As I suspect is common in ethnographic work, the theoretical lens which came to guide this research, and which eventually developed into the primary structure of this book, was offered to me in a conversation with one of the participants. During an interview with a middle-aged South African woman who had spent several years in Jerusalem, I asked her if she could tell me more about when she had first arrived in Israel. Mary's answer is telling both in its religiously loaded opacity and in the importance she places on Israel in terms of her religious identity. In her short answer she came to formulate several of the central questions that will be discussed in the following pages:

Yes. It changed everything in my heart. This is truly God's land and it's a spiritual place, there's a spiritual intensity in the land. Ideas that you formerly had..., things change internally. It's as though everything is brought into the proper perspective—*your understanding of the Bible, of the land, of yourself*. Your priorities change. For me so many of my priorities changed personally; on a broader level, everything changed. Everything changed. I went back and people just couldn't believe the change. But that happens to so many people, they just go home and it is something that draws them [back]. I understand how Abraham felt I think.¹⁷

Mary's presentation of the transformative encounter with the land directed my attention to the relationships between the Bible, the land, and the religious self which together form the analytic sections of this dissertation. An underlying idea is that the personal religious significance of Israel is formed in a close relationship between these three categories.

Chapter Two introduces the Evangelical Zionist scene in Jerusalem, particularly as it has developed from the prophetic excitement following the Six-Day War of 1967 up until today. I focus primarily on the growth of the three organizations: how they were formed, how they have articulated their organizational identity, and how they have negotiated their place in Israeli

¹⁷ Mary 2013, emphasis mine.

society over the past thirty years. This historical background is presented in order to contextualize the interviews with volunteers, discussions of which follow in the analytic chapters which are thematically oriented around the categories that emerged from Mary's interview.

Chapter Three focuses on ideas about the religious self as it emerges in the life-story narratives of the volunteers. The first part discusses the production of human and divine agency in the stories and situates this in relation to Evangelical personhood more broadly. The second part focuses on self-transformation and how the coming-to-Israel stories are recounted as a type of conversion narrative. Through these narratives, I argue, Israel is constructed as a religiously significant symbol and is integrated into Evangelical religious identities.

Chapter Four explores narratives of the land and situates them in relation to academic conversations about sacred space, presence, and mediation. It is argued that in these narratives about land Israel is framed as a sacred space with a unique ability to mediate divine presence. As a result of these narratives the volunteers often find themselves in a position where they have to negotiate Protestant understandings of place in relation to the uniqueness of Israel.

Chapter Five examines the textual ideology of Christian Zionism in relation to discourses about Bible prophecy and the Hebraic roots of Christian faith. Particular attention is paid to the process by which Israel is framed as an evidence for the truth of biblical Scripture. By employing prophetic and historical narratives Christian Zionists can subvert critics' assessment of their practices as a modern manipulation of symbols and instead situate themselves as representatives of authentic biblical faith.

Self, *land* and *text* are analytically separated in this work but I do not consider them independent from each other in the faith and practices of the volunteers. In fact, central to my argument is that it is precisely through the relationship between these categories that Israel's particular spiritual significance emerges. The religious self, the biblical text, and the land of Israel can be conceptualized as a triangle where any one term mediates the relationship between the other two.¹⁸ Thus Chapter Six finally draws these themes together and locates them in relation to the questions that have been raised in this introductory chapter.

¹⁸ For a similar theoretical perspective see (Feldman 2016).

2. Evangelical Zionism in Jerusalem

“The Embassy”—shorthand for the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem in Evangelical parlance—is situated on Rachel Imeinu Street in what is known as the German Colony: a lush and slower-paced neighborhood in the western part of the city, away from Jerusalem’s immediate center. It is a pleasant part of town, sprinkled with small boutiques, Italian cafés, bars, and some residencies of ambassadors and diplomats. Previously the area also housed several of the national embassies that have been relocated to Tel Aviv as a result of the passing of the Jerusalem Law and the subsequent international protests against it in 1980. The German Colony has an interesting history. More than hundred years ago, it was established by a group of Pietist settlers called “the Templers” which was led by the German theologian and politician, Christoph Hoffman. Like several other Christian groups that set up in Palestine during the course of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries the Templers were inspired by millennial ideas. In this particular case, that spiritual cooperation, cultivation of the land, and rebuilding the temple would mark the beginning of the kingdom of God and the millennial era. In the 1940s the seven colonies that the Templers had established in the second half of the twentieth century, including the one in Jerusalem, were dismantled by the British, and any remaining Templers were deported to Austria and Australia, never to return (Kroyanker 2008).

In what looks like a happy coincidence, the side-streets of the German Colony today are named for famous Gentile supporters of Zionism such as former British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, the French Nobel Prize winner, Emile Zola, and the South African Politician, Jan Smuts. The street where the ICEJ is located, however, has a more biblical ring to it: “Rachel, our mother”. The large and beautiful mansion that houses the Embassy also has a fascinating history; built in the middle of the mandate period by the Christian Arab contractor Ibrahim Haki, it hosted several embassies and consulates before the ICEJ took up residence there in 1997. Previously the ICEJ had rented several other buildings, among them the house on Brenner Street which post-colonial theorist Edward Said claimed to have been his childhood home before his family was evicted as part of the 1948 struggles: a story which has frequently

been picked up in literature about the ICEJ. In a 1992 article, and a later BBC documentary, Said showed his audience the building, and described how it was now occupied by a “right-wing fundamentalist Christian and militantly pro-Zionist group, run by a South African Boer no less!” (Said 1992)¹⁹ Said’s claim to have lived in the house was later questioned in a series of critical articles by Justin Wiener from the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (e.g. 1999)—no doubt with his own political agenda; the claim is also contested by ICEJ staff when queried on the issue. Whatever the truth of it is, the story about the takeover of Said’s childhood home by the “South African Boer” has come to symbolize the colonialism of the Christian Zionist enterprise in literature critical of the ICEJ: the unequal power dynamics, the militant fundamentalism, the arrogance of Western Christians, and their indifference towards indigenous voices (Cohn-Sherbok 2006, 167, Halsell 2003, 91, Wagner 1995, 97). As a story it is, perhaps, too good not to be true.

In a sense, the ICEJ seems perfectly placed, given the history of the German Colony with its millennialist settlers, the streets named after gentile supporters, and the diplomatic air of the ambassadorial surroundings. It is almost as if the move away from Brenner Street—with all its symbolical implications of militancy, fundamentalism, and colonialism—to the house on Rachel Imeinu Street signifies the deeper theological and ideological transformation that the ICEJ has aimed to accomplish in the last fifteen years: a transformation which, in their view, is a move away from flamboyant apocalypticism and high-profile political radicalism towards lower-key considerations of God’s covenantal promises to the Jews and a more solid and respectable role in Israeli society. The shift from Brenner Street is one in social space as much as in geography: it represents respectability and social status, and a proper standing as an embassy symbolically representing the Kingdom of God *vis à vis* Israeli society and the Jewish people. This transformation is far from complete, however, and much of their social and linguistic practice is the result of balancing these desires between biblically grounded eternal truths and the pragmatism necessary to function, as it were, “diplomatically” (McConnell, Moreau, and Dittmer 2012) on intense discursive terrain.

¹⁹ The “South African Boer” mentioned by Said was Johann Lückhoff who was the executive director of the ICEJ from when it was founded in 1980 until 2000 when he was replaced by another South African, Malcolm Hedding.

History of the Organizations

At least since the decades following the Protestant reformation, ideas about a future Jewish national restoration have been an important theological undercurrent in various Protestant movements. During the sixteenth century, several Protestant thinkers including Henoeh Clapham, Thomas Brightman, and Joseph Mede speculated about the Jewish historical destiny, and during the seventeenth century such ideas flourished both in Puritan England (Lewis 2010, Smith 2013) and in northern European Pietist milieus (Ariel 2014, Stewart 2015). As noted in Chapter One, scholars focusing on the North American context have often paid particular attention to theological developments in the British Isles. Historian Robert O. Smith, for instance, has argued that the sources for “contemporary American affinity for the State of Israel” are primarily found within a tradition of “Judeo-centric prophecy interpretation” (Smith 2013, 3) first developed by Protestant theologians in the early Elizabethan period, refined in the seventeenth century, brought to North America via the Puritan settlers, and later adopted into the emerging fundamentalist culture (185).

In the late 1800s several Christian Restorationists were also actively involved in political work on behalf of the emerging Zionist movement. In North America, William E. Blackstone wrote a petition to President Benjamin Harris in 1891 in order to convince him to help set up a Jewish-administered state in Palestine. Twenty-five years later, he repeated the request in another petition to President Woodrow Wilson (Smith 2013, 167-168, Boyer 1992). On the European continent, the Rev. William Hechler was another politically active Christian who worked with Zionist leaders such as Theodore Herzl and Leon Pinsker in order to set up a Jewish nation in Palestine (Goldman 2009). Similarly, the Protestant Restorationist influence on the Balfour declaration in 1917, primarily exercised through the Earl of Shaftesbury, has also been frequently described in previous literature (Lewis 2010, Smith 2013, Tuchman 1983).

Since much of this history of “Judeo-centric prophecy belief”, along with the various Protestant programs to further Jewish settlement in Palestine, has been discussed in detail elsewhere, I will not reiterate that here. My focus, rather, lies on how the Christian ministries in Jerusalem have engaged with this history in terms of their self-understanding, and the ways in which they have developed in relation to Israeli society over the past forty years. Although frequently discussed in the media, an exhaustive scholarly account of the organizations’ history has

yet to be produced. The publications that have addressed them at any length have also tended to treat them as largely stable over time. While critical accounts, such as Ariel's (1997), locates the ICEJ in relation to "fundamentalism" and "dispensationalism", more sympathetic accounts such as those by Paul Merkley (2001) and Faydra L. Shapiro (2015) tend to emphasize contemporary formulations as also representative of the organizations historically.²⁰ Although I draw on all these accounts here I try to complement them by tracing their historical development in relation to the society in which they operate. After briefly discussing the question of premillennial dispensationalism—due to its importance in considerable scholarly work on Christian Zionism and the ministries in Jerusalem—I turn to the development of the ministries starting with the prophetic excitement that followed the Israeli victory in the Six-Day War in June 1967.

Restorationism and Dispensationalism

While Judeo-centric prophecy belief, sometimes with Restorationist aims and activities, has flourished in several different Protestant contexts historically, one such tradition—that of premillennial dispensationalism—has received the bulk of attention and often been understood as the main historical source for contemporary Christian Zionism (e.g. Spector 2009, Weber 2004). Dispensationalism is an elaborate eschatological system developed in the mid-nineteenth century by John Nelson Darby of the Plymouth Brethren. Darby's system divides history, as well as the biblical text, into distinct eras which structure the ways in which God deals with humanity. Darby also separated the two peoples of God—the Jewish people and the Church—and argued that particular biblical prophecies only referred to the former. The most distinctive tenet of dispensationalism can be said to be the rapture of the church which marks the end the present era and restarts God's timetable.²¹ Thus, for Darby,

²⁰ It should be noted that Paul Merkley, apart from being a historian, is also a long-term member of the ICEJ's international board, and thus generally sympathetic to their views. His portrayal of the ICEJ and similar organizations demonstrates an unwillingness to engage in any critical analysis of their ideas or practices while his analysis of "Christian anti-Zionist" voices is shallow, polemical, and generally misleading (Merkley 2001).

²¹ The biblical basis of the doctrine of the rapture is primarily found in 1 Thess. 4:17: "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever" (NRSV). Among premillennialist Christians this passage in conjunction with other eschatological passages of the Bible has been understood as a prophecy concerning the "hidden return" of Christ which is expected to occur prior to the

no prophetic fulfillment would happen until after the “any-moment-now” rapture. None of these features however, was unique to Darby’s system; they had existed in various formulations before him and continued to do so after the emergence of dispensationalism and its adaptation by North American Evangelicalism in the early 1900s. Dispensationalism became influential in the emerging fundamentalist milieu, while, particularly as the result of the acceptance of Darby’s ideas by revivalist preachers such as William E. Blackstone, Dwight L. Moody, and Cyrus I. Scofield, the system also underwent a series of transformations in the North American context.

In relation to the Evangelical ministries in Jerusalem there are two important things to note about dispensationalism. Firstly, as several observers have argued, the association between the ministries and premillennialism has been vastly overstated in much previous research (Shapiro 2015, Westbrook 2014). Dispensationalism is no longer a particularly common self-identity among Evangelical Zionists and only a clear minority would be able to explain the dispensational system in any detail. During my time in Jerusalem, I only met one volunteer who self-consciously identified himself as dispensationalist, but even in his case it was with dispensationalism in one of its later forms (Ryrie 1995). Christian Zionists in general and the ICEJ in particular, also prefer to see themselves not as a modern application of dispensationalism but rather as heirs of a long history of Protestant Judeo-centric restorationism. In the case of the ICEJ, this identity is sometimes even phrased in explicit contrast to premillennial dispensationalism.

tribulation. “Caught up” (lat. *raptus*) is a supernatural event in which believing Christians are physically brought up to God and saved from the horrors of the apocalypse. While the rapture has been a part of Bible prophecy circles for the past two centuries, more recently the doctrine has undergone a remarkable popularization by being included in Christian cultural products such as the 1972 movie *A Thief in the Night*, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (novel), the *Left Behind* series (novels and films), and online communities such as *Rapture Ready*. Even more recently the idea has also been explored in non-Christian products such as the novel and TV-series *The Leftovers* and the computer game *Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture*. For more on how the Rapture functions as a cultural product see (Howard 2011, Johnson Frykholm 2004).

Flowing from all these biblical truths [Rom. 11], the ICEJ simply cannot endorse dispensationalist teachings, such as different ways of salvation in preceding ages, that the Church was an after-thought of God following the Jewish rejection of Jesus, or that it is a “parenthesis” in time. For this and other reasons, it is erroneous and misleading for anyone to associate us with Dispensationalist thinking. (Parsons 2013, 28)²²

In contrast to, and critique of, Timothy Weber’s narrative that places the ICEJ as a direct consequence of North American dispensationalism (Weber 2004), David Parsons, the media director of the ICEJ, argues that the “true and noble origins of Christian Zionism” should be traced instead to the “very infancy of the Protestant reformation” (2013, 6). Their “theology, actions and motives”, he writes,

are based on biblical principles and promises, which are backed up by biblical prophecies and New Testament truths. Our position is best identified as Biblical Zionism, which rests on Covenantal Theology. Our approach ... views both the Jewish people and Land of Israel as chosen by God long ago for purposes of world redemption. Thus we have the interest and fate of the entire world in heart and mind when we defend Israel’s restoration to her land. (2013, 2-3)

This identification with broader restorationist traditions has in the ICEJ’s case been explicit since the “first Christian Zionist Congress” in Basel 1985 in which the ICEJ consciously identified themselves as the heirs of European restorationism, particularly the work of William Hechler (Ariel 1997).²³

Secondly, while dispensationalism as an elaborated *theological system* is not very popular amongst contemporary Evangelical Zionists in Jerusalem for a variety of reasons, it is still necessary to recognize the influence dispensationalism as a *popular theology* has had in spreading Christian Zionist ideas and the identifications between the Zionist movement and Christian sacred history. Classic dispensationalism was strictly futurist and advocated a separatist anti-political approach to society (Smith 2013). Such ideas are not only out of fame but even antithetical to contemporary Christian Zionism

²² Parsons’ article *Swords into Ploughshares: Christian Zionism and the Battle of Armageddon* is not officially published but is freely available at the ICEJ website. I received the text in its final form in 2013 from David Parsons.

²³ “International Christian Zionist Congress, Basel, 27.-29. August 1985”, Central Zionist Archives, A15\1582, Jerusalem.

(Westbrook 2010). Yet dispensationalism had a profound influence on the emerging fundamentalist movement in North America, and underwent a series of modifications that made it able to account for the Jewish national restoration as fulfillment of prophecy, particularly through the work of William E. Blackstone (Smith 2013). With the influence of the Scofield Reference Bible, popular dispensationalism also became identified with the cause of Evangelical Biblicism in opposition to liberal or modernist theologies.²⁴ Moreover, in its modified forms dispensationalism came to significantly contribute to the development of prophecy fiction in the style of Hal Lindsey and Carol C. Carlson's *The Late Great Planet Earth* as well as Tim LaHaye's and Jerry B. Jenkins *Left Behind* series. Such works embedded a modified dispensationalism in the culture of Evangelical Biblicism and contributed to the spread of ideas about the Jewish national restoration as a fulfillment of prophecy. Consequently, the popularization that dispensationalism underwent in the North American context, primarily during a few decades in the mid-1900s, did much to establish the identifications between Zionism, Bible prophecy, and biblical literalism. As such, fictional prophecy works and other cultural products that draw on these ideas are part of the "textual economies" (Bielo 2009, 110) by which Evangelicals make sense of the State of Israel and Zionism.

Thus, in the context of contemporary Jerusalem, I share Faydra L. Shapiro's general observation that the "connection between premillennial dispensationalism and Christian Zionism has been vastly overdrawn" (2015), and that it is reasonable to approach the organizations primarily through their self-understanding as embodying a modern application of Protestant restorationism. Yet it is crucial that these contemporary expressions of the organizations' guiding theology are also contextualized historically and discursively. Taking them too much at face value—as Shapiro often does in spite of her insistence that the boundaries of religions are ideological products—risks naturalizing these claims as transparent reflections of inner motives and makes the historical trajectories by which they have developed invisible. The organizations' insistence that they are based on eternal and unchanging "biblical mandates" leave them little room to consider their own ideological development

²⁴ The Scofield Reference Bible was widely influential in the spread of dispensationalist ideas. Historian Paul Boyer has made the important observation that "unlike most commentators Scofield combined his notes and the biblical text on the same page, so the former took on much the same authority as the latter" (1992, 98). This is a significant point; by Scofield's juxtaposition of the biblical text and his own dispensationalist commentaries an identification was made between the two that helped further the latter as "biblical", indeed, even as "literal". "Readers," according to Boyer, "often could not remember whether they had encountered a particular thought in the notes or in the [biblical] text" (98).

over time, but that does not mean that there have been no such developments. As I hope to show below, these developments need to be understood in relation to the organizations' quest for legitimacy in Israeli society and their broader ideological aims.

Jerusalem in the 1970s

Robert O. Smith writes that for early-twentieth century Christian Zionists who long had imagined a future Jewish restoration, the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, and its territorial expansion in 1967 came as a validation of “theological commitments centuries in the making.” (2013, 193). Even before the founding of the state, however, the British mandate had attracted many different varieties of millennial groups, Christian missionaries of both conservative and liberal orientations, and Protestant travelers who were fascinated with the achievements of the Zionist movement and often identified them with biblical prophecies (Goldman 2009, Newberg 2012, Stewart 2015, van Oord 2008). Outside Israel's borders Christians were also largely positive in their attitudes to the new state, some on eschatological grounds, other more for humanitarian or political reasons (Carenen 2012). The Six-Day War in 1967 in which Israel conquered the Golan heights, the Sinai peninsula, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank including East Jerusalem, however, would prove a major turning point in Protestant-Israel relations (Boyer 1992, Carenen 2012, Weber 2004).

The Israeli authors Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar have described the period that followed upon the Israeli victory in '67 as one of “Messianic zeal”: a sense of euphoria in which everything suddenly seemed possible. For the first time in two millennia the Jewish people controlled the larger Land of Israel including the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The beginnings of the settlement enterprise, and the emergence of the national religious camp in the public arena, is understood by Zertal and Eldar in relation to this broader messianic excitement that characterized the years following June '67 (2007, also Ravitsky 1996). On the other hand, Caitlin Carenen describes how the Israeli victory was met with ambivalent responses from mainline Christians in North America, most of whom had been positive towards Israel until then. While some prominent theologians including Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King Jr., and Krister Stendahl signed a statement in support of Israel's recent acquisition of Jerusalem, others expressed concern over Israeli expansionism and the deteriorating humanitarian situation for the Palestinians. The North American

National Council of Churches, for instance, declared that it could not “condone by silence territorial expansion by armed force” (Merkley 2001). In time, the latter position would grow in prominence among liberal and mainline Christians in the US and elsewhere (Carenen 2012, 137-140), and is apparent, for instance, in the development of the World Council of Churches’ perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Ekin 1985).

But if liberal Christians were ambivalent towards Israel after ‘67, Evangelicals were far more enthusiastic and generally understood the Israeli victory in terms of prophetic fulfillment. To describe the experience of peoples or groups that have entered the apocalypse phenomenologically, historian Richard Landes has coined the term “semiotically aroused”, by which he means state of mind where

everything quickens, enlivens, coheres...everything has meaning, patterns. The smallest incident can have immense importance and open the way to an entirely new vision of the world, one in which forces unseen by other mortals operate. (Landes 2011, 14)

Landes’ description is a fitting one for the prophetic excitement that followed the Israeli victory in 1967 in many Evangelical camps. For some, the fact that Israel was now in control over all of Jerusalem signified that “the time of the gentiles” (Lk. 21:24) was over and that the third temple would soon be built in Jerusalem. For many Evangelicals, the Israeli victory also seemed to fit into larger concerns over the experienced erosion of North American culture in the ‘60s, the war in Vietnam, and the fear engendered by the Cold War (Weber 2004). These concerns were ingeniously given voice in the bestseller *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) which placed them and the Israeli victory in a modified dispensationalist framework and argued that they signaled the beginning of the end times. In the book Lindsey intends to show, and for millions of people he indeed showed, how all the crucial events expected to precede the second coming were taking place around the readers. The success of the *Late Great Planet Earth* led to an explosion in the prophecy business in the United States; not only numerous books, but also TV shows, videos, and prophecy conferences helped to spread and popularize the identifications between the State of Israel and biblical prophecy (Boyer 1992).

A similar excitement with the Israel victory was also unmistakable among Evangelicals in Jerusalem, and the ‘70s would see the birth of several Evangelical initiatives and organizations which identified themselves as defenders of the State of Israel and as educators with regards Israel’s role in the prophetic drama. The post-‘67 criticism of the State of Israel that had begun to be heard from the

international community and liberal Christians was also important here: for many Evangelicals this clarified that Israel needed not only to be celebrated but also defended ideologically and theologically. One of the most publicized events of the early '70s took place in June 1971 and was called the "Jerusalem Conference on Biblical Prophecy" which attracted at least 1,200 participants from 32 different countries to Jerusalem's convention center in which the gathered Evangelicals were greeted by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion (Boyer 1992, 188). The conference hall, according to Weber, was made available free of charge by the Israeli government which had begun to understand the benefits of building a relationship with the Evangelical constituency (2004, 214). In fact, as early as shortly after the '67 war, Yona Malachy of the Israeli Department of Religious Affairs had been sent to the US to study the potential of an alliance with fundamentalist Christians, from which he had returned claiming that American conservative Christians were both very friendly towards Israel, and unafraid of saying so (Weber 2004, 221).²⁵ These Israeli initiatives are not reported here to imply that the State of Israel somehow manipulated Evangelicals into supporting it post-'67. In fact, the Evangelicals needed little such manipulation since many of them were already convinced of Israel's prophetic role, and from the Israeli perspective such an alliance with the Evangelical constituency made perfect political sense. However, the initiatives are important because they account for some of the sense of appreciation and momentum in the Evangelical scene in Jerusalem in the '70s which was important in the creation of several Christian Zionist organizations. Not only were they living in historical times, they were also recognized by Israeli politicians as having an important role to play in the unfolding of that history.

One of the organizers of the conference in '71 was G. Douglas Young who would eventually become one of the most important Evangelicals in the development of the Christian Zionist ministries in Jerusalem (Hanson 2012, Merkley 2001). Young was born in Korea, the son of Canadian Presbyterian missionaries, but later moved to North America for a theological education. After gaining a doctorate in Semitic languages and several academic positions in the US he moved to Israel in order to start the American Institute of Biblical Studies in Jerusalem.²⁶ Young identified as a dispensationalist and believed in the periodization of history into specific eras, the future rapture of the believing

²⁵ Malachy's assessment was later published in his *American Fundamentalism and Israel* (1978).

²⁶ The Israel-American Institute of Biblical Studies was founded in 1957. Later it changed its name to the Institute of Holy Land Studies and later still to Jerusalem University College which is the name it bears today (Merkley 2001, 165).

church, the spiritual restoration of the Jewish people *en masse* in the (near) eschatological future, and a coming tribulation for unrepentant Jews and Christians (Hanson 2012, 240-246). Throughout the '50s, while still in North America, he had taught that the restoration of the Jews was a fulfillment of prophecy and that Christians should seek closer co-operation with them and reconciliation for centuries of anti-Semitism, as well as theologically re-evaluating their position on Jewish election. Yet Young's version of dispensationalism was also "unorthodox" in that he insisted upon a second rapture of those Jews who accept Jesus as their Messiah—after the rapture of the Church but before the Great Tribulation, an emphasis which was clearly meant to save the Jewish people from the horrible fate projected for them in most dispensationalist narratives (Hanson 2012, 242-243). Furthermore, according to his biographer, for Young the Jewish people was both distinct from the Church as in classic versions of dispensationalism but also united with the Church in "one family of God" (Hanson 2012, 245). Young, even while he expected a future "spiritual restoration" of the Jewish people post-rapture, also had higher regard for Judaism and for contemporary Jews than most dispensationalists at the time. For Young, the Jewish people was still chosen by God; for Christians not to recognize this unique relationship and how it had manifested in the birth of the State of Israel was not only deeply ungrateful to the Jews for their historical role but also a failure to recognize how God works in history (245).

Although it was generally considered a success, Young was disappointed that the participants at the conference in Jerusalem had not been able to agree on a clear political statement in support of Israel; several participants—among them the chairperson of the conference, Carl F. H. Henry—had been cautious about being interpreted as too "pro-Israel" (Hanson 2012, 233). In consequence Young, and several other likeminded Evangelicals including the influential dispensationalist, John F. Walvoord of the Dallas Theological Seminary, went ahead and published a declaration of their own which emphasized their support for the "unification" of Jerusalem and their resistance to the internationalization of the city that had been a part of the UN partition plan since 1947. A few years later, in 1978, Young organized a second conference, "Congress for the Peace of Jerusalem", and this time he was determined it should be done properly. In preparation for it Young and others published a full-page article in the New York Times which caused considerable controversy. Entitled "Evangelicals' Concern for Israel", it stated:

We believe the rebirth of Israel as a nation and the return of her people to the land is clearly foretold in the Bible and this fulfillment in our time is one of the most momentous events in all human history. While the exact boundaries of the land of promise are open to discussion, we, along with most Evangelicals, understand the Jewish homeland generally to include the territory west of the Jordan River. (Young et. al. quoted in Hanson 2012, 248)

In conclusion the statement called upon fellow Evangelicals to recognize this divine mandate and to support Israel in a variety of financial and political ways. Although the second conference drew less attendance from abroad than the first, it was again visited by top Israeli politicians like Jerusalem's mayor, Teddy Kollek, and Israel's newly elected prime minister, Menachem Begin, who was enthusiastically introduced by Young.

Connecting Israel with the Evangelical World

The conferences in '71 and '78 were only two of several initiatives launched by Evangelical Zionists in Jerusalem during the '70s that served to position them as a bridge between Israel and a global Evangelical constituency. For instance, on 2nd February 1978, Douglas Young together with Pastor Claude Duvernoy (French Presbyterian), Pastor Per Faye Hansen (Norwegian), Basil Jacobs (South African), Chuck Smith (US preacher), and several others founded "International Christians for Israel" which was to be a body "to link concerned individuals, churches and organizations, and to coordinate worldwide Christian commitment related to the state and people of Israel".²⁷ The initiative was publicly declared in a spectacular fashion at the ancient fortress of Masada by the Dead Sea under the proud rubric, "Masada shall never fall again" (Merkley 2001, 168). Young was elected the new networks chairperson. In '75 a South African branch of Christian Action for Israel was also founded in which Basil Jacobs, Claude Duvernoy, and later also Malcolm Hedding who would become the executive director of the ICEJ, were involved. They were active, like several other similar organizations, through newsletters and expressions of support in Israeli and international media, and would later be involved in the founding of the ICEJ.

²⁷ "News release", Central Zionist Archives, S38\653-t, Jerusalem.

While these different initiatives and networks were certainly directed towards fellow Evangelicals in an attempt to win support for the Zionist movement, it is hard to escape the notion that they were also directed at the Israeli political establishment. Interviews with Evangelicals like Young, Duvernoy, and Faye Hansen were frequently published in Israeli newspapers in which the interviewees tried to reduce Israeli concerns that they were missionaries in disguise, and to explain that Evangelicals were staunch supporters of Zionism. A common argument was that there was vast potential, largely untapped by Israeli authorities, in the millions of Evangelicals abroad who supported Israel. It was argued that as Israel after '67 was increasingly in need of such international support, aligning with the Evangelicals was simply a matter of political pragmatism. In other words, all through the '70s, Evangelical Zionists in Jerusalem worked not only to convince their fellow Evangelicals abroad that supporting Israel *was the Christian thing to do*, but also the Israelis that working with Evangelicals *was the Zionist thing to do*. They consciously, simultaneously, and very effectively positioned themselves as the bridge between a large constituency of Evangelical Christians and the Israeli political establishment.

An interesting glimpse into how strategic this ideological positioning was at times is provided in an undated document written by Harold W. Dart, who was the chairman of the International Association of Christians for Israel, and before that involved in the American Christian Committee for Israel. This document, entitled "Christian Attitudes towards Israel: Sectarian and Ideological considerations"—and signed with a "confidential" tag in the top-right corner—was likely written in the second half of the '70s and addressed to several Jewish Zionist organizations.²⁸ The explicit aim of the document was to explain "the most relevant ideological divisions" within Christianity, in order to outline the most effective ways in which to "arouse Christian support for the specific cause of Zionism and Israel". After outlining the groups in typical Evangelical fashion—"non-religious", "liberals", "Evangelicals", and "various sects"²⁹—Dart explains how the first two should be reached mainly by focusing on secular, humanitarian, and historical arguments such as the "democratic aspects of Israel

²⁸ "Christian Attitudes towards Israel: Sectarian and Ideological Considerations", Central Zionist Archives, S38\653-t, Jerusalem. The document is undated but included in a folder entitled "Western European Christian institutions that support Israel. Correspondence, reports, memoranda, surveys, publications, brochures, reprints, newspaper clippings (organized by country)", 1976–1978, so a reasonable guess is that it was written sometime during those years. Furthermore, at least some documents in the same folder were sent to Benjamin Yafa at the World Zionist Organization, Jerusalem, which might indicate the receiver of the document.

²⁹ Literally the document reads (i) "non-religious", (ii) "modernist" or "liberal", (iii) "biblical", "fundamental" or "Evangelical", and (iv) "various sects".

versus the authoritarian and despotic character of its enemies” and “Israel’s achievements in restoring the land [and] agricultural development”.

The Evangelical group however was different; in addition to humanitarian and historical arguments, advocacy activities here should focus on emphasizing the connections between Zionism and biblical narratives, particularly Bible prophecy. In conclusion, Dart pointed out that although “to date, Jewish Zionist efforts have been directed mainly to reaching the first two elements of the ‘Christian World’ [nonreligious and liberals] ... the greatest potential ... lies within the Evangelical community”. Thus, “specially designed material for use with Evangelicals should be prepared to stress Biblical aspects of Zionism and Christian relationship to Judaism”. To anticipate Israeli concerns about evangelization the author also added that “Evangelical tendencies to missionary attitudes can be modified by a proper use of the history of Jewish and Christian relations and examples of Christian tolerance and good will”.

Although it is uncertain who the receiver(s) of this strategy document were, and what impact it might have had on Israeli efforts to build Christian support for Zionism in the late ‘70s, it is interesting to note both how pragmatic the author is in assessing the various groups and the various strategies that should be employed to reach them, and how he singles out the Evangelical group as likely to be the most receptive to Zionist ideology. In the late ‘70s, despite forerunners such as Dr. Young, the alliance between Evangelicals and Israel was still in its infancy and Israeli media constantly misconstrued Evangelical views and activities in Jerusalem. The concern that they had a hidden agenda and were really just interested in winning Jewish souls was ever present, and suspected missionary activities were frequently reported in the press. Dart’s document is interesting because it clearly and pragmatically outlines the basis on which the alliance should be built and how Israel could win international Christian support for Zionism. In retrospect, the document sounds almost prophetic in terms of how this alliance would develop, and the basis on which the relationship between Evangelicals and the state of Israel would be structured.

Practical Support and Founding Organizations

In spite of all these public declarations, budding Evangelical networks, and the attention that they had begun to receive in Israeli and international media, some Evangelical Zionists in Jerusalem started to feel that a more tangible expression of their support was needed. Thus in the ‘70s, while the prophecy business was booming in the US, Evangelical Zionists in Jerusalem began to organize

themselves so as to create the infrastructure for what would become the Christian Zionist ministries in Jerusalem. Many of these organizations were highly dependent on the vision of one charismatic and effective leader, and consequently several of them disappeared or merged with other organizations when the leader no longer had the time or energy to run them. Some, however, would prove more long-lived. The first of the ministries that is still active today is the final brainchild of Douglas Young: Bridges for Peace. In '78, Young handed over responsibility for the Institute of Holy Land studies to another Evangelical Zionist, George Giakumakis, and launched the BFP, an Evangelical organization that was to engage in practical work within Israeli society and in building bridges between Israel and Evangelicals (Hanson 2012, 267). The organization built on the social status and relationships Young had developed in Jerusalem but by this time Young was aged and he never took up the position as director, dying of a heart attack in May 1980. Instead, the position was filled by Clarence Wagner Jr., a graduate from Oral Roberts University who had been running the Spafford Children's Center in Jerusalem for some years. Shortly before he died, Young received the honor, "Worthy of Jerusalem", the city's highest award, from Jerusalem's mayor for his services for the city.

In '79 another development was also stirring in Jerusalem, centered on the charismatic Dutch Reformed Church pastor, Jan Willem van der Hoeven, who had been the warden of the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem between 1968 and 1975. Van der Hoeven grew up in a Reformed family in Holland, studied theology at the Bible College in London where he also met his Lebanese wife, and was ordained in the Armenian Evangelical Church in Beirut before coming to Jerusalem a year after the Six-Day War. In '79 van der Hoeven was involved with several other Evangelicals—Robert Lindsey, the pastor of the Baptist congregation in Jerusalem; David Bivin, another North American Baptist who ran a Hebrew school in Jerusalem; Canadian couple Marvin and Merla Watson; Douglas Young; George Giakumakis; and others—in founding a small prayer community that they called the Almond Tree Branch (Ariel 1997). It was this community that, in '79, launched the first Feast of Tabernacles celebration that has since become the most visible expression of the ICEJ. The rationale for this celebration came from van der Hoeven: according to his reading of Zech. 14:15 gentiles were also commanded to gather in Jerusalem during Sukkoth and it was unscriptural, he argued, that Christians celebrated only two pilgrimage feasts (Easter and Pentecost) while three (including Sukkoth) were actually mentioned in the Bible.

While the feast celebration in '79 drew in many Evangelical Christians and further served to consolidate the base of the emerging organization it was 1980

that would mark the real start of the ICEJ when, in July, Knesset passed the *Basic Law: Jerusalem, Capital of Israel* which provided the impetus. The law did not specify any boundaries, and did not legally change the status of Jerusalem, but it was nevertheless received critically by the international community as a de facto annexation of the larger Jerusalem area, and the UN declared that the law needed to be rescinded. In consequence, as noted above, the few national embassies that had until then remained in Jerusalem were relocated to Tel Aviv.

Among the Evangelicals in Jerusalem, this relocation was met with outrage, and several signed petitions calling on their national governments to rethink their decisions; one of the Evangelicals most involved in these protests was van der Hoeven. When the protests went unheard some of those involved in the Evangelical scene in Jerusalem decided to launch a Christian Embassy to represent the views of “Bible-believing” Christians who were in full support of the Jerusalem law.³⁰ The official opening was held in the presence of Mayor Kollek during the second Feast of Tabernacles in September ‘80. *Haaretz* reported that van der Hoeven told Kollek that the new organization “expresses the feelings of millions throughout the world who support Israel and who are not obliged to pay lip service to the conventional political pressures of the moment”.³¹

In terms of positioning themselves as a politically valuable ally to Israel the choice to launch the Embassy, and to frame it as a response to the Jerusalem law was highly effective. The sight of eight hundred Evangelicals marching through the streets of Jerusalem in a show of solidarity was also extensively reported in Israeli newspapers and was likely important in making the Embassy known to the Israeli public. In short, the founding of the ICEJ was spectacular, timely, and very successful. While some media reports seemed uncertain what they should make of these unexpected Evangelical expressions of affection for Israel and the Jewish people, reports were largely positive. Similarly to Dart’s letter

³⁰ Ariel describes the founding of the ICEJ as basically an opportunist move: with the relocation of the embassies the Evangelicals in the group around van der Hoeven had the perfect opportunity to receive the maximum amount of publicity for the new organization. In ICEJ’s own accounts, the founding of the organization is rather presented as a spontaneous act of solidarity arising from the outrage they felt when “the nations abandoned” Israel. I think the truth lies somewhere in between; the ideas for an organization had been long in the making but the critical letters sent to politicians in Norway and Holland in response to the decisions to relocate their embassies served to crystallize the new organization’s focus and organizational identity. Finally, the public announcement of the organization was perfectly timed and brilliantly executed. It was an opportunity not to be lost.

³¹ “More than 5,000 now registered for Jerusalem March”, *Haaretz*, September the 23rd 1980, Caspari archives, Media review 80-82.

above, the ICEJ effectively framed themselves as representative of a large Christian constituency that would support Israel's claim to the land, and they would be unmoved—in van der Hoeven's words—by “conventional political pressures of the moment”. Their support for Israel was based on the Bible, and neither modern political expediency nor the opinions of national governments or international organizations could trump that.

Although largely similar ideas about Bible prophecy and Jewish restoration were influential in the circles attached to both the BFP and the ICEJ, and even though some of the same people were involved in founding both, their organizational identities were different from the start. Both ministries were interested in supporting Israel through practical means such as investments in the Israeli economy and sponsoring Jewish immigration, and both wanted to be perceived as a “bridge” between Israeli society and the Evangelical world. What made them different was not so much ideology as their views of how they could best fulfill these goals. While the BFP drew upon Young's long and very well-respected engagement with Israeli society, his participation in Jewish-Christian dialogue, and his interest in Christian education, the ICEJ was much more of a political advocacy organization from the beginning; it was loud, overtly political, confrontational, unashamedly self-confident and—at least in theory—much more global.³² Furthermore, while the BFP derived most of its support and most of its employees from North America, the ICEJ had its main base of support in Europe (especially northern Europe) and in South Africa. The names chosen for the organizations also speak to these differences; while the BFP saw relationship-building between Christians and Jews as its main occupation—although it always felt that a large part of this relationship derived from its political support for Zionism—the ICEJ was launched as an “embassy” in open confrontation with the international community as expressed in UN resolution 478. The ICEJ were—in an echo of Malachy's assessment of North American fundamentalism noted above—both very supportive of Israel, and distinctively unafraid of saying so.

³² In 1981, the ICEJ reported that they had established “consulates” in 16 countries and hoped “to expand by another 10 nations very soon” (Johann Lückhoff, ICEJ Newsletter, 30th September 1981). The ICEJ's fast internationalization and establishment of national branches in many countries in the early '80s depended in part on making already existing Evangelical Zionist organizations part of the ICEJ network. Examples of such organizations were: “Help to Israel” (Holland), “Prayer for Israel” (Britain), “Arbeitskreis vür Israel” (West Germany), and “Christian Action for Israel” (South Africa). (“Embassy without a country”, David Krivine, Jerusalem Post, June the 24th 1981, Caspari Center, Media Clippings Jan 81-Dec 81).

Navigating the Socio-Political Space

While the differences between the BFP and the ICEJ during the early years should not be exaggerated—as already mentioned they had similar goals and ideological agendas and they have often cooperated in specific areas throughout their histories—nor should they be completely neglected. As the ICEJ emerged as the figurehead for Evangelical Zionism in Jerusalem during the ‘80s they also received more coverage in the media, and they became the Evangelical organization that most Christians and Jews, both within and outside Israel, came to identify with Christian Zionism. Consequently, the ICEJ became the organization at the center of much heated debate, and its theo-political agenda was frequently discussed, evaluated, criticized, praised, and misunderstood in the media throughout the ‘80s and ‘90s. On the other hand, the differences between the organizations during the ‘80s also emerge, in no small part, from the characters of the people behind them.

Without doubt, the most important person behind the ICEJ until his resignation in 1998 was van der Hoeven, who was both charismatic and outspoken, but also deeply controversial (Ariel 1997, Merkley 2001). While officially holding the modest title of “spokesperson” of the ICEJ, he was not only the face of the Embassy but also, in Ariel’s words, “undeniable leader and chief ideologue” (1997, 373). Van der Hoeven was religiously conservative and politically radical, even by contextual standards, and under his leadership the ICEJ ventured into several sensitive political areas—sometimes, I think, more based on the spokesperson’s whim than any planned strategy—that made the organization highly controversial in relation to the larger Christian world.

In the early ‘80s van der Hoeven often expressed hopes for the rebuilding of the temple on the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif, and complained of the fact that most Israelis did not care about the issue.³³ In some cases, he also ventured into relationships with Jewish national religious right-wingers who had similar goals, for instance Stanley Goldfoot’s Temple Mount Foundation. In 1984 Meir Kahane, the founder of the ultra-nationalist party *Kach*, claimed to have been contacted by van der Hoeven but that he had refused to work with him because he was “repulsed” by Christians, and because he considered van der Hoeven a missionary.³⁴ In the same year, the ICEJ planned a march to the Temple Mount as part of the Feast of the Tabernacles festivities and, according to Ariel, it was

³³ “The Temple mount connection”, Jerusalem Post, June the 15th 1984, Caspari Center, Media Clippings, Jan 84-Jun 84.

³⁴ Ibid.

only after the intervention of Mayor Kollek that the leaders of the ICEJ could be convinced to abort it (1997, 384-385). Earlier the same year, the members of the Jewish underground—who had developed plans to blow up the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount—had been arrested (Zertal and Eldar 2007, 76 ff.), and Kollek was apparently concerned that thousands of Evangelicals on a march to the location might further upset the city’s delicate inter-religious balance.

The overtly political, and somewhat excessively self-confident, approach of the ICEJ during its early years is also visible in the naivety with which it engaged with the civil war in Lebanon both before and after the Israeli invasion in June 1982. While a broad majority in the Knesset had voted in favor of the invasion, public opinion in Israel soon became increasingly critical of the war. In contrast to earlier conflicts, it was felt to be a war of aggression that lacked a clear military goal, a sentiment which materialized in a large anti-war demonstration in Tel Aviv in September ‘82. The ICEJ supported the war effort through opinion pieces, association with the Evangelical pro-Haddad radio station, “Voice of Hope”, and even had General Sa’ad Haddad visit the Embassy in the summer of ‘82, a visit which was described in emotional and encouraging terms by the executive director Johann Lückhoff in a newsletter in June.³⁵ The people of “Free Lebanon” deserved strong Christian support, he wrote, not only because they were “the last vestige of a Christian nation in the Middle East”, but also because they shared a “wonderful, scriptural destiny in common with Israel”.³⁶

As in the question of the expanding settlement enterprise and the interest in rebuilding the temple, the support for Free Lebanon placed the ICEJ ideologically in close proximity to the emerging national-religious camp in Israel. They espoused a vision of Israel that was a mixture of messianic and nationalist sentiments, a religious pioneer state that was an exception in the community of nations and that could only be judged by biblical standards. However, during his time as spokesperson van der Hoeven was not afraid of openly chiding, not only the Christian world but also Israeli society when they failed to live up to his millennial expectations. His outspokenness on such issues is remarkably different from how the ICEJ behaves today. For instance, in 1981, the Jerusalem Post published a four-page article covering the new “embassy” that

³⁵ Johann Lückhoff, “Newsletter”, June the 7th 1982, p 1-2.

³⁶ The State of Free Lebanon was the self-proclaimed and internationally unrecognized territory in southern Lebanon that was under the control of Haddad and his allied forces roughly between 1979 until Haddad’s death in 1984. For some years it was practically semi-independent but heavily reliant on Israeli logistical and military support.

is telling in this regard.³⁷ In the article van der Hoeven tells the author that “we are better Zionists than you Israelis [because] you don’t fully believe in your own cause”. Israelis, van der Hoeven says, are too compliant with the standards of the modern world when they should be leading it towards the new era; Israel lacks a “sense of mission” and is “assimilating to foreign standards”. These comments reflect both van der Hoeven’s resistance towards land concessions as part of peace negotiations, and also his critique of the moral and spiritual status of Israeli society. The author of the article makes the remark that van der Hoeven “reproves us [Israelis] like the prophets of old” and quotes the ICEJ spokesperson: “Have you survived the terrible ordeals of your 2,000 year exile, in order to set up at the end an ordinary carnal, self-seeking state like Denmark or Holland or America?” According to van der Hoeven, Israelis are failing to accept their role as the penultimate heroes in the eschatological narrative due to their denial of their religious destiny and their wish to be just like any other people. But Jews are not like other people; it is even “in their blood” to be different, he says, and they need to accept the demands placed upon them by narrative and become the light of nations that they are meant to be. If they will only accept their spiritual destiny they will be the heroes of the coming dawn. In response to the author’s question about how they then should live in order to fulfill this destiny van der Hoeven responds by quoting Jeremiah (31:31-33) and the conditions of the new covenant, the implications of which are lost on, or at least go unmentioned, by the journalist. For van der Hoeven, of course, this is a reference to the expected spiritual restoration of the Jewish people that will occur when they accept the Messiah. The Messiah is the ultimate answer to their contemporary moral, spiritual, and political shortcomings.

This highlights another point relevant to the ICEJ’s negotiation of the social and ideological space in Israel; while the critique of them from Christian quarters outside Israel mainly had to do with their overtly political approach and the way they associated with the national religious right in Israel, the principal question that they had to negotiate within Israel had to do with evangelization. As early as ‘82, the ICEJ reported that their building had been vandalized by “religious fanatics” who were convinced that “the Embassy is just a front to take away their Jewish identity”.³⁸ Similar attacks on the buildings and activities of the ICEJ, BFP, CFI, and other Christian organizations in Jerusalem were reported many times in the ‘80s and ‘90s and it remains a question of concern

³⁷ “Embassy without a country”, David Krivine, Jerusalem Post, June the 24th 1981, Caspari Center, Media Clippings Jan 81-Dec 81.

³⁸ Johann Lückhoff, Newsletter, March 1982.

for the ministries today. Israeli anti-missionary organizations like the *Yad l'Achim* (A Hand to Brothers) have specifically targeted the Christian Zionist ministries in Jerusalem and subjected them to a critical examination of their goals. Within Israeli media there has also been an ongoing debate about whether the Evangelicals should be perceived as “true friends” of Israel or rather missionaries in disguise (see also: Shapiro 2011, 2015).

In 1990, however, the ICEJ was also attacked from the other end of the spectrum. In an issue of *Mishkan*, a Jewish messianic journal associated with the Caspari Center, several of the authors address the ICEJ’s outspoken non-missionary agenda and criticize it on theological grounds.³⁹ The ICEJ and the other ministries in Jerusalem have consistently argued that even though they hold to the belief that all peoples—including Jews—need to recognize the Messiah, they themselves do not engage in any missionary activities in Israel. To attempt to convert Jews is not part of their mandate as they see it, and it is ultimately unnecessary since the Jews will in any case realize that Jesus is the Messiah at some point in the eschatological future.

Although limited in terms of public impact, the *Mishkan* issue is important because of what it represents. In the issue, Evangelical and messianic authors who generally saw themselves as part of the Evangelical Zionist movement criticized the ICEJ for its lack of integrity; while they generally recognize the ICEJ’s importance, and describe it as a genuine Evangelical organization they also lament its unwillingness to live up to its own Evangelical commitments and, particularly, its alleged silence on behalf of the marginalized Messianic Community in Israel. Considering that the ICEJ, like most Evangelical Zionists, both expects a future “spiritual restoration” of the Jews and perceives this to be the ultimate fulfillment of Jewish identity, an unwillingness to defend and support the Messianic congregations in Israel is too much of a sacrifice in the name of Zionism and social respectability, the authors argue. The ICEJ has gone too far in trying to be acceptable to the Israeli public; in essence, they compromise the Christian message by making Evangelical commitments conditional upon Zionism and Israel. Furthermore, in spite of their claim to represent millions of Israel-loving Christians worldwide, one of the authors claims that the ICEJ is a “self-perpetuating and self-regulating body,

³⁹ *Mishkan*, no. 12, 1990. According to the editorial, the ICEJ was invited, but refused to respond to these critiques in the issue, a refusal which perhaps illustrates the disinclination of the ICEJ to engage in debates concerning evangelization beyond stressing that they are completely uninvolved in such endeavors. All *Mishkan* issues are available online here <http://caspari.com/new/en/resources/mishkan-archive> (accessed 2016-04-12)

independent of any ecclesiastical jurisdiction. It is a voluntary society representing the views of its own limited circle of supporters” (Ross 1990, 15).

In a sense, this absence of broad Evangelical mandate was of course true. The ICEJ was from its inception an Evangelical, non-denominational interest group without any specific ecclesiastical or ecumenical mandate,⁴⁰ despite their own claims—frequently repeated in media and scholarship alike—to represent seventy million Christians worldwide. The political leverage they eventually gained developed gradually, partly through their own work, but also as a consequence of their association with Israeli politicians and civil society. Ultimately, the legitimacy that they gained was the result of self-fulfilling prophecy; if they had not been perceived from the start as representative of a large group of Evangelical Christians they would not have gained as much attention from Israeli politicians and media. When they gained that attention, however, they also became better known in the Evangelical world.

Yet, in Ariel’s assessment of the ICEJ’s early years, it is clear that its importance in European and South African Evangelicalism was never equaled in North America where other organizations—among them the BFP—were already established and had a head start (1997). This regional disparity would become even more acute in the fall of 1985 when a controversy arose within the Embassy which ended with the defection of most of its staff and board members from English-speaking countries.⁴¹ The Jerusalem post reported in October ‘85 that members of the UK branch of the Embassy had resigned and that several Christian Zionists who had long been associated with the Embassy had chosen to boycott the Feast of Tabernacles that year, among them Evangelical celebrities Lance Lambert and Derek Prince.⁴² The reasons for dissent were numerous. According to the defectors there was a general discontent with the “almost unquestioned leadership” of the power duo van der Hoeven / Lückhoff, their

⁴⁰ For instance, the Lausanne Movement for world evangelization has not explicitly addressed the ICEJ, or even Zionism or the State of Israel in any of its formative documents. The only questions relevant here that it has raised concern Jewish evangelization and so-called two-covenant theology in which it simply has affirmed the “orthodox” Evangelical position that all people need to accept Jesus as their Messiah, and that there is no separate path for Jews. See the “Manila Manifesto” and “Cape town commitment” available here: <https://www.lausanne.org/category/content> (accessed 2016-04-12).

⁴¹ Ariel attributes the crisis to the “authoritarian” style of leadership within the ICEJ and differences in European and North American political culture (1997), while Merkley does not give any reason (2001). In interviews with me those involved in this crisis have been unwilling to talk about it.

⁴² “Christian Embassy suffering dissent as annual event opens”, Haim Shapiro, Jerusalem Post, October the 2nd 1985, Caspari Center, Media Clippings August 85 – October 85.

excessive involvement in politics, and their close association with the Likud party. Johann Lückhoff, on the other hand, said that the conflict was caused by the Embassy's decision to stick to its "original goal of comforting Zion" while the dissenters "were more concerned about with reconciling Jews and Arabs". The defections from the board would have consequences: the ICEJ lost some of its credibility in English-speaking countries—something which it later had to work hard to regain— although the most tangible effect of the controversy was that several of the dissenters moved ahead and founded another organization in December '85: the Christian Friends of Israel.

If a concern with the rightist policies of the ICEJ and a wish to work more closely with the Palestinian population were indeed the major reasons for the defection of the British and North American staff, however, there is little evidence for this in the founding stories of the CFI. In concert with the Bridges for Peace and the ICEJ, they identify as Biblical Zionists who understand their main task is one of undoing of the history of Christian anti-Semitism and supporting the Jewish people, materially, financially, morally, and politically. Two of the original founders, both of whom are still the leaders of the organization, were Ray and Sharon Sanders, North Americans who had worked at the ICEJ since June '85, and as volunteers at the Feast of Tabernacles before that. Other founding members were Orde Dobbie—a cousin of British Major-General Orde Wingate, legendary in Christian Zionist circles, who during the British Mandate worked closely with the Jewish Agency and the Haganah—Derek White, and several other North American, British, and French Christian Zionists, most of whom had previously worked at the ICEJ. Theologically educated at a Bible college in Dallas, both the Sanders had been interested in Israel since reading *The Late Great Planet Earth* in the early '70s, later traveling to Israel in '75. In an interview with me, Sharon expressed a greater identification with dispensationalist narratives than is common at the ICEJ, but she also added that there are parts of dispensationalism "that the Jews are very concerned about" and that those "far-out, doomsday theories" that have been frequent in popular dispensationalism "need to be restudied". In spite of this emphasis on dispensationalism, there is little that distinguishes the CFI from the BFP or the ICEJ ideologically or theologically. They also prefer to see themselves as representatives of a broad Christian "Bible-based" restorationist tradition: friends of Israel who are healing the wounds of the past. Like the BFP however, the CFI has been able to operate with less publicity in the shadow of the larger and more vocal ICEJ.

Covenantal Theology

In '98, van der Hoeven, the most vocal Evangelical political voice in Jerusalem, had to leave his position as spokesperson for the ICEJ after the board insisted on his resignation (Merkley 2001, 239, footnote 30).⁴³ Two years later, the executive director, Johann Lückhoff, who had occupied the central administrative role at the ICEJ, was replaced by another South African, Malcolm Hedding. These changes in personnel were indicative of a change of direction for the Embassy, its theological emphases, and its relationship to Israeli society. As the ICEJ has occupied a central ideological role for the Evangelical Zionist community in Israel since its early years, these changes would also reflect more broadly on the Evangelical scene in Jerusalem and abroad.

Malcolm Hedding is a Pentecostal (Assemblies of God) of British descent who had been active in the Jerusalem scene in the '80s and '90s. He had served as chairman for Christian Action for Israel for close to ten years, been the pastor in the Jerusalem Christian assembly (which later became the King of Kings community) in the late '80s and he had also occupied the position of chaplain at the ICEJ. In the '90s Hedding returned to South Africa to start a Pentecostal congregation with a specific Messianic orientation in Durban before he came back to the ICEJ to take up the position as executive director in 2000 (Helgesson 2006).⁴⁴ As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Fourth International Congress on Christian Zionism organized by the ICEJ in February 2001 started the shift of emphasis to "Biblical Zionism" instead of "Christian Zionism", one that is, if not a direct consequence, at least in congruence with

⁴³ After his resignation van der Hoeven started a new organization in Israel called the "International Christian Zionist Center" which still remains active to some extent but has never grown into a major Evangelical actor in Israel.

⁴⁴ To date, no scholarly work to my knowledge has analyzed the profound influence of South African Christianity on the development of the ICEJ and on Evangelical Zionism in Jerusalem more broadly. This influence is visible both in the many prominent South African Evangelicals in Jerusalem and in the theological development that followed. Furthermore, during the '70s and '80s, it was common among South African Evangelical Zionists to compare their own situation with Israel and to identify with the Israeli struggle. For instance, in a newsletter written in 1977, Basil Jacobs, the then secretary of Christian Action for Israel, writes that "South Africa and Israel are riding out a storm—it may in the end turn out to be the same one". Robert O. Smith has emphasized how North American Christian Zionism developed in close relationship with North American national identity (2013), and a similar argument has been developed by Timo R. Stewart in the Finnish context (2015). Considering the Israeli and South African contexts in the '70s-'80s, and the close relationship between those two states during the apartheid era (Polakow-Suransky 2010), it is not unreasonable to expect a similar dynamic as the one described by Smith and Stewart to play also among South African Christians.

Hedding's theological emphasis on covenantal promises rather than apocalypticism. In the Biblical Zionism series, a five-volume collection written by Malcolm Hedding and published by the ICEJ in 2004, Hedding specifies what can be seen as the ICEJ's present theological platform.

Christian support for Israel, or Biblical Zionism, is not based on the prophetic portions of the Word of God ... Our support for Israel is based on *something far deeper*, and that is the promises of the Word of God or the great covenants of history that God made with the people of Israel. *The prophetic portions of God's word reinforce these great promises and validate them.* (Hedding 2004, 5, my emphasis)

I have italicized the two passages here because they signify how the theological reorientation commenced by the ICEJ in the early 2000s was (and still is) understood by its leadership. The biblical foundation for Zionism lies in God's promises to the Jewish people, and apocalyptic passages are understood as secondary, yet important *validations* of these promises. While emphasis on the biblical covenants had of course been an important part of Evangelical Zionist and restorationist theology long before the early 2000s, Hedding placed these covenants at the heart of his theology. For him, and consequently for the ICEJ, covenantal theology was understood as a more solid, more biblical, and notably less controversial way to express and motivate Evangelical forms of Zionism. While prophetic speculation had been the primary mode of motivating such support following the Six-Day War, it had also framed Christian Zionists as excessively interested in the apocalypse, the horrors of the coming tribulation, and the identification of contemporary geopolitical actors with the eschatological drama. By focusing instead on the covenants such negative side effects could, at least in theory, be avoided. It is important to note, however, that the emphasis on covenantal theology is *not less eschatological* than theologies built upon "the prophetic portions" of the Bible; in Hedding's work, the covenants are always placed in an explicitly eschatological framework. The purposes of the covenants, and the ongoing restoration of the Jewish people, are nothing less than the ultimate redemption of the world.

Israel is the vehicle of world redemption; therefore, to curse her or hate her or despise her is to resist the purpose of God—eternal salvation—flowing to the world through her ... Her position before God is special because she plays out a role historically that is unique to her ... If the nation of Israel fails, then God’s plan for world redemption fails. She is the vehicle of world redemption. (Hedding 2004, 8-9)⁴⁵

Traditionally, covenantal theology draws upon reformed Christian thought, and argues that God interacts with the world through the institution of various covenants: with Abraham, Moses, David, and in the New Testament. Covenantal theology has often been criticized by dispensationalists as a form of “replacement theology” due to its traditional ways of conceptualizing the relationship between the Old Covenant (with biblical Israel) and the New Covenant (with the Church). In the aforementioned *Swords into Ploughshares* however, David Parsons explicitly contrasts the “covenantal theology” of the ICEJ with both premillennial dispensationalism and replacement theology, both of which are deemed unbiblical (Parsons 2013, 16).

In the ICEJ’s understanding of covenantal theology, the “Abrahamic covenant” naturally plays a pivotal role. There are two aspects of this covenant that are important here: in it a specific *people* is chosen to be the vessel of God’s redemptive plans, and they are, eternally and irrevocably, promised a specific piece of *land*.⁴⁶ The current physical restoration of the Jewish people to the land that they were promised in the Abrahamic covenant will be followed by a spiritual restoration in which the Jewish people accepts the Messiah (Hedding 2004, Parsons 2013). This spiritual restoration, Parsons argues, is neither conditioned upon a future tribulation (as in many dispensationalist narratives), nor should the believing Church expect a rapture preceding it. These formulations significantly de-stabilize the boundary—which in dispensationalist narratives are often very strict—between the present and the future millennial era. While theoretically still separated, the physical restoration to the land is already the beginning of the millennial era and the eschatological end game.

⁴⁵ “Israel” here has a multi-layered meaning in a way that is typical of Evangelical Zionist thought; it refers most directly to the people (or nation) of Israel, but by typology also to the contemporary state which is understood as a natural and unambiguous extension of biblical Israel.

⁴⁶ Parsons applies a juridical language to account for the difference between *ownership* of the land which is irrevocable and *right of residence* which is conditioned upon the Jewish people’s obedience and spiritual status. In other words, exile and the diasporization “does not impair their underlying [land] title before God. It merely reflects their breach of the conditions for residency” (Parsons 2013, 22).

This vision is framed more as an ongoing eschatological process than a chart in which all the details can be filled in and precisely timed.

Another significant effect of placing emphasis on the enduring covenants instead of Christian apocalypticism is that it draws the ICEJ's Zionism considerably closer to Jewish religious Zionist thought. It cuts away some of the superfluous religious (and specifically "Christian") material that is alien to Jewish messianic thought and frames the redemptive process more in line with those espoused by the national religious camp (Ravitsky 1996). Faydra L. Shapiro has identified Jewish religious Zionists as the most "natural partners" to Evangelical Zionists because they share "a fervent religious faith based in the Hebrew Bible, conservative social values, and an ardent, faith-based Zionism" (2015, 108-109). Shapiro also points out that for many Jewish and Christian Zionists alike, "this movement of Gentiles embracing the Jews and helping them, in the service of God, is nothing less than another example of prophecy in action" (2015, 114). Although Christian Zionists were developing relationships to the religious settler movement in the early '80s, the covenantal theology being developed by the ICEJ was making its theology and eschatological vision less foreign and presumably more acceptable to Israelis with a religious-nationalist vision of Israel.

Going Mainstream

While the Evangelical Zionists in Jerusalem during the '70s and '80s were actively trying to shape Israeli policies on questions such as the protection of Christian communities and Holy places, the freedom to change religion, abortion, and land concessions, the Evangelical Zionist ministries today are generally more cautious about criticizing Israeli internal politics or presenting their own political visions. Previously, there had been a sense of impatience in the Christian Zionist scene in Jerusalem, a sense that in spite of the prophetically significant events of '67, the Jerusalem law, and the steady flow of new Jewish immigrants, the Israelis still refused to fully embrace their prophetic destiny. This is visible, for instance, in van der Hoeven's open criticism of the Israelis and their resistance to surrendering to the demands of eschatological narrative. It is also visible in the '90s when several of the ministries were frequently—and openly—critical of the Oslo accords and the Camp David summit. The failure of the latter, for instance, was welcomed by the ICEJ

director, Johann Lückhoff, in a Jerusalem Post article.⁴⁷ While territorial concessions—particularly those concerning Jerusalem—as expressed in the land-for-peace formula are still resisted by most Evangelical Zionists in Jerusalem, it is far less common to hear these critiques today.⁴⁸

Currently, among the ministries as well as among the volunteers in Jerusalem, there is a very different sense of patience and eschatological moderation; they now seem much more content to wait for events to unfold in their own time. There are, I suspect, several reasons for this shift in attitude. First to be considered are the processes of accommodating to Israeli society and gaining social legitimacy that I have been tracing in the previous pages. There has been a learning curve to understanding how to express their views and how to work in and with Israeli society in ways that are both communally accepted and effective locally. Second, this accommodation was also made easier by broader political shifts within Israeli society in the 2000s that have brought the Evangelicals more into the Israeli mainstream politically. Following the failure of the Oslo process in the mid-'90s, the Camp David summit in 2000, and the outbreak of the Second Intifada the same year, Israeli politics have been moving steadily to the right under three consecutive Kadima / Likud governments headed by Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert, and Benjamin Netanyahu respectively. Some of the positions held on the issues of the Palestinians and the peace process that were previously mostly found in the nationalist right now increasingly occupy the political center. Although the ministries have historically worked with both leftist and rightist governments in Israel, the right has always been a more natural ally due to the organizations' resistance towards the land-for-peace formula and the two-state solution. This implies that for the Evangelical Zionist ministries things have simply moved in the right general direction during the 2000s: the peace process, although periodically revived, is in hibernation and there are no credible options on the table for changing the status quo. While there is often a sense of alarm in the newsletters and other publications of the ministries concerning Islamist violence, outbreaks of European anti-Semitism, or criticism of Israel from the international community, the general sense is that none of these are "existential threats" in the same way as a peace process involving Israel giving up land. To be clear here, the ministries do not in theory resist a genuine peace process, but they do not perceive any peace which is based

⁴⁷ "Radical Christians sigh with relief over failed peace talks", Tamar Hausman, Haaretz English edition, July the 28th 2000, Caspari Center, Media Clippings Jul 00-Sept 00.

⁴⁸ See for instance Johann Lückhoff's comments to Yitzhak Rabin when the latter visited the Feast of Tabernacles in 1994: "Premier preaches peace to visiting Christians", Haim Shapiro, Jerusalem Post, September the 21st 1994, Caspari Center, Media Clippings Aug 94-Jul 95.

on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state as viable. To the extent that this position, which the organizations have defended more or less since they were founded, has become more common among the Israeli public, so also has the ideological distance between them been reduced.

At the same time, the ministries in Jerusalem have for more than thirty years now worked hard to show that they are indeed Israel's best friends by investing millions of (US) dollars in Israeli society.⁴⁹ These funds have been injected into a variety of different programs: support for new immigrants, elderly care for holocaust survivors, schools and educational programs, orphanages, food banks, bomb shelters in Sderot near Gaza, the repair of homes, and tourism, as well as sponsoring more than 100,000 Jewish immigrants.⁵⁰ These initiatives have consistently been presented as "unconditional" acts of solidarity with the Jewish people, as attempts to try to repair the damage done by Christian anti-Semitism, and as acts of love for Israel. Through them, hundreds of thousands of Israelis have gotten in contact with the ministries either directly or indirectly, and many have come to know them as Evangelical friends of Israel. Stories about contact with Israeli Jews, and opportunities to explain "why they do what they do" in Israel frequently occur and are particularly treasured among the volunteers. In many programs, however, funding from the ministries is channeled through Jewish governmental and non-governmental agencies. Cheryl Hauer, at the BFP, explains:

Often Jewish organizations will come to us because they've heard of us from other Jewish organizations. We give a large portion of our food every month to soup kitchens and those kinds of organizations here in Israel. And also, you know, we do the direct distribution, but we have eighteen communities that we are very strongly connected to and we take truckloads of food to those communities every month. And we give it to the municipality and then the municipality in turn distributes it to the neediest of the needy. The only thing that we ask in all of these circumstances is that people that are distributing the food make sure that

⁴⁹ David Parsons reported in an interview with me that their "injection into the Israeli economy", including the Feast of Tabernacles, is between \$US20-25 million annually. I have not, however, seen any official financial reports so I have not been able to confirm these figures nor examine how they have changed historically.

⁵⁰ This is by a conservative count. The ICEJ reports that they have sponsored 117,000 immigrations, and spent roughly \$US45 million since 1989 (see <http://int.icej.org/news/special-reports/icej-aliyah>, accessed 2016-04-18). The BFP and CIF have been less directly involved in sponsoring and coordinating immigration but have worked with new immigrants, and assisted them on arrival. Most of such work has been channeled through the Jewish Agency.

the end recipient knows that that food came from Christians, because that's what we're all about. ... And so the bags that we deliver the food in have a message on the outside of the bag that says in Hebrew, that says this food is coming to you as a gift from Christians around the world who stand in support with the nation of Israel.⁵¹

In other words, in the 2010s the ministries have become deeply financially embedded in Israeli society, probably to an extent not recognized by most Israelis.

Faydra L. Shapiro has argued that Israeli responses to the Evangelical Zionist organizations, while diverse, have often been guided by a pragmatic approach: “We need all the friends we can get” (Shapiro 2015, 100). While for many orthodox Jews Christian donations are a religious question,⁵² most Israeli Jews on the liberal end of the religious spectrum view the Evangelicals primarily through the lens of politics. What matters to them is the ministries’ Zionism, not their conservative Christianity which is mostly treated as a “(hopelessly) harmless quirk” (2015, 104). In my reading of the representation of the ministries in Israeli media, this pragmatic approach has been dominant since the beginning, although criticized from time to time either from a religious perspective (emphasizing the risk to Jewish religious identity), or from a leftist one (emphasizing the rightist views of the ministries and their potentially toxic mixture of politics and religion).⁵³

⁵¹ Cheryl Hauer 2013.

⁵² Shapiro argues that, for Orthodox Jews, the relationship to the Evangelical organizations and Christian donations is largely a *halachic* matter. Many rabbinical organizations have prohibited the acceptance of Christian donations, but that has not stopped numerous religious organizations, families, and individuals receiving such support. The ministries sometimes admit to difficulties when working within the ultra-orthodox community, but all of them also testify that they frequently do so.

⁵³ A more in-depth analysis of Jewish Israeli perceptions of Christians is provided by Jackie Feldman in his recent ethnography of Jewish tour-guide performances (Feldman 2016). In Feldman’s account, Jewish guides often exhibit an ambiguous attraction / repulsion relationship with Christianity which is at least partly rooted in their own religious identities and the historical relationship between Christians and Jews. While the guides are often fascinated by Christianity, and might also be drawn to it, or “seduced” (2016, 117), they are also disgusted and often employ different strategies to maintain the borders between themselves and the pilgrims; these often occur in practices outside of the pilgrims’ view that Feldman calls “prophylactic rites” (2016, 131) such as (ritually) purifying themselves after spending a week with the pilgrims, or by throwing away personal greetings that they have received together with the tip at the end of the tour. Although explicitly limited to tour guides, who have much more extensive experience of Christians than most other Israelis, Feldman’s account also demonstrates some of the complexities and ambivalences that might be hidden under the surface of “the pragmatic approach” in the Jewish Christian encounter.

If offering social aid to Israeli society is a major part of the activities of the Evangelical Zionist ministries, another is what in Israel is called *hasbara* (public diplomacy). And just as the aid aspect of the ministries has become increasingly embedded in Israeli society, so has their advocacy. For the ministries, *hasbara* most directly translates as defending Israel politically and theologically, particularly *vis à vis* the Christian world. As noted above, this is an activity in which the ministries have been involved since the '80s via newsletters, media reviews, publications, and speaking tours, but it was further developed during the first part of the 2000s as a result of the organizations' being among the founding members of two new, and largely independent, institutions: the "Knesset Christian Allies Caucus (KCAC)" and the "European Coalition for Israel" (ECI). The former was founded in 2004 on the initiative of Josh Reinstein and Yisrael Beiteinu MK Yuri Stern in order to function as a bridge between the Knesset and Christian supporters of the State of Israel.⁵⁴ Its work is mainly directed towards the Christian world but also tries to achieve more positive Israeli attitudes towards Christian supporters of Israel, both in Jerusalem and globally. For the organizations in Jerusalem, it has also been helpful in decreasing bureaucratic difficulties for the ministries: by softening visa restrictions for volunteers which allows them to stay for longer terms, for instance. The ECI was also founded in 2004 by the three ministries—together with Netherlands-based "Christians for Israel – International"—to work as a pro-Israel lobby directed at the European Union. In contrast to its founding organizations, however, the ECI operates on a largely secular platform, and references to Bible prophecy or interpretations of the Scripture are entirely absent from its explicit lists of aims and motivations. Instead it focuses on the history of anti-Semitism in Europe, a shared Judeo-Christian tradition, and argues for Israel primarily on ethical and juridical grounds. These rhetorical differences have made the organization much more able to operate in relation to the European Union than if it had been explicitly associated with Christian Zionism.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ "Rising star", The Jerusalem Report, November the 7th 2013. The work of the Caucus has expanded and now there are 25 Caucuses globally which are organized under the umbrella organization "Israel Allies Foundation".

⁵⁵ The ECI homepage does not include any references to the founding organizations, but they are available in the pamphlet "European Funding of Palestinian Institutions: Issue Brief" printed by the European Coalition for Israel, unpublished.

The Ministries Today

In the 2000s, then, Evangelical Zionism in Jerusalem, although still strange and alien to many Israelis (Feldman 2016), seems to have become increasingly mainstream and socially accepted. On the one hand the ministries exist in an environmental bubble, a specific Evangelical sub-culture in a Jewish majority context while, on the other, they are also deeply embedded financially, socially, and politically in Israel.

While the political beliefs of the ministries have remained remarkably stable throughout their histories—accentuating, as it were, Jewish territorial control over the geographical areas captured in 1967—their ways of articulating those beliefs and their public images have undergone some quite significant changes. Most notably, the ICEJ made an effort, particularly in the 1990s, to whittle away superfluous religious and political content that was controversial within Israeli society, and outside it, among Christian communities. These changes were largely driven, not by a reassessment of core religious and political beliefs, but rather by social demands; the main engine behind them was a willingness to be perceived as true friends of Israel, without a hidden apocalyptic agenda, and thus facilitate smoother co-operation. Post-2000, as their political beliefs have found more resonance within Israeli political culture, the ministries have also become increasingly embedded in Israeli public diplomacy efforts. Their position as bridge to a large Christian constituency situates them as a highly valuable diplomatic tool for *hasbara*.⁵⁶

However, the process of accommodation that I have traced here should not be understood as in any sense complete or finalized. Throughout its history Evangelical Zionism has participated in, and negotiated, two specific discursive arenas: one in Israeli society and the other in the Christian world; these processes of negotiation continue to be highly salient today. In reference to the former, Evangelical Zionism—and the ministries as embodiments of this phenomenon—exists on the border of Israeli discourses and has often tried to find expressions and articulations of its identity that are acceptable to that society. Its adherents know they are different, and they know that, as Christians, they come to Israel with particular historical baggage that forces them to work hard to convince Israelis that they are friends through thick and thin, without any hidden motives. As to the latter, Evangelical Zionism perceives itself as a reform movement engaged in re-evaluating “traditional” Christian positions towards the Jews (see Chapter Five). The ministries have never been as

⁵⁶ Josh Reinstein in “Rising star”, The Jerusalem Report, November the 7th 2013.

representative within Christianity as they have claimed to be, yet during the past fifteen years they have achieved a strong momentum, in particular by focusing more on charismatic forms of Christianity in the Global South. Charismatic Christians in Latin America, in Africa south of the Sahara, and in East Asia are paying increasing attention to Israel, and the ministries in Jerusalem—particularly the ICEJ—have long since realized the potential of this trend.

An interesting picture of this new global Evangelical climate is presented in the *Global Survey of Evangelical Protestant Leaders* (2011) conducted by the Pew research forum among participants at the Lausanne Conference in Cape Town. When asked about their opinions of different religious groups—both Christian and non-Christian—seventy-five percent of the interviewed Evangelical leaders report that they have a generally favorable view of Jews. All other religious groups—not counting other Christian groups—are recorded as being viewed unfavorably. Seventy-three percent of the interviewed Evangelicals also believe that God’s covenant with the Jewish people continues today (22% do not). With regards the State of Israel, forty-eight percent of the interviewees say they believe that Israel is a “fulfillment of Biblical prophecy” (42% do not agree). However, the most interesting results of the survey are visible only when these numbers are compared to the geographical origin of the participants. In general, Evangelicals among leaders from the Global South are more conservative on moral and political issues than leaders from the Global North, and more likely to claim to read the Bible literally and to profess belief in the rapture. Southern leaders are also more likely to sympathize with Israel than are their counterparts in the north. For instance, fifty percent of sub-Saharan leaders sympathize more with Israel than with the Palestinians, a figure which should be compared to the thirty percent of US leaders who choose this option. When it comes to the question most closely related to Christian Zionism—whether or not the participants believe that the state of Israel is a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy—participants from the Global South are also more likely to say that they do.

Percentage of Evangelical Protestant leaders, by region, who believe that the state of Israel is a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy:⁵⁷

	Yes, true	No, not true	No response
All leaders	48	42	10
Sub-Saharan Africa	58	32	10
Asia Pacific	53	40	7
South / Central America	49	43	8
US	44	48	8
North America	43	49	8
Middle East-North Africa	40	51	9
Europe	38	49	13

This trend in the global Christian climate towards an increasing identification with the state of Israel among charismatic and Evangelical Christians in the Global South is very relevant for the ministries in Jerusalem who have always striven to represent global “Bible-believing” Christianity *vis à vis* Israel. All three organizations are also highly aware of these developments and work to make the most of them. For instance, David Parsons at the ICEJ observes:

Our new areas of growth are in Latin America, Africa and Asia and the potential ... We go to Brazil and there is a stadium filled with 120,000 people waving Brazilian and Israeli flags. And we go to Africa and there’s 10,000 pastors gathered to pray for Israel. And, you know, we’re engaging with our Chinese Christian leaders, [and] their church networks number in the tens of millions and God is speaking to them to get involved with Israel. And to me it’s a move of the Holy Spirit. It is pure motives; it’s upright motives. You can’t impugn it. It’s just a work of God.⁵⁸

The movement of the Holy Spirit that influences charismatic Christians to identify with Israel is part of the eschatological vision. *It too is a sign of the times.* While the organizations—particularly the ICEJ—have always claimed to

⁵⁷ Pew Research Center, “Global Survey of Evangelical Protestant Leaders” conducted Aug. 16 Dec-Dec 6, 2010. Q 35. In the full report “Global Survey of Evangelical Protestant Leaders” p. 65, available on the website, not all these numbers are included. I am grateful to the Pew Research Forum for sending me a more substantial breakdown of the answers to Q 35 region by region.

⁵⁸ David Parsons 2013.

represent a large group of Evangelical Christians, it is primarily during the last fifteen years that circumstances have changed to the degree that, for the first time, they have the real potential to develop into the global organizations that they have always desired to be.

At the Embassy 2012

Arriving at the ICEJ's mansion on Rachel Imeinu Street for the first time, I am aware of their history—although not to the extent that I am now—and I am aware of their somewhat ambiguous and unstable social position within Israeli society. Considering this history and the ways in which ideological parameters often structure social encounters in Israel (Markowitz 2013a), I am also very uncertain about how I will be received at the Embassy and whether, and to what extent, they will allow me to carry out my research among them. Today, I have been invited to the ICEJ by one of the volunteers whom I met through a mutual acquaintance, and he has promised to show me around the facilities and introduce me to the people working there. More or less as soon as I arrive, however, I am called up to the office of the media director, David Parsons. In the two-hour-long meeting with him, I am thoroughly questioned: not only, or even primarily, about my planned research project, but more about how I position myself religiously and politically in relation to Israel.

I recount the content of this meeting here since I believe it illustrates how the contextual circumstances that I have outlined in this chapter structure both the discourses of the organizations and the volunteers, and also my encounters with them and the ways in which I have tried to navigate this discursive terrain. Many ethnographers studying Evangelicalism recount similar situations with their interlocutors where their own religious identity is called into question, and various approaches have been developed in order to deal with this situation. These range from that of the detached observer, to more participatory approaches, and even to critical engagement with one's own religious identity as a valid and important subject position (Bielo 2009, 32-33, Howell 2007).

In my encounter with David Parsons, the more detached stance is never an option simply because he does not accept it as a viable subject position. During the conversation I naturally explain my research design, but what is of primary importance to him, and therefore fundamental to deciding whether he will let me carry out the research is, rather: (i) my personal relationship to born again Christianity; and, (ii) my political position *vis à vis* Israel and the conflict. He

asks me about my religious background in Sweden, the denomination to which I belong, how it stands with regards to Israel, and if I am “born again”. He asks me how I view different aspects of the Israeli context and the “situation”, and how I view the ICEJ and the work that they are doing. He also questions me about my thoughts on “Christian Zionism” and several different authors—particularly Victoria Clark, Stephen Sizer, Stephen Spector, Donald Wagner, Timothy Weber, and Paul Merkley whose works are in the book shelf behind him—who have written about Christian Zionism and the Embassy before me. In a way, I am being asked to develop a life story that will plausibly explain to him what I am doing in Israel, what my motives are, and why I am interested in my chosen subjects. While never unfriendly, his manner throughout the discussion is definitely probing, with a critical air to it.

I try to be as honest as possible in response, explaining my interest in Christian Zionism in similar terms to those presented in the previous chapter. Yet, considering the politics of language, and how easy it is in this particular context to be placed somewhere along the political continuum, I am also careful with what I say, using terminology which does not situate me as a critic. This negotiation with David exemplifies how the strict separation that researchers often attempt to construct between their personal and professional capacities—insider / outsider, participant / observer, political and religious views—can be impossible to uphold. In this case it breaks down primarily because David Parsons does not accept this as a viable division, and he is probably right. What we think, personally, has huge impact on the research that we design and conduct, not least in a conflicted area of research such as this one. Ultimately—and admittedly somewhat to my surprise—I pass the test and am rewarded with a “reluctant yes” to conducting research at the Embassy. The main reasons for this are probably that I am deemed sufficiently an insider (religiously and politically), and because I describe how I want my research to be different from some of the previous work that David feels has not represented the ICEJ and their views honestly. Having received that “reluctant yes” from David Parsons the doors to the Bridges for Peace and the Christian Friends of Israel are also opened. In that sense, he has functioned as a gatekeeper for me. In general, the other two organizations are less reluctant than the ICEJ to co-operate in my research, maybe partly because the ICEJ has already agreed to do so, thereby, in a certain sense, “vouching” for me. When we leave the room, the volunteer who has followed me there tells me that I should feel proud; according to him, I am the first researcher ever to get this opportunity.

To some extent negotiations between me and the organizations continued throughout fieldwork but, in general, restrictions relaxed the more comfortable

they became with my presence amongst them. Both in relation to the organizations and to the volunteers, however, I continued to occupy something of an in-between position: moving between insider and outsider, believer and non-believer, participant and observer (Tweed 2002). My positioning was not only my doing, but also depended on the particular volunteers whom I was interviewing, how well they knew me, and how they understood where I was coming from. While some volunteers addressed me as they would any insider, some were more cautious and “diplomatic” in their responses and narratives; yet others could become quite polemical, framing the interview situation more or less as an argument with me, or with an internalized audience of Christian critics or the international community. Often, towards the end of the interviews, I was asked about my own ideas of Israel, about how I understood the “restoration”, the political climate, the various parties, or how it all related to Christian salvation history.

The chapters that follow explore the volunteers’ narratives about themselves in relation to Israel. I have suggested in this chapter that these narratives need to be understood in relation to the organizations’ historical development and the tensions in which they exist in relation to Israeli society as well as larger Christian discourses, tensions that have structured their development and which continue to do so in the present. At the same time, however, the individual stories are obviously also expressions of personal beliefs, problems, desires, experiences, and longings. The next chapter focuses on a few of these individual biographies and the agencies and circumstances that have brought the volunteers to Israel.

3. Self: Calling, Agency & Transformation

So, I arrived here in Israel on September the 11th 2002, one year anniversary of the Twin Towers. Stepped off the airplane and I knew that I knew that I knew that I'd made the right decision. I felt like I was home. I can't explain it, but there was a connection. It was like, it was almost in my spiritual DNA since childbirth that I was supposed to be here for however long, whether it was two years I'm here or whether for my, the rest of my life. But it was like that my destiny came into focus that day ... a page had turned in my life.

Jacob, 2012

“Nothing is by happenstance in the kingdom of God,” Jacob tells me over an espresso in a café on buzzing Emek Refa'im Street in West Jerusalem. It is my third round of field work in the city and Jacob and I have decided to meet up and talk about what has been happening since last we met. We are chatting away about most everything that comes to mind: our respective jobs—mine at the university and his at a Christian ministry in Jerusalem—movies we have seen, last winter's snowfall in Jerusalem, churches, theologies, and God. Jacob does most of the talking while I listen, shooting in a question or two every now and then or when I get particularly curious about something, such as the limited possibilities for chance and coincidence in the kingdom of God. Jacob's remark stays with me during fieldwork and even after I have left Jerusalem: maybe because it seems to capture an important aspect of Evangelical culture; maybe because I recognize the sense of mild pre-determination that it conveys to me as a meaningful religious practice.

In Evangelical Christianity every individual life has a *telos*, a specific purpose which can be brought to realization if one chooses to listen when God beckons. “No happenstance” implies a view of reality that is ripe with intention, a sense that whatever happens, it will have *meaning*, something that can be interpreted,

deciphered, understood. This feature of Evangelical culture is visible not only in Evangelical life stories and conversion narratives but also in Evangelical theology more broadly. Often, but not always, communities, states, and peoples also have an interpretable purpose in God's plan, and even non-human events like natural disasters or other phenomena that secular observers generally consider to be beyond direct human control can, for Evangelicals, be decoded. One consequence of such a theology is the active search for God's hand in history, in contemporary political, social, or religious developments, and maybe most of all, in one's own life. God's activity can be interpreted through attentiveness to one's environment coupled with theological conversations, Bible readings, and prayer. Tanya M. Luhrmann has argued that by honing your perception and directing it towards God, you learn to "hear God" and to understand the plan that He has for your life (2004, 2012). In such a linguistic context, life stories are much more than simple reproductions of past events, or even ways of making sense of individual lives. Rather, life stories in Evangelical settings are a medium through which God's plans for one's life, and ultimately God's character, come to be—at least partly—known. Through life stories, a relationship with God can be cultivated.

For Jacob, as for most Evangelicals whom I interviewed in Jerusalem, the journey to Israel is most directly understood as a response to a calling that God has placed in his heart. For some volunteers this calling has been quite explicit, for others it took considerable time and energy to decipher. Some people had "seeds planted" early in their lives but it took time—and sometimes cultivation—for the seeds to grow and blossom. For others the calling did not come until much later, and received quite immediate response. Callings also come in many different forms: as an indistinct longing for Israel; through prophetic words or individual Bible readings; in sermons by elders or pastors; or even through material objects such as TV or the radio. A general pattern, however, is that life stories are almost always recounted in ways that significantly emphasize the involvement of the divine in individual lives. The meandering journeys towards Israel are generally not understood as a result of individual choice, or the agency of the narrator. Rather, God has called the volunteers to Israel, and they have responded, sometimes even without knowing—or being able to explain—why.

The calling narratives are often placed in a broader narrative framework in which the individual's "walk with God" is the central theme: the continuous movement of the self towards increasing religious conviction (Coleman 2003). A central aspect of these "walks" in the context of Jerusalem Evangelicalism is the transformative moments in which the volunteers come to realize the spiritual

significance of the State and people of Israel; in other words, the realization of Israel's place in God's plan is closely linked to the process of self-transformation. This chapter will explore the narrative construction of these coming-to-Israel stories and place them in relation to academic conversations about narrative identity, agency, and self-transformation (Bielo 2004, Harding 1987, 2000, Miyazaki 2000, Stromberg 1993). The first part focuses on the relationship between a divine calling and individual agency, suggesting that a central concern of these calling narratives is the temporary suspension of the protagonist's agency: a narrative operation which produces agency as a dialectical process rather than as a neatly demarcated site for intention, will, and desire. The second part of the chapter discusses how the realization of Israel's spiritual significance is articulated as a type of conversion narrative in which transformation of the religious self is closely related to increasing commitment to Israel as a religious symbol.

Narratives, Performance, and Transformation

As mentioned in Chapter One, much anthropological writing has been dedicated to the topic of Evangelical language use and the ways that language ideology and discursive practices shape Evangelical experiences of faith, agency, identity, and transformation (Bialecki and Hoenes del Pinal 2011). In some accounts, language has also been understood as the central medium of Evangelical conversion processes (Harding 1987, 2000, Stromberg 1993). From Susan F. Harding's perspective, conversion equals the process of learning a new language and being able to articulate experiences in the language of faith. Listening, Harding writes, is "coming under conviction", but it is through "speaking" that one becomes saved.

Once you are saved, the Holy Spirit assumes your voice, speaks through you, and begins to reword your life. Listening to the gospel enables you to experience belief, as it were, vicariously. But generative belief, belief that indisputably transfigures you and your reality, belief that becomes you, comes only through speech. Among fundamentalist Baptists, speaking is believing. (Harding 1987, 179)

Other anthropologists, notably Tanya M. Luhrmann, have argued that an exclusive focus on language might risk the elision of other important aspects of

contemporary Evangelical experiences of God, such as cognition and bodily experiences (2004). In response to Harding, Luhrmann comments that although the convert's new linguistic / cognitive knowledge is certainly an important aspect of the religious transformation process

it is not sufficient. For these converts, in these new and intensely experiential US evangelisms, God becomes an intimate relationship—a buddy, a confidant, the ideal boyfriend. It is not mere words that make him so but learnt techniques of identifying the presence of God through the body's responses—particularly in the absorbed state we call “trance”—and learned techniques that frame that responsiveness into the experience of close relationships. (Luhrmann 2004, 519)

In part, I believe this critique reflects the cultural differences between Harding's and Luhrmann's field sites (Jerry Falwell-styled fundamentalism and contemporary Vineyard Evangelicalism respectively) and the relative emphasis of language and charisma within these two types of Evangelical religiosity, but I also think Luhrmann is right in pointing out that even though language is an important part of the transformation process, religious change is seldom exclusively dependent on linguistic factors. My main focus here lies on how transformation happens within language; however, as we will see in more detail in the next chapter, transformation is seldom phrased in contrast to bodily or material experiences among the volunteers, as the physical encounter with place is also a highly important factor in the movement of the religious self.

The coming-to-Israel stories are not conversion stories in a traditional sense, yet they are similar in several ways to the narratives discussed by, for instance, Peter Stromberg and Susan Harding: they are plotted as stories of religious transformation; they cultivate a dialectical relationship between human and divine intentionality; and they employ Bible-based language as an important part of the transformation process. Since the coming-to-Israel stories share these general characteristics with the conversion narratives my analysis draws upon Peter Stromberg's important study of language and self-transformation (1993) in which, inspired by Roy Rappaport (1977), he argued that rather than approaching the conversion stories of Evangelicals merely as representations of the past, they need to be understood as ritual events in themselves (Stromberg 1993, 3, 11-12). Understanding the stories as rituals goes beyond the claim that witnessing and the telling of life stories are common practices in ritual contexts in Evangelical circles. For Stromberg, it primarily means that the stories, like other types of rituals, are *performances* that seek to effect exchanges between the

transcendental and the mundane at the moment they are told. Thus, rather than being a spoken representation of an original conversion event, the performance of conversion stories, Stromberg argues, is fundamental to the efficacy of the conversion itself.⁵⁹

Stromberg describes how storytellers re-enact emotional conflicts—in fact, the very same emotional conflicts that are narrated as the reason for the conversions in the first place—and then resolve them by reframing them in the language of Evangelical Christianity. It is this move from what he calls “embodied aims” (the non-articulable) to articulated intentions that produces a sense of self-transformation because it brings more of the “subject’s experience into the realm of self” (1993, 29). It is a move from non-sense to sense, from meaninglessness to articulable meaning. Moreover, since this new language enables the expression of what was previously non-articulable, the transformation of the self is coupled with a strengthened commitment to the new language system and its “canonical” symbols. This dual function of the conversion narrative—self-transformation and commitment—is important since it brings the meaning of symbols, and the process by which they receive a personal meaning, into close connection with each other. As Talal Asad has argued, the meanings of religious symbols cannot be isolated from the social and psychological processes in which they are used and produced (1993, 53). Thus, analyses of any particular symbol and the process by which this symbol comes to have a personal meaning for the believer are analytic tasks that need to be undertaken simultaneously. In Stromberg’s theory, commitment to the symbols of the new system is strengthened through the very same process as that by which these symbols come to have personal meaning.

I take a similar approach to the calling narratives discussed here: the narrative construction of Israel as a religiously significant symbol and the volunteers’ adoption of this symbol as part of religious transformation are understood as simultaneously occurring processes. Life narratives are speech acts that seek to effect changes at the moment that they are being told. By telling their coming-to-Israel narratives in relation to two traditional Christian genres—the calling and the conversion narratives—the volunteers are inscribing not only their own lives and work, but also Israel, with other-worldly meaning. In other words, the sense of self-transformation to which the physical and intellectual encounter with Israel gives rise is closely related to the production of these narratives.

⁵⁹ I do think this point is well-illustrated by Stromberg, but I would add that even if the recounting of conversion narratives may be the kind of ritual performances that Stromberg describes, they do not necessarily follow this pattern. Or at the very least, these characteristics of ritual are exhibited to varying extents.

The Calling

Calling narratives, of course, have a long history in Christian traditions and a wide circulation and appeal that extends beyond Evangelical spheres. Like many other Christian ideas, the notion of a calling has also escaped its original theological context and can be said to permeate Western culture more broadly (Bellah et al. 1985, Davidson and Caddell 1994, Scott 2002, Weber 2001).⁶⁰ In Evangelicalism, a calling is central to understanding one's life and work. For instance, in a recent study on Evangelical exchange students (2013), Roman R. Williams has argued that irrespective of field of study, the idea of a calling is the primary mode of framing careers and futures among Evangelical students. These narratives, he argues, can be construed as carriers of cultural values about how the world works, what is plausible, and what kinds of agency are possible (2013, 255). Furthermore, he argues that calling narratives offer "a compelling way to interpret the past, navigate everyday life in the present, and pursue a meaningful future" (2013, 254). Through these narratives this-worldly work or studies become "infused with other-worldly meaning" (2013, 264).

Considering the prominence of calling narratives in Christian tradition, and in Western culture more broadly, I perhaps should not have been surprised that the life stories of the Evangelical volunteers in Jerusalem came in the form they did, yet I was; the extent to which accounts of being called to Israel seemed to be the canonized story of the context, the absence of explicitly political motives in the narratives, and the framing of the life stories more as individual spiritual journeys than dutiful labor for the "Apple of God's eye" puzzled me. The pre-conceptions that I had of the volunteers prior to field work came largely from scholarly works on "Christian Zionism" which, as noted earlier, have prioritized top-down approaches, and construed the phenomenon as a political expression of conservative prophecy beliefs. Listening to the stories of the volunteers offered a very different perspective on why Christians from different parts of the world choose to invest time and money in supporting the State of Israel. In their

⁶⁰ In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2001 [1930]) Max Weber argued that the heritage of Luther and Calvin—what he called "worldly asceticism"—was "one of the fundamental elements of the spirit of modern capitalism". According to Weber, it was precisely the idea of the calling that served as the basis for modern economic conduct. Even though work in modern societies, along with much else, became "disenchanted" (Weber 2001, see also: Jenkins 2000, Williams 2013), or lost its spiritual dimension, more recent sociological studies have shown that the notion of a calling seems to have remained central to understanding work and social behavior in the West.

accounts, the personal relationship with God moved from the backstage which it has often occupied in previous accounts of Christian Zionism.

Ruth is in her forties. She is a warm and humorous, middle-aged American woman with a university degree in the social sciences who has been in Israel for the past twenty years. She works in the aid division of a Christian ministry in Jerusalem, and consequently has more contact with both Israelis and Palestinians than most other volunteers. She speaks Hebrew—which is necessary for her work—and has also started to learn Arabic. Through her work and her long experience of Israel she has a profound knowledge of the local environment and is comfortable discussing even the more sensitive issues concerning politics and the various difficulties that she has encountered in Israel. In this she is not very typical among the volunteers. She is more typical, however, in how she narrates her journey to Israel and the role played by God in that journey. Her route was a long and winding one but, the way she tells it, the seed was sown when, as a child, she became interested in movies and books about the Holocaust. It is noteworthy that Ruth chooses to start her story not with reference to theologies of Israel, with Bible prophecy, or a particular religious experience, but with popular cultural productions such as *The Sound of Music* and *The Hiding Place*.⁶¹ In terms of narrative identity, this beginning emphasizes Christian altruistic ideals and universal humanist values rather than the particularity of biblical prophecy. The fascination with the Holocaust—“the books and the movies”—and the theme of wanting to help, support, and comfort the Jewish people runs like a *leitmotif* throughout Ruth’s narrative. Apart from this “side interest” in the Holocaust, though, Israel and the Jewish people were not a very salient part of her Christian childhood. Her family was a “very devout Christian family” and “strong in reading the Word”. They were part of a tight-knit Christian community but Israel-centered theologies were not a part of that as far as she can recall.

⁶¹ *The Hiding Place* (1971) is an Evangelical classic written by Corrie Ten Boom together with John and Elizabeth Sherrill. The book describes the Dutch Reformed Ten Boom family who rescued Jews in Holland during the Second World War. It portrays biblically informed pietism as antithetical to Nazi Germany and draws upon Pietist theologies that understood the Jews as God’s chosen people “destined to regain their role as God’s first nation” (Ariel 2014, 214). According to Yaakov Ariel, the book’s narrative and its portrayal of the role of “true Christian believers” during the Holocaust has occupied a central place in Evangelical understandings of the relationship between Christianity and the Holocaust. Former ICEJ spokesperson Jan Willem van der Hoeven, for instance, also ascribes to *The Hiding Place* a central location in his own motivations for starting the ICEJ (“The Life in a Day of Jan Willem Van Der Hoeven”, Israel scene, 1985, Caspari Center, Media Clippings Nov 85-Dec 85).

Upon leaving home for college, and missing the intimacy of her childhood community, Ruth wants to find a new Christian setting in which to take part. This takes some time. She tries, among other places, an Assemblies of God congregation but nothing feels completely right until the moment when she is “randomly” invited into a Messianic community. This is her first personal contact with Judaism.⁶² Before this introduction to Messianic Judaism, she has known nothing of the Jewish holidays, she has had no Jewish friends and she has not given Judaism much thought, except for what she calls her “side interest” in the history of the Holocaust. Given this, it comes as a complete surprise to her when she feels “immediately and completely at home” in this community. Yet this feeling of belonging is puzzling; “Why do I feel at home?” she wonders. During the two years she spends in the Messianic community her prior interest in the Holocaust becomes personal on an entirely different level when she begins to understand the role played by Christianity in paving the way for the genocide of the Jews and other minorities during WWII. And it is here, while listening to a Rabbi explaining the history of Christian anti-Semitism, that she is called to Israel for the first time:

And I’m just horrified as I’m learning about all the ways in which the Church has been anti-Semitic and, and it was—I don’t know if you believe in God still talking to people today?—but I didn’t hear any audible voice, there was no, you know, whatever. I just knew that I was supposed to come here [to Israel] and love this people.⁶³

This is the first time she experiences a calling to Israel, but this time it does not stick. Travelling to Israel, she says, felt like “a crazy idea”.

There are rational reasons for shrugging the experience off: she does not have any finances for the trip and she has no idea what she would do in Israel if she went. Consequently, she keeps the calling to herself, and does not tell anyone about it. Instead, she says, “[I] shoved that whole bad idea down somewhere in the far recesses of my mind.” Sometime later, however, while listening to another speaker in the same congregation, it happens again, “like an arrow...

⁶² Several academic studies of Messianic Judaism have emphasized that it is an American-born phenomenon that has developed in close proximity to Evangelicalism. Whether this historical trajectory, the expressed belief in Jesus as the Messiah, or the unorthodox use of Jewish ritual locates Messianic Judaism outside “Judaism proper” is a question that is not discussed here. The participants in this study generally understand Messianic Judaism as an authentic form of biblical religion. For more on the relationship between Messianic Judaism and Evangelicalism see (Ariel 2000, Dulin 2013, Engberg 2012, Kaell 2015).

⁶³ Ruth 2013.

like an arrow piercing my heart”. And this time her response is different: “Wow, I don’t see how it could possibly happen but, you know, and I still think it’s a terrible idea, but ok, we’ll see.” This time Ruth tells a friend of her experience. To Ruth’s surprise, the friend embraces Ruth’s calling, and decides to join her in going to Israel. In a way, this friend acts as a catalyst for the still-very-uncertain Ruth. By running around and telling other people that “Ruth and I” are going to Israel the friend makes the incipient calling public. Yet, in the end, the friend’s enthusiasm seems to melt away and she drops the idea. Ruth decides to go ahead anyway and sends her application to a Christian ministry in Jerusalem: “If this is from the Lord,” she thinks, “He’ll make it happen.”

This is a very common pattern in Evangelical calling narratives: the uncertainty of the validity of the calling before the decision; the placing of ultimate responsibility outside the narrator and in the hands of God; and the way practical things miraculously fall into place once the decision is made. For Ruth, as soon as the application is sent in, “things just started happening”. Her financial difficulties are solved due to unexpected donations from friends, relatives, and members of the congregation; the uncertainty about what to do in Israel is diminished by a job offer from a Christian ministry to care for an elderly Israeli woman who has suffered a stroke. Now, much more confident in the calling, Ruth decides to go to Israel.

During her first sojourn in the country Ruth loses her “heart to Israel”. But, she says, “in a weird way. Because I knew fairly early on that this was a place that I could live, but I didn’t come here expecting to live here, it was weird.” The strong emotional attachment that she feels towards Israel is not making sense to her; she feels it, but she cannot explain why: “I... I would weep over this country and I still do. But it never made sense to me why [I] weep over this country.” When telling me this Ruth starts to cry, and continues to do so on and off until the end of the story. At several points her voice gets choked up and she has to collect herself in order to continue. The intense emotion that her story evokes is telling in itself, but the most important analytical point for my purposes here is her emphasis that her own emotional responses *do not make sense*. Peter Stromberg has analyzed similar non-intentional linguistic traits (affect, pauses, shifts in intensity, sounds, strong emotion) as instances where a part of the subject that it is not possible to express within the “referential language ideology” comes to the surface. For him, an analysis of these moments reveals how storytellers re-enact the emotional conflicts that are narrated as reasons for the conversions in the first place. It is precisely the move from “embodied aims” to articulable intentions that produces a sense of self-transformation, because this brings non-articulable experience “into the realm of

self” (1993, 29). Ruth is unable to “make sense” of the strong emotion that she describes and seems to be re-enacting it in the narrative performance. The crying over Israel did not make sense then and it does not make sense now, she says, but by employing Evangelical language she is able to phrase it as a “calling”. In other words, the strong emotion can be explained as an expression of divine intentionality instead of something that originates uniquely within the human subject. The narrator’s inability, or unwillingness, to make sense of her own experience opens up a narrative space in the story that can be filled with transcendent intention and agency.

Unfortunately, her first time in Israel is not entirely harmonious; the question of the troubled relationship between Christianity and Judaism that she began to ponder in the Messianic congregation now invades the realm of self by becoming a concern about her own identity. In Israel, suddenly she is “one of those blasted Christians who’d done all these horrible things”. The increasing awareness of this history and the reluctance to identify with it lead her into a crisis of identity; it becomes difficult for her to identify as a Christian. This “identity crisis”, as Ruth calls it, is not solved during her first stay in Israel, and even back in the States she finds herself still conflicted and lost. She feels she has been “hijacked” by Israel; she is longing to return, but she has no idea what God has planned for her. The way she narrates it, this is not a question of *what she wants*, but about understanding *what God wants for her*.

I would hold onto this promise: “Trust in the Lord with your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct your paths.”⁶⁴ And all the other Scriptures that talk about how He has a plan, a very specific plan for our lives, and a calling. And so, ok, well, if that’s the case, then I need to know. I need to know for sure, and not just because, “Oh, it was a nice emotional thing,” [becomes emotional, sobbing]. Because there’s a lot of challenge in leaving behind your family and, you know, being overseas and not seeing your nieces and nephews grow up or all those different things.⁶⁵

Ruth’s discourse about having a “need to know” indicates what Tanya Luhrmann describes as a central problem for charismatic Christians, namely, to learn to distinguish when a “nice emotional thing” is actually God trying to tell you something (Luhrmann 2012, xxiii, 39-71). Luhrmann argues that in order

⁶⁴ Ruth is here paraphrasing Proverbs 3:5-6.

⁶⁵ Ruth 2013.

to become a Renewalist Christian, to learn to hear God talking to you, it is necessary “to overcome the fundamental human awareness that our minds are private”(40). This requires developing “a new theory of mind”, a more “participatory” theory wherein the mind has “porous borders” that enable you to “experience thoughts as perceptions” (41). This is a skill that can be instilled through training, and the Vineyard congregation that she studies is understood by Luhrmann as (among other things) a training facility for Christians who want to hear God speaking to them. For Luhrmann, the fundamental strategy through which these Christians develop this new theory of mind is prayer. Ruth of course already knows that God speaks to people; her mind is already “participatory”. But even charismatic Christians well-trained in the ability to hear God, as Jon Bialecki has argued, need to discern between their own thoughts and perceptions of divine origin; not all thoughts should be considered to be from God (2009, 152-153). In Ruth’s narrative this discernment process is long, tortuous, and filled with anxiety, frustration, and conflicting emotion. Over the course of about a year she tries to understand her longing to return to Israel, and whether this is an authentic calling or something that originates within herself. Her primary method for doing so is through conversation and prayer. At the end of the year, the identity crisis comes to a climax when, after she has been teaching in church, she breaks down in tears and the gathered group prays over her. She returns home and has a conversation with her father about the future, and again she does not know, and again she is frustrated.

And I remember being so frustrated that I went up to my room and I, I really cried out to the Lord, you know: “*You have to make it clear,*”—[chuckles] I had one of those moments where you kind of scream at God a little bit— “*because this is driving me nuts. I’m, you know, I don’t know what to do. I don’t know whether to move forward, to stop, whatever. I don’t know what’s going on with my heart, why am I crying all the time? I don’t understand why I feel at home. I don’t understand why I feel homesick for a place that’s not home.*” Like all these different things that were going on with me that didn’t make sense to me.⁶⁶

Ruth’s narrative form here is interesting; once she approaches the climax of the calling narrative more and more sections are told through “direct reported speech”.⁶⁷ Reported speech—the discursive embedding of other agents’ words

⁶⁶ Ruth 2013. Direct reported speech here and below is indicated by quotation marks and italics.

⁶⁷ Conversation analysis and sociolinguistic research distinguish between different forms of reported speech, the most important being “direct” (DRS) and “indirect” (IRS). There are also

within our own discourses—is a discursive strategy that can serve many different narrative and rhetorical functions apart from simply moving a story along chronologically. It has also been analyzed as a way to express an evaluation of the events or characters of a story, to authenticate a certain event, or to appeal to authority (Parmentier 1994, Vincent and Perrin 1999). In a sense all reported speech implies a framing of words as originating outside of the context of their present utterance (Keane 1997b, 61). For my purposes here, the most important function of direct reported speech is how it can serve to dramatize an event, even to re-enact the event that is being recapitulated (Bauman 1986, Briggs 1986). As Stromberg has argued in his analysis of reported speech, the story does not only “recount” the storyteller’s experience; on the level of performance it actually “recreates it” (1993, 106-107). In the quote above Ruth’s usage of reported speech serves to re-enact her own conversation with God, and the emotional conflict in which she then found herself. By actualizing the past, the re-enactment also provides a narrative platform for the climax of the calling narrative.

Ruth story now flashes back to something that happened very soon after she returned to the States from her first sojourn in Israel: a male acquaintance from her church asked her where her home was. Upon seeing her struggling to find an answer, he told her: “*I’ve just been praying for you and I feel like there’s gonna come a time when you won’t have two homes, and home’s going to be the place that the Lord has called home for you.*”⁶⁸ In Evangelical discourses both extracts from the Bible and dialogues with God are commonly reoccurring instances of reported speech, but here it is an unnamed man who is the speaker. About a week after Ruth’s tears in church, the same man appears in the story again and tells her that when they were praying for her last week he “*kept hearing something in [his] spirit.*” Again, Ruth is telling this in third person. The man says:

various intermediate forms and variations of DRS and IRS. For my purposes here it is enough to note Ruth’s frequent use of direct reported speech. (See: (Cacchione 2006, Clift and Holt 2010)).

⁶⁸ Ruth 2013.

“It doesn’t even make sense to me. I don’t even know what it means. Maybe I heard it in a song somewhere,” he says. *“I didn’t feel to say anything last week but now I’m thinking I should share it with you and see if it’s something for you or not.”* And I’m thinking, *“Oh Lord, what’s coming?”* [laughs]. And he, and he said, *“I kept hearing ‘Shuvi Ruth, shuvi’. Does it mean something?”* [chuckles] He says: *“I don’t know what it is, does it mean something?”*⁶⁹

Shuvi does mean something. For Ruth, knowing Hebrew, this makes complete sense: *Shuvi* is the Hebrew word for “return”. In the story Ruth is told by a man who does not speak Hebrew that she ought to go back to Israel. It is the message for which she has been waiting and praying and she takes the words to heart as a direct communication from God. A week later, this third calling, or calling back, is reinforced by the term appearing again in an Israeli song in a dance class Ruth takes in church. Still slightly uncertain (“I’m still a little bit like, *‘Yeab, but my Hebrew’s not that great, so maybe, maybe, you know, maybe I’m wrong.’*”) Ruth asks her friend what *shuvi* means and the friend says, “Return,” but, the friend adds, “*it’s the feminine command form of the word.*” Once again Ruth receives the confirmation that she has waited for. Now certain that God has called her back, she decides to return. This calling took place twenty years ago; the last two decades she has spent working in Israel.

Clift and Holt have pointed out that one of the most frequently reoccurring instances of direct reported speech takes place at the climax of a story, a point which is also illustrated in Ruth’s narrative (2010, 2). In these climactic scenes the unnamed man delivers a message in a language he does not know, but which the narrator does. In a sense, the man serves as an unknowing mediator of divine intention. His ignorance is also significant since it circumscribes the possibility that the message originated with him instead of with God, as it is meant to be understood. As with Pentecostal discourses of glossolalia and Islamic traditions concerning the illiteracy of the Prophet, the ignorance of the messenger / mediator is here something that does not delimit but rather increases the power of the message as it indicates that its authenticity cannot have been distorted by the human mind. Since the mediator is ignorant, the message is framed as authentic; it is not symbolically manipulated or manufactured. In his study of spiritual mediums sociologist Robin Wooffitt has argued that the use of reported speech is a key rhetorical practice among the spiritual mediums whom he studies which serves to establish the authenticity of their claims to be able to speak with

⁶⁹ Ruth 2013.

the dead (2001). Similarly, Erwin Goffman argued that reported speech can serve to “reduce personal responsibility” for the things that are being said, and noted that speakers were, for instance, more likely to use curses and taboo utterances when using reported speech than otherwise (1981, also quoted in Clift and Holt 2010, 8). There is good reason to believe that these functions of direct reported speech are also relevant in relation to Ruth’s calling, which is narratively placed in the mouth of the unnamed / unknowing man. Responsibility is reduced—though in an agentive, not a moral sense—and the sense of authenticity is increased by the fact that the man is delivering the divine calling in a language that he does not speak. Neither Ruth nor the man is the agent responsible for the calling; to say either was would not make narrative sense. The remaining option is that the calling is of divine origin, and that “*Shuvi Ruth, shuvi*,” is an authentic reflection of divine intent.

Ruth’s narrative of the meandering journey that brought her to Israel in a physical as well as in a spiritual sense illustrates a trope that is endemic to the linguistic context of the volunteers in Jerusalem: that God has called them into service in Jerusalem. Moreover, in many of the volunteers’ narratives a “calling” is seen as a *necessary pre-requisite* to be able to function psychologically, socially, and spiritually in a situation which is commonly understood as especially “spiritually intense”, a theme which is developed further in the next chapter. I return to Ruth’s story when discussing self-transformation below, but before doing so I believe it is worth taking a closer look at the relationship between human and divine agency as it is articulated in the calling narratives.

“It Wasn’t Our Idea” – Calling and Agency

As already mentioned, calling narratives—as well as other types of life stories—can be understood as carriers of cultural values and beliefs about how the world works and what kinds of agency are possible in it (Williams 2013, 255). While life stories always deal with agency to some extent, in that they are concerned with explaining the protagonists’ life choices, motives, and reasons for acting, the negotiation of agency is a particularly salient theme in calling narratives. As Webb Keane (1997a) has pointed out, ideas about agency are historically and socially situated products that are, at least in part, dependent upon local beliefs and linguistic practices. Thus, the calling narratives presented here reflect more general Evangelical beliefs about how human and divine agency works, as well as evaluations about what forms of agency are preferable.

With this in mind, perhaps the most striking feature of the narratives told by the volunteers in Jerusalem is how the callings are dependent upon a temporary circumscription of human agency. This aspect is not discussed explicitly in Williams' analysis of Evangelical calling narratives. Instead he draws upon Dan P. McAdams notion of "personal myths" and, like McAdams, emphasizes narrative coherence and the harmonizing effects that calling narratives have on narrative identities (Williams 2013, 273, see also McAdams 2006). In contrast, the central scenes of the calling narratives discussed here, and their interpretations, are often constructed around a protagonist with limited control over their own lives, ridden with uncertainty, struggling to make sense of the situation in which they find themselves. Often the callings come in the form of an inchoate yet intense feeling of longing or love that is construed as a possible, but not certain, expression of divine intention. Consequently, the protagonist is obliged to explore the calling to try to understand whether the feelings are being interpreted correctly, and then to find the courage to follow the calling once the discernment process is finished. This temporary suspension of human agency is not understood as negative, but rather as a pre-requisite of authenticity; a calling is not a calling if it cannot be "traced" back to divine intent. As Phillip, one of the older volunteers who, together with his wife, continually travels back and forth between Israel and their home country, says when explaining their sense of calling: "The best thing I'll say about this whole thing ... [is that] it wasn't our idea."⁷⁰

Suspension of Agency

One of the clearest examples of the ways in which human agency is circumscribed in the life stories of these volunteers comes in an interview with a young European woman called Hanna. She relates how she was called to Israel in a series of events starting with an indistinct feeling that "there was something about Israel" during a fast that she undertakes together with her congregation. It is a feeling that she does not think much about at first, but it keeps coming back and she eventually realizes that she has to explore it in more detail. Perhaps God is trying to tell her something? She describes herself as a logical and rational person so the natural thing to do is to explore intellectually what Israel was all about. She "started to research it", she says, as, prior to getting this feeling, she did not know much about Israel or about "the biblical promises". She goes

⁷⁰ Phillip and Nancy 2013

online and discovers one of the Christian Zionist ministries and the prophetic understanding of Israel that they espouse and eventually finds herself applying to volunteer for them. When looking back at this process, and when trying to explain it to me, she finds the logic of the process slipping through her fingers.

What happened after that was a little bit difficult to explain because I'm a very kind of logical person and for me to leave my job, to leave my home, and to move to a foreign country where I don't speak the language, I know nothing about the culture, I barely knew what Judaism was—barely—I mean, nothing. It was just absolutely absurd and made no sense. So I tried to go back and think about when did I make that decision? And I can't pinpoint the time. I just *found* myself applying; I *found* myself in communication; I *found* myself quitting my job. ... *So, that's why I feel very strongly that I was brought here. Because there's no logical explanation as to how I actually got to be here.*⁷¹

The turning points that brought Hanna to Israel do not make sense to her. In fact, in retrospect she is unable or unwilling to construe her journey to Israel as being a result of her own decisions and choices. She cannot “pinpoint the time” when she made the decision, she says, and the narrative conveys a strong sense that the “decision” is rather something that *happened to her*. This sense is further strengthened when Hanna talks about herself as passive in the process that took her to Israel; she “found” herself applying, communicating with the ministry, and quitting her job.

Peter Stromberg has described how the “referential ideology” (see also: Keane 1997a, 680-682, Woolward 1992) that he understands as the hegemonic view of language and subjectivity in modern Western societies entails a “particular view of the subject in which meaning is tied to the subject's intention” (1993, 17). This view of the subject, he argues, is likely to be regarded as “common sense” in Western societies. In this common sense view of language, intentional acts are actions that “may be connected to a project in some construable way” (1993, 19); one may ask “why?” about an intentional act. In contrast, if the act is unintentional—for example, spilling a cup of coffee or slipping on a pavement—the question simply does not make sense. Or, it makes sense only as an ironic joke, not as a genuine question. Furthermore, “if a behavior can be linked to a project, it is thought to represent whatever it is in the human

⁷¹ Hanna 2013, my emphases.

organism that construes projects” (1993, 19).⁷² The statements Hanna makes about the turning points in her trajectory sound mysterious precisely because there is an interpretative gap between the acts described and the character doing them. By emphasizing how unlikely it is that she—“a very kind of logical person”—would act in the way the protagonist in the story acts she creates a narrative gap between the narrator and the protagonist that offers a sense of confusion or mystery. The narrator says she is logical, the protagonist acts in a way no logical person would act. The scene does not make sense because the behavior of the described character is at odds with the narrator’s description of the character. This might be seen as a case of what Wayne C. Booth called the “unreliable narrator” in his classic *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961): not to imply that Hanna is an unreliable or untrustworthy person, but that the rhetoric of the narration creates a gap between the narrator and the character that is being described. Unreliable narration has often been used, and often been analyzed as, an effective rhetorical tool to create humorous effects, or to emphasize perspectivism and limited knowledge (Herman, Jahn, and Ryan 2005, 623). The point for Hanna however, is not to make people laugh, but rather to emphasize the impossibility of construing the protagonist as responsible for the project of going to Israel. In this vein Hanna also suggests an answer to the confusion her description of the scene creates. In the last two lines in the excerpt above, she suggests that the reason that she acted the way she did was that she was “brought here”. The lack of logically plausible explanations for the character’s behavior points to the conclusion that the reason for that behavior is not to be found in the character, but rather in a force that is external to it. Her coming to Israel, she suggests, is not a consequence of human agency but of divine intent and human receptiveness.

Hanna’s explanation as to why she is in Israel can be connected to a “project in some construable way” (Stromberg 1993, 19), but it *cannot* be “thought to represent whatever it is in the human organism that construes projects” (1993, 19). The answer to the why-question about the project—going to Israel—is not to be found in her character because it is not *her* project; *it wasn’t her idea*. Her act is unintentional—she describes herself as passive—and yet it is possible to ask without irony why she went to Israel because in Hanna’s answer the project still refers back to a character, the act is still intentional; it is only that it is not her intentions, or her character that the project references, but God’s. By

⁷² Stromberg here describes how “character” and “intention” work within what he calls the “referential ideology”. In his view, this referential ideology is tied to certain conceptualizations about human subjectivity that reflect a simplified cognitive model, and which diverge from “actual experience” (Stromberg 1993, 17-23).

removing the possibility of interpreting the events that brought her to Israel as consequences of purely natural causes—to which we also have to add character and intention—Hanna increases the plausibility that it was supernatural causes that brought her there.

Narrative Non-Sense Making

Not being able to understand the motives and intentions of the protagonist might be as confusing for a listener to a story as it can be for a reader of a novel. There is good reason to believe, however, that the confusion that Hanna's narrative conveys is not the by-product of an inexperienced storyteller, or a person lacking sufficient introspection to understand and plausibly convey her own life journey. This is so because, firstly, Hanna does not at all give that impression generally throughout the interview, rather she gives a rational impression, she is highly detailed in her motivations for her political and religious views, and is very argumentative; secondly, Hanna is far from an isolated case in the material here discussed. The narrative uncertainty that she conveys regarding her own decisions and choices is also reflected in several of the other calling narratives. Consider, for example, Ruth's discourse, mentioned above, where she struggles to make sense of her strong emotional attachment to Israel. In some cases, the emphasis on God as the prime agent of the life stories even appears as one of several language games available to the storyteller. In these cases, the storytellers seem completely able to give two different accounts of their journey to Israel, one in which this-worldly motives and explanations play the primary sense-making role, and another in which god-talk and the language of faith is in the foreground. These storytellers can move between the different language games and adapt their story to their perception of the audience, whether internal or external, and how they want to portray themselves to that audience. These reasons suggest that—rather than approaching the circumscription of human decision-making and the different kinds of uncertainty (or things that “do not make sense”) in the calling narratives as speakers' inabilities to understand life choices and emotional responses—these practices constitute part of the Evangelical tool kit for storying lives. They are cultural tropes, or what Jerome Bruner has described as a canon of possible stories (Bruner 1991a, b, 2004). By drawing upon this resource the Evangelicals narratively limit personal agency, and by implication, open up an agentive space for God.

If “sense making” is the process by which human beings give meaning to experiences, the process described above can be seen as a sort of “narrative non-sense making”, a process by which narrators create ambiguity as to the meaning of the events they are talking about. While Ruth repeatedly describes her own emotional responses as “weird”, Hanna alludes to her life choices as “absurd”, and claims that they make “no sense”. According to the Oxford Thesaurus of English, “absurd” refers to something illogical, untrue, or nonsensical: something that is inconsistent with reason or with common sense (2006, 6). In other words, within what Stromberg calls a common sense view of language, where meaning is closely tied to intention, it is not possible to ascribe any meaning to the events that Hanna and Ruth describe. They are absurd. For both Hanna and Ruth, “the meaning” of the events is remarkably opaque and interpretation is (temporarily) suspended by the narrators. This effect is part and parcel of the particular language game, or the genre, to which these life stories belong. A calling cannot be a calling unless there is miraculous intervention in the life that is being described. The calling is made rhetorically plausible by the construction of nonsensical situations. This confusion is resolved by the introduction—explicit in the case of Hanna, more subtle in the case of Ruth—of supernatural agency.

But why create non-sensical situations or temporarily suspend interpretation if the tools to find the answers are already provided? The process described here is similar to what Susan Harding alternatively calls “narrative gaps” and “interpretative gaps” in her analysis of fundamentalist—particularly Jerry Falwell’s—language and politics (2000). An interpretative gap, she writes

is a silence, or an anomaly in a story that incites imagination by failing to meet expectations, a little like a clue in a murder mystery; or an odd sound at night, downstairs, near the back door; or two friends gazing at each other a bit too long and longingly to be “just friends”. A miraculous gap or excess fails to meet worldly expectations in a way that opens up a space for supernatural action. (Harding 2000, 86)

In her case study of televangelists Harding exemplifies this practice both with the numerous inconsistencies in the biographical accounts of the evangelists and with the explicit inclusion of Jerry Falwell’s moral flaws in his own biographies. The interesting question, she asks, is, “[W]hy does Falwell narrate the gaps, why does he stitch the holes in his stories to begin with?” (2000, 97). In response to this question she suggests that the narrative gaps, the silences, the excesses, and the moral oscillation in televangelists’ narratives should not be treated as

incidental or as mistakes, but rather as necessary for the “production of truth” amongst the listeners. Truth and faith, she argues, are produced through the harmonization of the gaps and discrepancies, because fundamentalist Baptist interpretation “rests on a poetics of faith, not on a hermeneutics of suspicion” (Harding 2000, 88). Listeners / readers of these storied gaps are invited to reconcile them, to close the gaps, and are consequently contributing to the production of faith and truth (2000, 86-104).

Narrative non-sense making could be seen as one way to “stitch” holes into stories; although not necessarily in the sense of a conscious rhetorical strategy but perhaps more as a culturally recognized way of speaking. The televangelists might be “masters of this kind of narrative instability” (2000, 86), but it is a practice widely employed among Evangelicals, including those outside the pulpit and the God Channel. In a disenchanted world, miraculous events need to be defended and, on a rhetorical level, narrative non-sense making supplies what is required. Even believers in miracles have to judge the evidence available that supports particular miracles, and speakers consequently have to provide what proof they have (Bialecki 2009). By de-emphasizing natural explanations, and by limiting human agency, narrative space for the involvement of the divine in individual lives is created. The calling narratives analyzed here employ this technique in order to make the transcendental origin of the callings seem plausible to the listener but also to themselves.

Agency in Abeyance

So far the analysis of agency in the calling narratives has emphasized the narrative strategies that are employed to delimit human agency in order to make space for an actively involved God. It was argued that one such strategy is the construction of narrative situations that are absurd or non-sensical if one rejects the possibility of supernatural agencies.⁷³ Yet the calling narratives generally do not linger long in that confusion; rather the trajectory is one in which confusion is transformed into insight, ambivalence into certainty, and absence of agency into a clear sense of purpose and identity. A very common pattern is the one exemplified by Hanna above. For her, an initially profound, yet indeterminate

⁷³ There are several examples in the interviews of other supernatural agencies besides God, primarily of the malicious kind (Satan and / or demons). For instance, the conflict in Israel / Palestine is generally emphasized to be of a spiritual nature, and benevolent and malicious spiritual forces are understood to influence the different actors in the conflict. However, in the calling narratives, very little attention is paid to agencies other than human and divine.

and ambiguous sense of calling that she finds hard to understand gets its precise form through her own labor. Hanna says that she “started to research” the spiritual significance of Israel through communication with other Christians and searches on the internet. Similarly, many volunteers describe how, after having received the calling, they turn to the Bible and read it anew with a different perspective. In other words, personal Bible study is understood as a *method* for reaching comprehension of the meaning of the calling, for discerning its authenticity, and for determining its shape and form: a bit like the work performed by a sculptor when transforming a block of marble into a human shape dressed in a laurel-leaf crown and toga. Yet this spiritual labor on the part of the volunteers is often understood as needing guidance; it is God, or the Holy Spirit, that “opens up” the Scripture and lays bare the spiritual significance of Israel that was always there, hidden under the trappings of Christian theological traditions. In terms of biblical study being used as a method to make sense of an intense but as-of-yet shapeless calling, human agency returns with force. As will be explained below, however, this connection between divine and human agency is also more than a mere chronological link; it is dialectical in the sense that the latter is often narrated as *logically dependent* on the former. The production of meaning is dependent upon the presence of situations of meaninglessness (Engelke and Tomlinson 2006b). In order to fulfill one’s calling, one often needs to learn to place one’s own “agency in abeyance” (Miyazaki 2000). For some of the volunteers, like Jacob whom we met at the beginning of this chapter, this ability is severely tested. God “places Israel on his heart”, but when he feels ready and willing to go, God does not let him.

Jacob is a middle-aged American man who has been a volunteer with one of the organizations in Jerusalem for about ten years. He is humorous and friendly, easy to talk to, and one of the first volunteers whom I got to know a bit better. He gives the impression of a thinker who has spent a lot of time developing his ideas about himself, about God, and about the world, all of which makes him a very good storyteller. In his story, Jacob describes how he “gave his life to Christ” as a teenager, had a “few good years in the Lord” but eventually suffered some events that “shattered his faith” and sent him on what he retrospectively describes as “the years that the locusts had eaten”.⁷⁴ These “years of the locusts” are full of tragedy, of anger, and of what Jacob calls “un-forgiveness”. He

⁷⁴ Jacob 2012. The “years that the locusts had eaten” is an implicit reference to Joel 2:25 which reads: “I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you” (NRSV). It is also one of many examples of how biblical language and idioms continually bleed into Jacob’s narrative and helps him make sense of his experiences.

describes himself as completely lost and as suffering from an inability to forgive some people who had wronged him.

And the next eight, nine years were just pure unadulterated hell as I walked away from everything I knew. And then, it's like it says in Proverbs, you know, "*a dog that returns to its own vomit*"; that's exactly what I did. And ... it was destroying me, even my physical appearance was changing, my mental appearance, everything. And there is a lot more to this story than what I'm saying right now, but needless to say, my life was really at an end.⁷⁵

The mental, physical, and spiritual breakdown that Jacob suffers through these years is narrated as an enslaving cycle of self-destructivity. The "dog returning to its own vomit" is a metaphor of compulsion, a self-destructive pattern that he is unable to break free from on his own. Eventually, the release from "the locust years" comes in the form of a combination of divine intervention and patient Christian friends who help him break the out of the negative spiral. Some years later, when Jacob returns to faith, God immediately starts to bring people into his life with connections to Israel and a "little seed" is planted, he says. Eventually, cheered on by a friend, he decides to apply for a discipleship program in Israel but when he begins to fill in the application

the Lord spoke to my heart and said, "*Nope, you're not going to go this year.*" I'm like: "*What?*" I was all excited; I'm ready to go. "*Nope, you're not going this year.*" So I tucked the application away in a drawer and continued to let the Lord work in my heart.⁷⁶

Jacob interprets God's refusal to let him go as a sign that he is not yet ready; that there is "physical and emotional" baggage that God needs to work on before He will let Jacob go. The application process happens once a year, so during the year following the first refusal Jacob buys books about Israel, and starts to go to a Messianic congregation. When the application process restarts, God again, to Jacob's great frustration, refuses to let him go. This second time Jacob's response is more intense, he rips the application apart in anger and answers God: "*Why have I got this desire in my heart, and you are not letting me go? Fine, I won't ever*

⁷⁵ Jacob 2012. The biblical reference is to Prov. 26:11: "Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who reverts to his folly" (NRSV).

⁷⁶ Jacob 2012. Like Ruth, Jacob frequently uses direct reported speech for his communication with God in these climactic scenes.

go then.”⁷⁷ This state of mind does not last, however. By the time the application process starts for the third year his anger has melted away and he decides to give it a third try, and this time God lets him go.

And then there was a series of events that happened in one day that I knew it was a confirmation that it was time for me to go to Israel. ... So I submitted the application, I was accepted and ... then I sold everything I had, my car; I quit my good job that I was gonna do for the rest of my life, but I knew that I knew that I knew that I was supposed to go for nine months to Israel. ... And they said if you leave, you can't come back. But I knew that in my heart of hearts that this was a fork in the road and I thought, *“You know what, God has delivered me from so much and He's given me so much, it's up to Him what happens after those nine months; I've got to take this chance.”* You know, it's almost like the greater, the greater the risk, the bigger the reward ... So, I arrived here in Israel on September the 11th 2002, one year anniversary of the Twin Towers. Stepped off the airplane and I knew that I knew that I knew that I'd made the right decision. I felt like I was home. I can't explain it, but there was a connection. It was like, it was almost in my spiritual DNA since childbirth that I was supposed to be here for however long, whether it was two years I'm here or whether for my, the rest of my life. But it was like that my destiny came into focus that day ... a page had turned in my life.⁷⁸

The two times that Jacob is denied permission to go create an intensification in his story that eventually comes to a high point when his prior frustration is transformed into an absolute certainty that it is his purpose to go to Israel. As with Ruth's story above, these climactic scenes are narrated through the use of direct reported speech; the story moves chronologically through a reported dialogue between God and Jacob. Jacob's certainty is emphasized by the many times that he uses the form, “I knew, that I knew, that I knew”; and, as if this was not enough to underline the certainty, he adds: “I knew that in my heart of hearts.” Finally, he elaborates on the feeling of certainty and peace when he says that coming to Israel “felt like I was home”; it was even as if it had been in his “spiritual DNA since childbirth”. This was not just a trip like any other, it was not just nine months at a discipleship school in a foreign country; it was as if his “destiny came into focus”, as if “a page had turned in [his] life”.

⁷⁷ Jacob 2012.

⁷⁸ Jacob 2012.

The knowledge that Jacob describes is a sort of foundational knowledge, an intuitional knowledge bordering on absolute certainty or an unquestionable truth. This form of knowing among Evangelicals has been discussed in numerous anthropological studies of charismatic and Evangelical Christians (Bialecki 2008, Bielo 2004, Durbin 2012, Luhrmann 2012). In his *Walking in the Spirit of Blood* James S. Bielo describes this as “heart knowledge” which, he argues, serves as “the center of moral identity” (2004, 271).

The location of intent, the decider of belief, the division of right and wrong action, and the ability to understand spiritual matters combine in these discourses to define what lies in the heart: the true self. By revealing the true nature of the self, the heart emerges as the core of moral identity. The heart is where God touches you and is the conduit through which the fiber of the moral self is altered. To give your heart to God means to recognize God's sovereignty over your life and to commit to place your relationship with God before all else. Yet, for all its significance and ability, the heart is beyond a person's ability to understand. (Bielo 2004, 274)

Bielo focuses on the heart as the center of moral identity but in his account the heart also serves as a site of knowledge; it is the location of “the ability to understand spiritual matters”. In statements such as “I knew that I knew”, and “in my heart of hearts”, the heart fundamentally represents a knowledge that is beyond question, critique, and, perhaps paradoxically, comprehension. If “head knowledge” was the preferred mode of knowing in old time fundamentalist discourses about Bible interpretation, theology, and evolution (Harding 2000, 141, see also: Marsden 2006, 7), “the heart” in Jacob's and many other volunteers' stories emerges as the paradoxical center of an Evangelical, or charismatic, epistemology.⁷⁹ And paradoxical it is, because the heart is where you receive “confirmation”, the site where you know beyond question, and yet it is not logically possible to make sense of this knowledge or fully comprehend it. Narrative non-sense making and the emphasis on heart knowledge shares an epistemology that limits the possibilities of human understanding and allows Evangelicals to connect their own life to cultural tropes such as God's plan. Yet, although narrative non-sense and heart knowledge share a common

⁷⁹ The heart versus head knowledge dichotomy is not unique to the case presented here but rather a fundamental aspect of Christian revivalist discourse. Similar debates are observable in the different stages of Reformation history, for instance in Pietist polemics against Lutheran Orthodoxy.

epistemological frame, as narrative practices they differ from each other: whereas the former presents a locus of confusion, the reception of heart knowledge is one of profound insight. While decision-making processes and even the possibility of comprehending these processes may be narrated as instances where personal agency is in abeyance, the moments of insight are depicted as instances where it returns with force. When Jacob landed in Israel his destiny came into focus; it was, he says, as if a page had turned in his life. And a page has turned in his narrative; Jacob now knows—beyond question—that he is where he is supposed to be; in fact, he is where he was always supposed to be.

Jacob's narrative conveys a Christian subjectivity that is developed in an intimate—even indispensable—relationship to supernatural forces. Divine agency is understood to exist in a dialectical relationship with Jacob's own will(s), intention(s), and desire(s), even his very capacity to act. This is initially illustrated in the general trajectory of the narrative which moves from a situation of bondage during the "locust years" to one of meaning and purpose. When separated from faith Jacob is bound by the destructive forces in his surroundings: he is a "dog that returns to its own vomit". He suffers spiritually, mentally, and physically from the self-destructive spiral that he is unable to escape on his own. As is common in Christian conversion narratives, relief from this situation comes through divine intervention, when "the Lord started to take the chains off of" him. It is through a return to the Lord, which is preconditioned on Jacob's ability to forgive, that the things binding him release him and he is able to act once more. This rediscovered agency is then put to the test, however, when attempting to complete the application forms. At this point Jacob must place his agency in abeyance and wait for God to decide when he is ready, in spite of his calling, his sense of feeling ready, and his desires to go. In close proximity to the biblical narrative about Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Jacob has to ignore his own emotions, even his incomprehension, and recognize that God's will is sovereign.

In the social scientific study of narrative, life stories are commonly considered to reflect and shape individual identities (Bruner 2004, Gergen and Gergen 1997, Holstein and Gubrium 2000, MacIntyre 2007, McAdams 2006, McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich 2006, Ritivoi 2008). In Jacob's life story not only identity but also a personal theology is reflected on, shaped, and constructed. Theology and identity formation here are closely linked. Jacob's narrative illustrates that the modern tendency to locate agency primarily in humans (Keane 1997a), and / or social structures fits poorly with Evangelical conceptions of calling, subjectivity, and identity. As Evangelicals profess belief in a God that is profoundly involved in history and the lives of individuals, agency

is naturally located not only in the believers, but in the object of that belief as well. Analysis of these calling narratives has shown how this understanding of agency is embedded not only thematically, but also formally, in the linguistic practices of the volunteers. Indeed, several authors have argued for the need to pay more attention to “forms of agency that do not necessarily privilege the autonomy of human agents” (Miyazaki 2000, 31, see also: Bialecki 2014a, Keane 1997a, 1997b). As notions of agency are formed through historical and social processes, and are in part dependent on local beliefs and speech practices, it is unsurprising that religious communities might not want to claim all agency for themselves but might instead “prefer to find it in other worlds” (Keane 1997b, 66). In addressing these non-human forms of agency Miyazaki has suggested a theory about the “abeyance of agency” (2000, 31), which I have already mentioned above. He argues that religious practitioners might not share the social scientists’ problems with locating agency in experientially inaccessible entities (such as spirits or God) but instead insist that “what is at issue is not so much the agency of these entities as the limits of human agency—their own or others ... their own capacity to make sense of events or even their capacity to act” (2000, 32). From this perspective he continues, faith “emerges not so much as a Kierkegaardian leap of belief in something beyond comprehension but as a capacity to place one’s own agency in abeyance” (2000, 32). This capacity is visible in the life stories of these Christian volunteers. Seen from the perspective Miyazaki suggests, narrative non-sense making emerges less as a rhetorical strategy employed to convince a present (or internalized) audience of the validity of the calling than as a fundamental religious practice. The circumscription of individual agency represented in the calling narratives can then be seen as the very language of (Evangelical) faith.

“Abeyance”, however, does not imply relinquishing agency completely or indefinitely; abeyance is a temporary state. Placing their lives in God’s hands for these Evangelicals is more than a one-time event happening at the time of conversion; “to walk with God” is a religious practice that one must do, and continue to do, with increasing magnitude and sincerity throughout the life course (Coleman 2003, Luhrmann 2004, 520-521). Jacob’s narrative, for example, continues after the excerpt with several theo-biographical accounts of his struggle to place more and more of his life into God’s hands. His nine-month stay in Israel develops into a story about learning to listen, and learning to trust God completely through financial difficulties, through uncertainty about the future, and through the fear of living in Jerusalem during the Second Intifada.

Thus, learning to rely on God, for many Evangelicals, does not restrict their capacity to act or their sense of freedom, but rather increases it. All three narratives discussed here convey ideas about freedom, understanding, and agency that are dialectical in nature; in Jacob's narrative freedom is developed through practices that delimit freedom. In Hanna's story, understanding that God has called her to Israel comes through the making of narrative non-sense and the subsequent acts of researching Israel. In all cases agency is developed in a process where the temporary narrative circumscription of agency not only chronologically, but logically, precedes the sense of agency that the narratives conveys.

The capacity to place agency in abeyance is one highly prized in Evangelical communities and the calling narratives display some of the rhetorical strategies by which faith, in Miyazaki's terms, becomes narratively embedded. Like most Evangelicals, these voices simultaneously adhere to ideas about free will and the ultimate control of God over everything created, and the narration of agency reflects this paradoxical understanding of the possibilities for human action. What emerges from these narratives is a concept of agency that privileges the dialectical relationship between human and other-worldly forces rather than one dependent only upon human autonomy and self-sufficiency. This concept of agency is dialectical not only because it describes a forward movement that requires both attracting and repelling forces between opposites but, more importantly, because these opposites are integral components of each other. What I have here called narrative non-sense making is a constitutive component of Hanna's process of understanding her life journey; it is through the practice of making narrative non-sense that she makes sense of her divine calling.

Self-Transformation

So far I have argued that a central aspect of the calling stories of Ruth, Hanna, and Jacob is how narrators locate divine agency in relation to the self. As we will see in the following chapters, the resulting relationship between human and supernatural agencies is not limited to Evangelical understandings of the self, but also comes into play in the context of Evangelical engagements with the biblical text and with the world; in that sense the relationship can be seen as an important part of the tool box which Evangelical Christians utilize to make sense of the world and their own place in it. As Peter Stromberg has suggested, this interplay between divine and human agency in narrative performance is also

closely related to the sense of self-transformation that these narratives often convey (1993, 76-100). Thus, in the final part of this chapter I return to a theme raised in the introduction: how the coming-to-Israel stories are narrated as a type of conversion narrative. On the one hand, personal transformation is a general and frequently occurring theme in the volunteers' stories of the effect that is often ascribed to trips to Israel, for instance, and to how living and working there is understood to deepen and develop personal faith. On the other, transformation is also a theme that is particularly connected to the moment when the protagonist suddenly realizes Israel's spiritual significance, a moment which is often described in a language that emphasizes suddenness, spontaneity, and profound religious change. Since the encounter with the land is the theme of the next chapter, here I focus primarily on these latter, particular moments of self-transformation.

These moments of religious insight are explored in terms of what Simon Coleman has called "continuous conversion"; namely, a perspective that posits "conversion" more as an ongoing process in which the self moves towards religious conviction than as a spontaneous, one-time event (2003). I wish to suggest that, for the volunteers, the realization of Israel's spiritual significance constitutes a central moment in that process. As a consequence of these narrative performances, not only self-transformation is achieved but also an increased commitment to Israel as a religious symbol.

Realizing Israel's Spiritual Significance

As we saw in Chapter Two, the connection between twentieth-century Jewish immigration to Palestine and Christian eschatological narratives has a long history in the Protestant imagination. The Christian ministries in Jerusalem rest firmly on this restorationist history and the volunteers have an awareness of it to varying degrees. Yet in many of the volunteers' narratives there are specific and clearly identifiable moments in which Israel's spiritual significance is realized that are often recounted as sudden, sometimes even unexpected, moments of conceptual change. In Hanna's words:

And then the biblical prophecies came to light as I was reading. And it was as if someone turned a lightbulb on in my head and all of a sudden what I'd read since childhood and never understood, all of a sudden I

realized that this is Israel, this is God's people and He's bringing them from all four corners of the earth.⁸⁰

For Hanna this moment happened before she had visited Israel; it occurred during her period of preparation for the journey, mentioned above. After receiving the calling, she started to do what she calls "research" in order to understand more exactly what God wanted her to do in Israel.

And it was only during those months in [mentions a place]—which were invaluable to me—because I got to really research Israel and really ask questions: "*Why am I being brought here? What's it all about? Who are Israel? Who are this people? Are they the people of the Bible?*"⁸¹

It is during this process that the Bible suddenly opens up to her, and lets her understand the importance of Israel, not only in the Scriptures but also in sacred history. For other volunteers, this moment of religious insight is closely related to the first time that they visit the land, often as participants of a Christian tour group. For Marcus, one of the younger European volunteers, it came when he visited a friend who was volunteering for one of the ministries in Jerusalem.

My relation to Israel, the catalyst really for me coming here was when I visited ... a friend who was also working for [the Christian ministry in Jerusalem] at the time. ... He was volunteering here and I came for his final week. ... It just really struck me: the place, the people, and just the importance that Israel and the people had in the Bible. And even though I was only here a week, so much happened and it was just, it was at that point that I just realized that I want to come back again at some point. It's almost like it just captured my heart. And I just left feeling ... almost spiritually drunk from the whole experience. I mean it just stayed with me for so long. I couldn't really get it out of my system, it just sort of seeped into everything I was doing back home. I would see things that had a connection to Israel, whether it was signs or things people said. So I just knew at some point I was going to come back.⁸²

For Marcus, as well as for Hanna, this experience of insight had profound effects on the religious self. Hanna describes how it made it possible for her to

⁸⁰ Hanna 2013.

⁸¹ Hanna 2013.

⁸² Marcus 2013.

understand what she had read in the Bible since childhood, things she had not been able to understand before. Marcus felt “spiritually drunk” he says, and the intoxication stayed in his “system” after the journey and “seeped into everything [he] was doing back home”. For both Hanna and Jacob these moments are narrated as sudden and spontaneous acts of religious change. Other volunteers described it as a slower process that involves the calling, individual Bible studies, prayer, and encounters with significant others such as Messianic Jews, Evangelical preachers, or university teachers. But biographical particularities aside, virtually all volunteers describe the realization of Israel’s spiritual significance as part of a thoroughgoing religious change that had a major impact on their understanding of the world, the biblical text, and their own religious identities.

In her ethnography of American pilgrims to Israel Hillary Kaell (2014) describes how thoughts about transformation structure the pilgrim’s encounter with the land. Prospective travelers, she writes, often encounter the trope of transformation, even prior to their trips, through the products of the tourism industry, and through conversations with other people who have already made the journey. Travelers even *learn to expect* transformative experiences in the land, experiences that will forever change how they view the Bible, and that will make their relationship with God more intimate (161-163). This certainly suggests that transformation is a well-established cultural trope among Evangelicals and other prospective travelers to Israel, so encountering these themes among the volunteers is relatively unsurprising. There are many similarities between the volunteers’ stories and Kaell’s account of American pilgrims but there is also one important difference: among the volunteers, transformation is not only centered on Israel as a location where it is possible to experience the Bible, but on a specific cognitive process of realization that the land and the State of Israel *in themselves* are religiously significant. This realization transforms Israel from a place in which the biblical stories played out to a religiously loaded concept.

While some volunteers attribute considerable importance to Israel as the historical “land of the Bible”, to knowledge about the historical and geographical context of the biblical stories, and to the mimetic practice of “walking where Jesus walked”, the main transformative experience is often connected to the realization of contemporary Israel’s religious significance. As mentioned above, this experience is narrated as a conceptual change, or as the adoption of a partly new symbolic system which significantly alters the way they view the world, themselves, and the relationship between spiritual and material realities. Hanna’s use of visual metaphors, which is also reflected in several other interviews, is highly illustrative of how this experience is generally understood.

Realizing Israel's spiritual importance is a change of perspective; it is about suddenly *seeing* things differently. Meanwhile, people who do not share the volunteers' understanding of Israel are often understood to be subject to a "spiritual blindness", as Hanna puts it. Perhaps the most direct description of this understanding comes in an interview with David Parsons, the media director at the ICEJ, when he compares the difference between various religious understandings of Israel in terms of an optical illusion.

Now even the gospel, Paul says it's veiled. People's understanding[s] are veiled to the gospel and to the Jews it's a stumbling block ... But for those of us who have seen the mercy of God in it and understand, it's a love story ... And I think Israel in a way, it's a mystery as well in the Bible ... That's what Paul's talking about.⁸³ I don't want you to be ignorant of this mystery. It's the mystery of Israel's enduring election, even after the cross ... And once you see it, you see it everywhere. And it's like that illusion that, you know, you've got to look at from this angle and all of a sudden you see the face of the old woman looking this way instead of the, you know. It's one of these double [pictures] where it looks like a, you know, a guy in a cloak, but if you see it this way it's an old woman with a broom or something. And what you see there, you know, it's easy – there it is, there it is.⁸⁴

By implication, the knowledge about Israel that the volunteers have discovered is a knowledge that is "veiled", and it takes the guidance of the Holy Spirit to discover contemporary Israel in the biblical texts. In Parsons' understanding, "seeing Israel" equals the process of discovering a second picture in a consciously multi-layered painting. It should be noted that sensory, visual metaphors for spiritual knowledge (light / dark, sight / blindness) commonly occur throughout both the Hebrew and the Christian Bible, particularly in the gospel of John (Stovell 2012), and as such might be considered a cultural trope in Evangelical Biblicism. What is significant here, however, is how this biblical metaphor—normally associated with the "new life in Christ" among Christians—is applied instead to the realization of Israel's spiritual significance. It describes a form of knowledge that was previously hidden but is now unlocked through the collaboration of divine agency and an open and willing human subject.

⁸³ This reference is a bit unclear but Parsons draws both on 1 Cor. 1:23 and Rom. 9-11 here.

⁸⁴ David Parsons 2013.

It is of course difficult to know how much these narratives of sudden religious change reflect past biographical events, and to what extent they are infused with present concerns, emotions, understandings, and priorities in the moment that they are told. The “authenticity” of narrative accounts is to some extent always beyond ethnographic knowledge. Yet, with the perspective that was delineated above and which approaches conversion narratives as *ritual events*, it might be expected that some parts of the past experiences of religious change are also visible in the narrative performances themselves. While not all the coming-to-Israel stories exhibit ritual-like characteristics to an equal degree—and differences here, I believe, might be attributable to methodological choices, the interview situations, and to differences between individual storytellers—some of the stories do illustrate the dynamics described by Stromberg. This is exemplified by a return to Ruth’s story.

Becoming Ruth

We left Ruth’s story when she had experienced a confirmation of her calling to Israel that was mediated by an unnamed man in the *shuvi* incident. She now knew that she was meant to return to Israel, and that she was called to work with the Jewish people there. However, what Ruth called her “identity crisis”—the ambivalence that she felt towards her identity as a Christian—and which she reenacted throughout her narrative, was not entirely solved by the incident. In her story, God called her back in spite of her sense of ambivalence and confusion; she was certain about the calling, but not about her own identity. However, before closing the narrative, Ruth returned to the question of her conflicted identity. The way she tells it, her identity crisis was solved through what Stromberg describes as the reframing of an emotional conflict in “canonical language”, a narrative operation which he sees as a central aspect of the transformative function of conversion narratives (1993, 3). Emotional conflict is not necessarily resolved by linking personal experience to a symbolic system, but it can be placed within a framework where it no longer causes the same friction as it did before (108). In Ruth’s case, as for most Evangelical Christians, this symbolic system is conditioned by the Bible. But at the same time it is also a particular form of Evangelical Christianity in which a symbolic role for Israel and the Jewish people has been developed; the problem that she has found difficult to solve is her identity in terms of the particular relationship between Christians and Jews. In Ruth’s narrative the pivotal moment comes in a sermon by a messianic speaker that Ruth heard while still in the US, prior to her

return to Israel. In his speech—and here reported speech is again used with, I believe, similar implications as above—contemporary Jewish Israelis are identified as the biblical character “Naomi”. They have returned to their land, he says, in “bitterness”, a bitterness arising from all the terrible things that they have suffered throughout history.

And he said, “*I know that many of my Jewish brothers and sisters won’t agree with me, but I really believe that what we need is a Ruth to come alongside of us and help, you know, just like Ruth came alongside of Naomi and she was a help to her and a blessing to her. We also need our Christian brothers and sisters to do that for us today.*” If I told you I sobbed, I’m sure you won’t be surprised seeing me now [weeping]. But it was like all of a sudden I knew: “*Wow! I don’t need to go to Israel and, try and be something I’m not.*” Actually what this people [Jewish Israelis] need, they need to see Christians who are Christians, who aren’t ashamed to call themselves Christians, who are not having the same message or doing the same [as] throughout history. And it’s not going to be an easy place to stand in because so many, you know, are going to see us through a certain lens. But, ... basically the Lord needs some people, ... some Christians who will come and be a blessing to this people and show a different face of the Messiah, because they can’t see the Messiah through the glass that we’ve shown them, or through the way that we’ve shown Him throughout history. Ok, so that was my purpose then, and it helped me sort out this whole thing of, you know, why, why would I come? What would be my... And as far as my identity, God called me as a Christian, I’m supposed to be just that, you know.⁸⁵

The question that had troubled her ever since learning about the role of Christianity in the history of anti-Semitism, that created the “identity crisis” during her first year in Israel, and that made the year in North America so conflicted, found closure by virtue of a typological identification with a biblical character. Susan Harding argues persuasively that born again speech often relies on “figural” or “typological” connections between biblical narratives and personal life stories. A common feature of such narrative constructions is how real life events, characters, and identities are pre-figured by the biblical stories and receive their meaning in relation to interpretations of those stories (2000, 55). In the case here, this is the same process that Stromberg identifies as the reframing of emotional conflict by the speakers’ adoption of canonical language,

⁸⁵ Ruth 2013.

and which he argues is a central aspect of both personal transformation and increasing commitment to the “new” symbolic system. The biblical narrative about Ruth and Naomi provides a way for Ruth to harmonize her calling, her strong emotional attachment to Israel, and her own Christian identity. By identifying with the biblical Ruth—in fact, by understanding her own identity *in terms of* biblical narrative and the connected symbolic system—Ruth feels she can be a “Christian” again. But this narrative operation does not simply take a pre-existing symbolic system and attach it to personal experience; it also recalibrates the symbolic system in the process. Personal transformation by narrative performance is in part also a transformation of the symbolic system in which personal experience is re-interpreted. Ruth is again called to be a “Christian”, but it is a new type of “Christian”, one that is notably different from those whom “Naomi” has historically encountered. Thus the meaning of “Christian” is fine-tuned by this narrative in relation to the role of the biblical Ruth as friend and supporter of the biblical Naomi: in other words, the relationship between Christians and Jews. The divine calling is directed to this recalibrated Christian identity, not to the old one that Ruth had found to be in conflict with her emotional attachment for Israel. It is by becoming this new, transformed type of Christian that Ruth’s conflicted identity is harmonized. Narratively speaking, by *becoming* Ruth her conflicted identity is made whole.

Continuous Conversion – Faith Walk

It should be clear from the examples and analysis that the volunteers would object to a description of their religious interest in Israel as something that could be separated from their identity as born-again Christians. While most would not say that understanding Israel in the way they do is a fundamental doctrine comparable to Jesus’ salvific work on the cross, or the divine authorship of the Bible, most would agree with Hanna when she argues that not seeing Israel’s spiritual significance is a case of “spiritual blindness”, and that it represents a severe misinterpretation of the Bible which is attributable to Hellenism’s harmful influence on Christianity throughout the centuries (see Chapter Five). Some would go even further and question whether someone who is a believing Christian can fail to see the importance of Israel; if they truly have Jesus in their heart, the Holy Spirit will lead them to understanding.

Despite the religious importance that the volunteers place on seeing Israel in the correct light and how this insight often comes embedded in a rhetoric suggesting a spontaneous and profound religious change, a narrow view of

religious conversion that emphasizes a radical break with the past and the adoption of a completely new religious identity is obviously not applicable here. The volunteers were born-again Evangelicals before they became Zionists, and they continue to be so afterwards; in many respects the worldview, the beliefs, and the practices that they had before the spiritual significance of Israel dawned upon them continue to function without any major changes. Christian Zionism here is a process of continuous and increasing identification with the State of Israel, with Jewish symbols and practices, and an integration of these new features into the language and practice of evangelical faith. Joel Robbins has made an important distinction between two main anthropological approaches to religious conversions: the *utilitarian* approach and the *intellectualist* approach (2004, 2007). While the former perspective explains religious change by emphasizing worldly gain and social mobility, the latter approach, which is what I have emphasized above, “argues that converts are attracted to the new religion because it renders meaningful new situations that defy the sense-making capabilities of their traditional ways of understanding the world” (2004, 85). Particularly applicable here are approaches that understand conversion not so much as a one-time event but rather as a continuous process of spiritual growth (Austin 1981, Austin-Broos 2003, Coleman 2003, Cucchiari 1988). One such perspective is described by Simon Coleman:

All of these points contribute to a total picture of what I call *continuous* conversion, in which “continuity” can be understood in a number of related ways. It can imply that movement of the self toward charismatic conviction is an ongoing process, albeit one described by a rhetoric of a spontaneous transformation; it indicates a blurring of the boundaries of identity between religious affiliations; and it suggests that analysis of conversion practices should focus not only on the potential neophyte, but also on broader sets of social relations and ideological representations that include and influence the evangelizing believer. (Coleman 2000b, 17, emphasis in original)

Coleman’s broader articulation of the conversion concept describes religious change as a process that does not necessarily begin as abruptly as often articulated in conversion narratives, and that does not end once the religious subject becomes, as it were, “saved”. Rather, conversion here is understood as an ongoing movement of the self towards increasing religious insight, a deeper faith, and, in the Christian case, a more intimate relationship with Jesus. In other words, “continuous conversion” implies the possibility of increasingly

integrating one's own life with the symbols, linguistic practices, rituals, social relationships, and bodily experiences that are provided by the particular form of religion that one is drawn to.

There is, in fact, an Evangelical formulation of the process described by Coleman, one that is frequently employed by the volunteers when they describe their engagement with Israel, and how this engagement has influenced—or “deepened”—their religious commitment. In Evangelical terms this process is recognized as the “faith walk” or “walk with God”. Israel is integral to this among the volunteers, both as a religious symbol, and as a place in which it becomes possible to enact the insight about Israel's spiritual significance. For them, volunteering in Israel provides an opportunity to live increasingly by faith, to learn to rely on God, to restructure life patterns, and to grow in understanding about spiritual matters. As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, being in Israel is commonly associated with both challenges and blessings; it is a trying experience but also rewarding for those who do it for the right reasons and who learn to rely on God's providence.

I count it very much a blessing to be here, but I don't find my identity in being here. There's a big difference. At one point it looked like I was going to have to return to the States because I didn't have all the money to complete the course [that I was doing in Israel]. But the Lord orchestrated that circumstance and I had to raise several thousand dollars within a week or else I was going to have to return to the States. And I remember being very upset with God. And I'm like, “*Lord, I quit my job, I did this and that, and now you're going to send me back to the States and I haven't even completed this course?*” The Lord said, spoke to my heart and said: “*Where's your identity? Is your identity in being in Jerusalem or is your identity in me? Is your identity in what you're doing or is your identity in who you are in me?*” And I had to really look at that. And the Lord said: “*If I want to send you back to the West Coast without completing this course, it shouldn't matter to you, your life is not your own.*” So I had to really come to terms with it that day. I said, “*Ok, God, if I get sent back to the West Coast I'll go.*” The moment I let it go, within a week 2,300 dollars was raised and God showed me that He wanted me to be here in Israel, but He had to deal with that identity first.⁸⁶

God, in Jacob's discourse, contrasts “identity in me” versus “identity in Israel” and makes it clear that Jacob's place in Israel is completely dependent on God

⁸⁶ Jacob 2012.

and that Israel is subordinate in the faith walk. Reflections of this conceptualization of his engagement with Israel are visible in several of the volunteer's narratives, and many of them frequently emphasize that in the end it is the individual relationship to God that matters—"not Israel". In the quote below, Marcus describes how he came to reevaluate his own work in Israel after listening to a Messianic preacher:

And he was telling us that the reason we're here is because God wants to do a work in us. It's specifically for our relationship with him. And when he said that, it really struck me deeply. It then made me reevaluate why I was here [in Israel], because I think for a lot of us we come here thinking, "*Yes, we're coming to bless the Jewish people.*" And that's great and, and that's what we're trying to do. But I think more important than that, it's about our own walk with God. And it's from being here that I feel like my, that my faith has increased a lot. And I think my walk has improved a lot with the Lord.⁸⁷

In terms of religious change, there is a certain amount of tension between the strong narrative emphasis on the realization of Israel's spiritual significance and the enactment of this insight through the volunteer work, and the subordination of Israel to a secondary role in the faith walk. On the one hand, the conceptual change described in the coming-to-Israel stories is narrated as a radical rupture from the past, and the new knowledge about Israel is understood as both fundamental and radically transformative. Narratively speaking, Israel is a key concept that drives the self-transformation in these stories. On the other hand, Israel, as a place, is relegated to an instrumental role in the walk with God, one which may never become more important than the walk in itself. For Jacob, this tension is articulated in terms of "identity-in-Israel" or "identity-in-God" where the former represents a distortion, or at least a misguided faith in something that should be secondary.

These tensions are rarely, if ever completely resolved in the volunteers' stories. As we will also see in the next chapter, this type of negotiation of the role of Israel and the meaning attributed to it is a commonly recurring theme. The discursive practices concerning Israel that situate it as unique, as a mediator of self-transformation and divine intent, that locate Israel as a religious symbol through which one can experience and interact with divine realities, do not always find support in the broader theological tradition to which the volunteers

⁸⁷ Marcus 2013.

also belong. In these cases, the volunteers often compromise their own talk about Israel by drawing on these broader traditions. In a sense, these negotiations might be seen as representing an ongoing process of finding theological space for a religiosity that engages Israel as a religious symbol, a material object that can mediate divine presence, uniquely and fundamentally. In finding that space, Evangelical Zionists need to negotiate broader Protestant tradition and its emphasis on immateriality, interiority, and iconoclasm. The discursive practices, or lived religiosity, seem to be the engine in this process; broader theological traditions will have to follow.

Conclusions

The coming-to-Israel stories of the volunteers in Jerusalem engage with two narrative genres that have played a big role in the articulation of Christian identities historically: the calling narrative and the conversion narrative. In their respective stories the dialectical formulation of agency, the production of meaning through its opposite, and the task of properly locating divine intention are central preoccupations. However, while the stories formally draw heavily on established Christian tropes, they also introduce a new element by articulating the realization of Israel's spiritual significance as a central moment in the process self-transformation. In these stories, the narrative space traditionally occupied by the encounter with Christ is here occupied by the encounter with the State of Israel. Such transformation, however, should not be seen as a definite rupture from the past but rather as a part of a continuous process of increasing religious commitment.

I have here emphasized the role of Israel as a symbolic object in this process. It is through realizing that God is continuing to work with Israel that one also realizes how God works with the self. To some extent, the emphasis placed on Israel represents an important recalibration of Evangelical symbolic systems and what it means to be an Evangelical Christian. In that sense, these narratives represent both continuity and discontinuity with Evangelical forms of religion more broadly. In terms of the discussion here, these Evangelical narratives can be seen as reflecting an ambition to find theological space for a religious symbol not traditionally included in these formulations of faith. It is precisely in the tension between continuity and discontinuity that a sense of self-transformation emerges; the symbolic role of Israel is a new articulation of old Evangelical truths about the relationship between God, the world, and the self.

4. Land: Israel, Place & Presence

It's a miracle that Israel is a nation again. It's a miracle Hebrew is spoken again when it was a dead language. It's a miracle that all these people from the rest of the world is coming back to this land; [but] it's also an everyday, normal regular city, country in the world, it's like everywhere else in the world, but at the same time it's like nowhere else in the world. So that makes it unique. And even though I feel like this is the place God wants me to be so far, I don't know if one day He says, 'No', well then I'll go wherever He wants me to go. But so far I think this is my home.

Jennifer, 2013

The coming-to-Israel narratives that were analyzed in the previous chapter described how God had called the volunteers into service in Israel, thereby framing the motivation for being in Israel as miraculous in nature. Although similar stories likely would be found among Evangelicals engaged in short-term mission, or volunteer work in other geographical locales (e.g. Hancock 2013, Howell and Dorr 2007), Israel, for the volunteers, is a country unlike any other. For them, Israel is “the land of the Bible”: a place of miracle and wonder, and a place of “spiritual intensity” (and sometimes equally intense danger). In short, Israel is a place where God's presence is most tangibly and acutely felt. This ontological uniqueness of Israel, which is derived from its expected role in God's redemptive purposes, leaves the country shimmering with an otherworldly light. But at the same time, the volunteers often insist that Israel is a country like any other: a place where people go to work in the morning and home in the evening; where groceries and housing are far too expensive; where there is secularism, sin, poverty, violence, pollution, and general ungodliness. Israel is simultaneously of God, and of the World.

The task of rightly locating Israel spiritually invites the volunteers to negotiate the relationship between place and divine presence, a relationship which has often been contested within Protestant history, and which theologies at the liberal end of the spectrum have often understood in terms of fetishism. For

some volunteers this negotiation creates theological problems: how is it possible to confess dedication to the Evangelical credo that God is immediately accessible everywhere (Luhmann 2004), and at the same time the deeply felt experience that God is most particularly available in Israel? Where does the boundary go between Israel as a sort of territorial prelude to the millennial kingdom on the one hand, and Israel as an ordinary country on the other?

This chapter explores the volunteers' narrative constructions of Israel as a sacred space and places these discourses in relation to academic conversations about place, presence, and mediation (Engelke 2007, 2010a, b, Keane 2009, Smith 1987, 1993, Stolorow 2005). In the first part, the discourses of the volunteers are discussed in light of Jonathan Z. Smith's theory about religion and place, and it is argued that their narratives about Israel provide examples of what Smith has called a "locative" religious orientation, which is rather conspicuous given Evangelical Christianity's more general "utopian" orientation. As locative religiosities connect place to divine presence, the second part of the chapter relates these discourses to what has been called "the problem of presence", namely, "the problem of ... how a religious subject defines and claims to construct a relationship with the divine through the investment of authority and meaning in certain words, actions and objects" (Engelke 2007, 9). Here I suggest that the problem of presence emerges particularly in relation to Israel, not as the place where the biblical events played out historically, but rather as the "land of the restoration". Finally I turn to the question of how the tensions that are created both by the religious significance attributed to Israel and the empirical experience of the place are negotiated in the discourses. Before we turn to these problems, however, a more general introduction to the place of Israel in Christian imaginaries will be necessary.

Space, Place and the "Holy Land"

The "Holy Land" as understood in Christian and Jewish imaginaries can be seen as a paradigmatic example of a sacred space. According to historian of religion, Jonathan Z. Smith, a sacred space

... is a place of clarification (a focusing lens) where men and gods are held to be transparent to one another. ... The ordinary (which remains, to the observer's eye, wholly ordinary) becomes significant, becomes sacred, simply by *being there*. It becomes sacred by having our attention directed

to it in a special way. That is, there is nothing that is inherently sacred or profane. These are not substantive categories, but rather situational or relational categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed. There is nothing that is sacred in itself, only sacred things in relation. (Smith 1982, 54-55 emphasis in original)

In contrast to—but also in the same tradition as—Mircea Eliade’s understanding of the sacred and the profane, Smith views these as constructed categories that are dependent on different cultural factors such as inherited narratives, texts, religious practices, and culturally determined ways of seeing. Sacred spaces in Smith’s view, are *made*, not *found*.⁸⁸

Historically, the land of Israel, and Jerusalem in particular, has held a central place in the religious imagination of Jews and Christians as well as many other religious communities. In biblical history, the identification between Jerusalem and divine presence goes back at least to the Zion theology that pre-dates the exilic period (587-539 BCE), but it is difficult to establish the exact origin of this tradition with any certainty (Smith 1987, 48). The ancient Zion traditions identified the mountain in Jerusalem as a place of particular sacred significance; this was the place that YHWH had chosen to dwell, the place where a temple was to be built and cults organized (Friis 1996). The exilic / post-exilic sections of the Hebrew Bible (most particularly Ezekiel 40-48) offer what Jonathan Z. Smith has called an “ideology of place” (Smith 1987, 48), an imaginary map of an ideal cultic place centered on Jerusalem and on the temple. But the ideology of place stretches beyond the temple cult alone: “In a sense” Smith writes in *Map is not Territory*,

the entire Old Testament, may be understood as a complex creation myth concerning the establishment of the land in which a man can be truly human and at home. In Israelitic terms, it is a myth of the establishment of Israel the land and the people of Israel. (Smith 1993, 110)

This ideology of place, of course, is embodied in many of the texts that Christianity later inherited from ancient Israelite and Jewish religion. However, in his “Christian Ideology and the Image of a Holy Land” (1991b, a),⁸⁹ the

⁸⁸ For Smith’s discussion of Eliade see his “The Wobbling Pivot” (1993, 88-103).

⁸⁹ Bowman’s article “Christian Ideology and the Image of a Holy Land: the Place of Jerusalem Pilgrimage in the Various Christianities” exists in different versions under the same title. In the following I am referring to the longer (44p) version that is available on: https://www.academia.edu/265156/Christian_Ideology_and_the_Image_of_a_Holy_Land (accessed 2015-08-04). A shorter version (24p) of the same article is available in Eade &

anthropologist Glenn Bowman describes how early Christianity gradually developed a new “textual” understanding of place. This “textualization” of “the Holy Land” was “an integral part of the process by which Christianity was transformed from a dissident sect within Palestinian Judaism to a universal religion embraced by peoples throughout the world” (1991b, 2). By “textualization” Bowman refers to a process in which the actual place gradually became eclipsed by the Israel of Christian imagination as it appeared in Bible readings, stories, hymns, and liturgies. Bowman does not here refer to Smith; if he had, he would perhaps have recognized this textualization process as a transition from a “locative” to an “utopian” religious orientation, a process which Smith describes as not limited to the so-called “parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity but as a much broader development among ancient religions in the first centuries CE (Smith 1987, 1993). For Smith, the terms “locative” and “utopian” serve to distinguish between different religious orientations or symbolic systems. While the “locative” vision of the world emphasizes place and order and has a cult centered around purity, the “utopian” vision by contrast highlights the “value of being in no place”, rituals of transformation, and the imperative that the religious practitioner transcends the world. For Smith, the transition to a utopian religious mode in antiquity is connected to diasporization:

For the native religionist, homeplace, the place to which one belongs, was *the* central religious category. Ones [sic] self-definition, ones [sic] reality was the place into which one had been born—understood as both geographical and social place. To the new immigrant in the diaspora, nostalgia for homeplace and cultic substitutes for the old, sacred center were central religious values. For the thoroughly diasporic member, who may not have belonged to the deity’s original ethnic group, freedom from place became *the* central category. Projecting the group’s diasporic existence into the cosmos, he discovered himself to be in exile from his true home (a world beyond this world), he found his fulfillment in serving the god beyond the god of this world and true freedom in stripping of his body which belonged to this world and in awakening that

Sallnow’s *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*. London: Routledge, 1991 (reprinted later by Illinois University Press 2000 & Wipf and Stock 2013). However, in the shorter versions much of the historical discussion that interests me here is missing. I have confirmed this information, and discussed my usage of the text with Bowman in personal correspondence 2015-08-04.

aspect of himself which was from the Beyond. (Smith 1993, xiv, emphases in original)

Diasporic, in contrast to locative religion was utopian, “a religion of nowhere” (Smith 1993, xiv), or of “anywhere” as Smith has written elsewhere (2004). “Uprooted” socially and perhaps geographically from the previous center, utopian religion came to value that which previously had been a defect: homelessness and detachment from place. The true home could no longer be found in this world, it could only be found within, or beyond, so religious practices began to shift mode from an emphasis on the *purity of place* to the *transformation of self*. God could only be found beyond this world or through the transformation of the self, not in particular geographical places. The “textualization” of early Christian imaginaries of the “Holy Land” that Bowman describes, then, should be seen as a part of a broader process leading towards more utopian orientations in ancient religion. Although the biblical names and places continued to be remembered in liturgy, hymns, and narratives, they had little connection to the concrete geographical places in the Roman province Syria Palaestina. What mattered most to these early Christians was heavenly Jerusalem, not Aelio Capitolina (1991b, 13).

In spite of the transition from locative to utopian religious orientations that took place in antiquity—and of which the early development of Christianity was a part—it is important to note that these terms should neither be understood as evolutionary, nor should they be seen as mutually exclusive.

[B]oth have been and remain coeval existential possibilities which may be appropriated whenever and wherever they correspond to man’s experience of his world. While in this culture ... one or the other may appear the more dominant, this does not affect the postulation of the basic availability of both at any time, in any place. (Smith 1993, 101)

Furthermore, I do not mean to claim that the development from a religiosity focused on place, to a “religion of nowhere” was anywhere near as linear—or indeed as complete—as it might appear in this brief overview. Christian imaginaries have taken many different directions with regards to place throughout history and continue to do so today (Coleman 2000a, Tweed 2000, Westergren 2012). In fact, a central part of my argument here is that the Christian Scriptures—and consequently also Christian history and tradition—

contain both of these orientations simultaneously.⁹⁰ How these are understood depends on interpretative standards as well as theological, ideological, and cultural preferences. Evangelicals, like other Christians, have a reservoir of biblical stories to draw on when making sense of their encounter with the land, as well as when trying to understand the role of Israel in salvation history. This narrative reservoir, as we shall see, creates both interpretative possibilities and theological tensions.

The “Land of the Bible” and the Evangelical Gaze

“The American Protestant gaze on the Holy Land”, Feldman and Ron write, “has been influenced, not only by biblical paradigms, but by Orientalist world-views and the process of theming and disneyization” (2011, 151) and, they stress, “like all ways of seeing, is not natural, but is historically, socially and ideologically conditioned” (2011, 169).⁹¹ This constructivist perspective, although I believe it accurate, would not be shared by the volunteers in Jerusalem. For them, their gaze on Israel is perhaps not “natural” but it is “biblical”, and as such, unconditioned by subjective, ideological, and historical processes. The Israel that they see demonstrates two essential and unchanging characteristics: it is “the land of the Bible” and, as a consequence of this special status, it is marked by a fundamental alterity. For Adam, the uniqueness of Israel is framed as the main reason he came to work in Jerusalem.

One of the reasons I wanted to come to Israel was of course, my main reason was to, I mean ... this is the land of God. There's no doubt this is where it all happened. This is where Jesus walked, where He talked, where He did His miracles. Galilee, you know, up there, what happened there, where the great miracles he performed, he walked on the water. I wanted to see all those things, I wanted to be in the land of Jesus; I wanted to walk in His footsteps. I love Jesus and I wanted to get to know Him as much as possible, not just through the Bible. Of course you don't

⁹⁰ The biblical scholar Pamela Eisenbaum, for instance, has analyzed the Letter to the Hebrews through Smith's terminology. Understood as such, the supersessionism of which Hebrews is often criticized is better described as a theological argument for a utopian religious orientation (Eisenbaum 2013).

⁹¹ Jackie Feldman in particular has written several accounts of the narrative construction of Israel in tour guide performances, by different agents in the land, and by the travelers visiting there (see: Feldman 2007, 2011, 2013, 2016).

have to come to the land, but if you come here you get a visualization of everything much better – you understand what I’m saying.⁹²

As also observed by other authors who have studied Christian pilgrims in Israel (Feldman 2016, Kaell 2014), this is often phrased as an experience that “brings the Bible to life”, or that makes a previously two-dimensional text assume a third dimension.

To be able to be in the place where it’s happened, it’s brought life to sometimes the two-dimensional words that we read on a page. Kind of those letters get raised up and things start getting put into perspective. So I think volunteering in Israel is a great way to increase your faith and to actually see the places. When I drive along the highway and I’m: “*Oh, there’s Nazareth.*” [chuckles] “*Oh, I’ve heard about that once or twice before!*” It kind of brings some understanding about who Yeshua was. And so, yeah, definitely a deepening of my walk with God; [my faith] has definitely been deeper since, you know, realizing Israel.⁹³

In the excerpt Ron also connects his encounter with the land to his previous experience of “realizing Israel” which in the previous chapter was discussed in terms of a continuous conversion: realizing contemporary Israel’s spiritual significance and being able to live in the land has “definitely” deepened his “walk with God”.

“The land of the Bible” is a narrative construct with which most Christians have, to some extent, been familiar most of their lives, but also something that travelers to Israel encounter in tour guide narratives and the products of the tourism industry, albeit in different ways that depend on their denominational and cultural backgrounds (Bajc 2007, Feldman 2007, Goldman 2009, 10-14, Kaell 2014). Generally speaking, “the land of the Bible” refers to the significance of the land in biblical history and the geography’s connection to the biblical narratives. The places where it is believed that the biblical events occurred naturally play a significant role in this construct, but so do more modern additions, such as Yardenit, the Jesus Boat, and the Garden Tomb, where authenticity does not rely on historical or archeological evidence but rather on association and familiarity (Kaell 2014, Shapiro 2008).⁹⁴ Contrary to many

⁹² Adam 2013.

⁹³ Ron 2013.

⁹⁴ *Yardenit* is a baptismal site by the Jordan River that was developed by the Israeli government in the 1980s: “this well-equipped site is not linked with any church or mentioned specifically in

travelers' expectations, such a narrative production is not ideologically neutral but can instead be—and often is—employed in the service of the interests of the conflicting parties (Feldman 2011), or to gloss over political contestation (Feldman 2007). “During biblical tours”, Feldman argues, “Jewish Israeli guides and Protestant pastors become coproducers of a mutually satisfying performance that transforms the often-contested terrain of Israel-Palestine into Bible Land” (Feldman 2007, 351).

However, while the “land of the Bible” is a generic narrative theme that is used both by tour guides and travelers, it does not necessarily signify the same things or evoke the same connotations or sentiments across the denominational spectrum. For many Evangelicals—and certainly for the Evangelicals discussed below—“the land of the Bible” is not limited to representing the connections between biblical history and the land. In fact, several of them consider these connections of less personal religious significance than the relationship between the Bible and present-day Israel. To exemplify this: in an interview with the older couple, Tom and Susan, who have been volunteering in Israel on and off for the past twenty years, Tom explained to me that what made the greatest impression on them the first time they came to Israel was not the biblical past but their encounters with the modern history of Israel:

Because what we saw was what God is doing in this country with His people now – not necessarily what happened a long time ago in the Bible. Now we did see the Bible places, but what impacted us I think more than anything was that God is doing something even now in this land with this people: the fact that they are returning, the fact that the land is blooming again and all of that.⁹⁵

For this American couple, the most significant part of their first trip to Israel was not to see the biblical places, to “walk where Jesus walked” (Kaell 2014), but rather to have first-hand experience of “the restoration”. It was not the biblical

any scriptural or traditional source. Yet it has become, over the course of 25 years, *the* place of immersion for almost all American Christian [pilgrims]” (Feldman and Ron 2011, 159 emphasis in original). The Garden tomb is run by a UK based ministry and has over the years developed into a Protestant alternative to the Holy Sepulchre (Kaell 2014, 78-80). “The Jesus Boat”, finally, was found in 1986 by two Israeli fishermen and is now displayed in Yigal Alon Museum. “The discovery [of the boat]”, Kaell writes, “helped speed the creation of a sophisticated ‘worship boat’ industry” (Kaell 2014, 82). All three cases exemplify how it is possible to produce and maintain an image of Israel as the Bible land even in sites lacking any serious claims to historical or archeological authenticity.

⁹⁵ Tom and Susan 2013.

past that caught their attention, but the “biblical” present: *what God is doing in the land now*. The religious significance of the modern places and events is found in the fact that they are more able than their historical counterparts to demonstrate God’s continuing activity in the world. This is not an isolated case. Several scholars have observed how Evangelical Zionists invest religious authority and meaning in modern and seemingly secular places in Israel such as the Knesset, Independence Hall, the military cemetery on Har Herzl, and social institutions such as immigration centers. (Shapiro 2008, Belhassen 2009, see also: Engberg 2016). Visiting these sites while listening to the tour guide narrations that frame them as monuments to the return of the Jewish people to their land enables an Evangelical audience to witness the restoration first hand, and in consequence, God’s continuing redemptive action in the world. Israel’s narrative identity as the trans-historical land of the Bible is significant in this context because it explains how seeing a country experience socio-economic growth, immigration, and the modernization of agricultural forms (or watching the “desert bloom” in Christian Zionist vernacular) can be cognized as *signs* of what God is doing *in the land now*.

As the development of contemporary Israel is generally understood among the volunteers to have been foretold in the Bible, modern developments too can be understood as “biblical” events. And as the expected future of Israel is of crucial significance in God’s redemptive purposes the same applies here. As a result of being embedded in salvation history, all of which is recorded—sometimes opaquely, sometimes transparently—in the Scripture, the “land of the Bible” represents a hermeneutical node point, a “fixation” (Durbin 2013b, see also: Johnson 2000) that connects Israel’s biblical past with its *equally* “biblical” present and future. In this sense, for many Evangelicals, the land of the Bible is a trans-historical construct that makes manifest the symbiotic relationship between the land on the one hand and the Bible on the other. In a similar way as previously nonsensical or boring passages in the Bible can acquire new meaning when one has walked the land, seen the biblical places, felt the burning sun, and touched the stones (Kaell 2014, 166), an object—the State of Israel—previously without or with limited (spiritual) meaning can become spiritually significant due to its embeddedness in biblical narratives. Through this process of “biblicalization” (Harding 2000, 194) biblical authority and spiritual meaning is transferred from the biblical text to the State of Israel.

The alterity of Israel—in this case, both the land *and* the people—is derived from the biblical narratives where the people is chosen and the land is promised, as well as the locative passages where Jerusalem is described as a cosmological center. While the land is repeatedly referred to as “special”, “different”, and

“unique” in the interviews, the Jewish people is also animated by a biblical imagination that defines a sharp distinction between Jews and others. Tommy, for instance, describes in an interview how there are two different peoples in the world: “Jews and Gentiles”, and criticizes those who make further distinctions. The “biblical view”, he says, is that you are “*born either a Jew or you’re born not a Jew*”.⁹⁶ For Tommy, the distinction between Jews and Gentiles is not merely a question of ethnicity, culture, or religion; it is a fundamental, cosmological distinction that transcends social construction. For him, as for other volunteers, this separate status of the Jews is generally understood positively: the Jews have been chosen by God for a special destiny. But more than being a normative claim and a positive evaluation, it is often phrased just as a simple factual statement. This fundamental alterity of the Jewish people is what historian Paul Boyer has called a “cosmic otherness” (Boyer 1992, 220), and the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in another context has referred to as “allosemitism” (Bauman 1998, 2009).⁹⁷ Allosemitism is a term that was coined by the Polish literary historian Artur Sandauer, but the sense in which I employ the term here is developed primarily by Bauman. It refers to

... the Gentile practice of setting the Jews apart from all the rest as people radically different from all and any other people and therefore needing separate concepts in order to be described and comprehended, as well as special treatment in all or most social and cultural situations. ... “Allosemitism” is an intrinsically ambivalent attitude, able to embrace everything from love and respect to outright condemnation and genocidal hatred, and so it faithfully reflects the endemically ambivalent phenomenon of “the other”, the stranger—and, consequently, of the Jew who, in Europe at least, is the most radical incarnation, indeed the epitome, of the stranger. (Bauman 2009)

In my view, “allosemitism” more accurately captures certain Evangelical understandings of Jews and Jewishness than the more common labels “anti-Semitism” and “philo-Semitism”, primarily because allosemitism does not carry the same normative burden and as a consequence of this functions better analytically. In the interviews both Israel as a land and the Jews as a people are repeatedly described as fundamentally different from anything and anyone else in a way that has no correlation to particular Jewish customs or habits, social

⁹⁶ Tommy 2013.

⁹⁷ “Allosemitism” comes from the Latin term for the other: *allos*. For Bauman, allosemitism is the root phenomenon of both anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism.

organization, or culture. Their difference is of a different nature altogether: it is spiritual, even cosmological. They are different because God wanted to make them different, and they will remain so until their purpose is fulfilled.

The fundamental alterity of “the land of the Bible” as it emerges when structured by the Evangelical gaze partakes in the narrative construction of Israel as a sacred space. If such a space, as Smith suggests, is something that it is made, rather than found, and if it becomes sacred “by having our attention directed to it in a special way” (1982, 55), it might be useful to explore how attention is directed towards Israel. In the interviews this happens in several different ways, primarily by interpreting Israel as being a result of divine agency, and by constructing connections between contemporary Israel and the biblical text. What emerges in these discourses is an Israel where a particularly potent presence of the divine resides, and as a consequence, a new formulation of a locative religious symbol system.

Where Miracles Happen

In many of the stories about Israel miracles play a significant role. Jennifer, who provides the introductory quote to this chapter, gives voice to some frequently occurring ideas when describing Israel and events in Israeli history as miraculous. The birth of the nation, the revival of Hebrew as an everyday spoken language, socio-cultural developments, Jewish immigration, the “discovery” of (some of) the lost tribes,⁹⁸ economic growth, the modernization of agricultural forms, and scientific advancements and discoveries are all areas

⁹⁸ The “lost tribes” refers to the idea that ten tribes of the twelve that purportedly constituted the Jewish people were lost when the Assyrians captured the northern kingdom and deported its population in 720 BCE. The scriptural basis for this idea comes primarily from 2 Kings 17:6. Today there is growing enthusiasm for the quest to find those lost tribes of the Jewish people, amongst both Christian Zionists and some Jewish organizations (for instance: *Shavei Israel*). The two most famous examples of lost tribes that have been “found” are the Bnei Menashe of northeastern India and the Falashas of Ethiopia, both of whom have been granted the right of immigration to Israel under the law of return. Apart from those two, there are numerous other ethnic groups around the world who are, or have been, claiming descent from the lost tribes, such as the Igbo of Nigeria, the Lemba of South Africa, the Bnei Anousim of Spain and Brazil, and the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Methods of proving descent from the lost tribes include anthropological observations, examinations of history and religious customs, and DNA testing. The whole endeavor however, is deeply embedded in ideological discourses and tends to essentialize ethnic and racial characteristics, which often makes the project appear problematic from an historical scholarly point of view. For research about these practices see, for instance, (Egorova 2015, Erasmus 2013, Kaplan 2006, Parfitt and Egorova 2005, Tamarkin 2014).

that are commonly considered spectacular enough to classify them as “miraculous”.

I don't think man could have come up with a plan like this. I really don't. I think we're too stupid. We can't even feed the hungry in the world, much less put together a nation like this. This was a supernatural event. And I think if somebody has a problem with it they need to take their argument to God.⁹⁹

The practice of narrating miracles often relies on the ability to frame an historical event as a marvel, as something worthy of special admiration, as something so spectacular that explaining it in other terms than as a miracle seems to capture less than the whole picture. Jacob, for instance, frames the state of Israel as a miracle precisely because he believes human nature incapable of creating something so great. “A nation like this” is meant to capture the splendor of the Israeli state. Expressions of admiration for Israel are indeed very frequent in interviews and emphasis is generally placed on all the things the Israelis are felt to excel in politically, scientifically, and morally. In publications from the ministries, as well as in interviews with the volunteers, Israeli scientific breakthroughs are often reported as particularly admirable, and as cases of Israel's “blessing the world”.

That events are framed as miraculous, however, are, as Andrew Singleton has argued, also the result of particular rhetorical strategies, such as the privileging of certain cultural meanings at the expense of others (2001, 121). In similarity to the calling narratives that were analyzed in the previous chapter, narrative nonsense making here serves such a rhetorical role in situating events as miraculous and consequently directing our attention to a particular framing that embeds Israel in the sacred.¹⁰⁰ “You can't explain things like that”;¹⁰¹ and, “Now, you

⁹⁹ Jacob 2012.

¹⁰⁰ For a discussion about the relationship between miracle and magic and the epistemological and ontological connotations these carry in anthropology, see (Shanafelt 2004). Shanafelt suggests “marvels” as an alternative to these terms as it has more “cross-cultural utility ... without the implied hierarchy of monotheism or traditional anthropology” (Shanafelt 2004, 322). I use miracle here as it is the emic term most commonly used by the volunteers, but I do not mean to imply that miracles, understood as expressions of supernatural agency that somehow subvert the “natural” order of things are in any way qualitatively different from other such expressions of agency such as magic or other supernatural phenomena. What is a miracle is highly dependent on culturally transmitted understandings of the “natural” (Keane 2009), and hence discussions about miracles make most sense when discussed in relation to the cultural context within which they are encountered.

¹⁰¹ Philip and Nancy 2013.

can't make this stuff up";¹⁰² are common rhetorical markers that serve to emphasize the supernatural origin of the events told. By de-emphasizing natural causes and alternative causalities the remaining option is that the birth of the nation, or a particular socio-political development, is the result of divine agency. Much as narrated miracles sometimes serve a rhetorical role in the construction of religious conversions (Stromberg 1993, 76-100), and as a source of spiritual authority (Shipley 2009), these stories are mobilized to bolster Israel's authenticity as a sacred space. Narrated miracles direct attention in that "special way" (Smith 1982, 55).

However, supernatural involvement is not limited to Israeli history and Jewish life in Israel in general. Many of the volunteers refer to miracles that have happened to them personally in Israel, and some argue that it is a fact that miracles takes place more frequently there than anywhere else. These events too are often narrated as arguments supporting Israel's positioning as a place of divine presence. Adam, for instance, describes how during his first time in Israel, a period in which he did not have an income, he continuously "found money on the road".

Every day I found money so I could buy my, I could buy rice, I could buy bread, I could buy this or that. Every day! And every time when I found money I did as the Bible says, I took 10% of it and I gave it to some poor people. And the money multiplied. I have no idea [how]. Today I cannot explain.¹⁰³

Another volunteer describes how he was cured of a pre-cancerous "thing" on his face and, in another instance, how he was involved in praying for a Jewish couple who were unable to have children. The result of this intercession was that the woman called him two weeks later and told him that she was pregnant.¹⁰⁴ These are just two of "miracles upon miracles upon miracles" that he could tell me, he says. All of these have happened to him during the last seven to eight years that he has spent in Israel.

Of course, it is hardly surprising that Evangelicals refer to miraculous events, acts of God, or intense religious experience in their personal life stories. As Tanya Luhrmann has shown (2012), "supernatural" experiences might be far more common than we have previously thought, and charismatic Evangelicals

¹⁰² Philip and Nancy 2013.

¹⁰³ Adam 2013.

¹⁰⁴ Jacob 2012.

and Pentecostals are probably more inclined than most other Christians to embed this type of experience in life stories. Belief in a personal God that is actively involved in the lives of believers is part of the core dogma of Evangelical faith. The interesting detail here, however, is how personal miracles and religious experiences are discursively linked to the place in which they are narrated as having occurred.

Agnes is a middle-aged American woman for whom the realization of the spiritual significance of Israel came late in life. She grew up in the mainstream of the American church landscape and consequently had prior knowledge of the biblical texts about Israel yet “had never really understood” she says. When she took a tour to Israel as part of a para-church organization with which she is involved, insight about Israel came to her through an intense emotional experience.

The one experience with the most impact was when we came into Jerusalem ... At least it's been my experience [that the tour guide organizers] try and bring you in, you know, when the sun is setting and it's gold and pink and beautiful and we got to the hotel and we went to dinner. And my friend who was, who came with me, we were sitting in a table; I don't think we even ate that night. It was like we just could feel the presence of God almost like a shower you know. And I'm not the kind of person that normally experiences God in that way. I'm pretty logical, pretty analytical, pretty ... show me the facts, you know. If I can touch it, feel it; I'll believe it And this was totally different. And so we sat at that table and Mary said to me, she said, “*We need to pray big prayers. There's nothing too big to pray.*” And so we just started praying and, like I said, the next thing we knew we looked around and there was nobody in the room, everybody had finished dinner and had gone and we were just oblivious, you know. There was just nothing except God and it was like a download almost.¹⁰⁵

Agnes tells this story about her religious experience in an attempt to explain the point at which she realized the spiritual significance of Israel, a realization that is discursively connected to the encounter with Jerusalem, which in her story becomes an encounter with God.¹⁰⁶ When sitting in the restaurant, and watching the sun set over Jerusalem's rooftops she could “feel the presence of God almost like a shower”, and she describes how she (and her friend) even lose

¹⁰⁵ Agnes 2013, my emphasis.

¹⁰⁶ See Feldman (2016) for a tour guide perspective of pilgrims' encounters with Jerusalem.

track of time.¹⁰⁷ The potency of their religious experience as it comes to them mediated through Jerusalem, was “like a download almost” which made them oblivious to their surroundings and the passing of time. Agnes never says that this experience could not have taken place somewhere else, Jerusalem is not framed as a pre-condition to meeting God; nevertheless, place is of relevance here. It is relevant both because Agnes situates the experience within the geographical context of Jerusalem – the hotel and the beauty of the roofs at sundown – but even more so because the very rationale for telling the story in the first place is not the religious experience as such but to explain how she realized that Israel *as a place* was of significance to God. This realization came to her not through reading the Bible, nor listening to pastors, but through the theophany that she experiences in the encounter with place: through the intense feeling of the presence of God streaming down on her, almost like a shower, or a download.

The religious experience that Agnes had in Jerusalem is not a coincidence. Several volunteers describe how a particular presence hovers over Jerusalem emanating a spiritual intensity which is simultaneously cherished and challenging. Below, I will use this example to discuss another way in which Israel is discursively produced as a sacred space: the construction of links between place and the biblical text.

“God’s Fire is in Zion, but His Furnace is in Jerusalem”

In many interviews with the volunteers, a personal calling is not only described as a personal motivation or as a way to express dedication to one’s chosen path but also as a spiritual prerequisite for service in this particular place in the world: “you have to be called to do it really, you know”, one American woman explains to me. Unless you are called “you may get it here”, her husband continues while he pats his head, “but not here”, he says, pointing to his heart.¹⁰⁸

The requirement of a calling might at times refer to the dedication and tenacity needed to travel across the world, to live in a foreign culture, and to do voluntary work, all of which is probably easier with a conviction that the journey

¹⁰⁷ Luhrmann has described how this type of religious experience is more common among people who score high on Tellegen’s absorption scale which correlates with the vividness and richness of inner mental worlds, susceptibility to hypnosis, and “the ability to take pleasure in music, literature and the arts” (2012, 199). Tellegen’s scale is understood to indicate one’s relative ability to become so absorbed in something that it engages one’s mental resources completely.

¹⁰⁸ Philip & Nancy 2013.

is not entirely a matter of choice but rather an expression of the will of God. Sometimes, however, the calling requirement has additional connotations that have more to do with what is needed in order to function spiritually in this specific, and peculiar, place. In these discourses, Israel, and Jerusalem in particular, is described as “spiritually intense”¹⁰⁹ and as such it is also spiritually challenging and potentially dangerous. Not having a calling in such a place is a risky business because of the spiritual struggles that you will have to face. Jacob, who we met in the previous chapter, reflects on the spiritual danger of Jerusalem.

I don't want to be here any longer than I'm supposed to be here because it's a very dangerous place, and I don't mean physically, I mean spiritually. This place will eat you alive. It will tear you up spiritually if you're not supposed to be here.¹¹⁰

For Jacob, as well as for many other volunteers, the danger of Jerusalem is not directly related to any fear of political violence, anti-missionary activities, or even terrorism, at least not explicitly. Such concerns surface in some interviews but they are usually placed in a religious framework; it is a question of faith and it is a question of learning to trust that God will protect you from harm. Often danger is also understood as something that comes with the calling to bless the Jewish people. For Jacob the danger of Jerusalem is not understood as political but rather as spiritual in nature. The intensity is something “almost tangible”; it is something that you can “feel ... in the air”, he says. In illustration of this point he refers to several of his Israeli friends who do not live in Jerusalem but who claim to start feeling “the pressure” when they drive up to the city: “They're not born again believers and they feel the tension in the air,” he says. When asked to describe the spiritual tension that he experiences in Jerusalem and how he understands it, he begins by drawing on Isaiah.

It says in Isaiah, you know, “*God's fire is in Zion but His furnace is in Jerusalem.*” And His furnace is here in Jerusalem. And you feel that furnace. The heat gets turned up in your life and things that you never thought you had a problem with, all of a sudden you're like, “*Wow, I*

¹⁰⁹ Jacob 2012, Mary 2013.

¹¹⁰ Jacob 2012.

didn't know that was in my personality," you know. And the Lord always knew it was there.¹¹¹

This description—mirrored in several other interviews but rarely explicated in this way—is in sharp contrast to the stories about the miracle and wonder of the land of the Bible discussed above. And it is delivered with a very different and more severe, even grave, tone. Being exposed to the “furnace” is not a happy-clappy religious high. Feeling that furnace is not even a pleasant experience; it is rather one of being severely challenged, of being out of your depth, of being forced to change.

Jerusalem has a way of finding your Achilles' tendon [sic] and God uses that to expose our weaknesses to Him and then we can do something with it where He can, He can work in our life but if we don't know that it exists, you know, Jerusalem will find your weak spot, it will. So I think that's another reason I'm here, it has changed me.¹¹²

The reason that Jerusalem has this ability to find your “Achilles' tendon”, your weaknesses, according to Jacob, is found in the Bible.

Because God wrote His name here; it says that in the Old Testament: that God wrote His name here in Jerusalem. This is a place, a point of contention in the spiritual realm. And there is a battle that is always going on at high intensity. This is the place where Jesus defeated the enemy. And I think that those spiritual principalities and everything that He defeated, you know, two thousand years ago, those things are still hanging around here and they affect the people that are not born again believers. And [for] those who are born again believers, God uses that testing time or that war time to grow you up. And so it is a different level here, I mean, than it is anywhere else in the world. ... This is where everything culminates in a sense. ... There're a lot better, prettier cities than Jerusalem, but there's something about it, and it's because it says in Psalms that God He neither slumbers nor sleeps, He watches over Israel. So His eye is continually here, not because the Jewish people are great, not because they're better than anybody else – in fact He says just the

¹¹¹ Jacob 2012. The Isaiah text that Jacob refers to is found in Isa. 31:9: “Their stronghold will fall because of terror; at the sight of the battle standard their commanders will panic,” declares the Lord, *whose fire is in Zion, whose furnace is in Jerusalem*” (NIV, my emphasis).

¹¹² Jacob 2012

opposite – but it’s because this is where He has chosen to place His name.¹¹³

The spiritual tension that Jacob sees hovering over Jerusalem illustrates a point which underpins this book: the narratives that we carry with us to a new geographical and cultural context structure our “ways of seeing” (Feldman and Ron 2011, 169) and our experience of the encounter with place. Bowman makes this point succinctly; for him Jerusalem is not so much “a holy city” as it is a “multitude of holy cities”; cities which are structured by the imaginaries that Christians (as well as Jews and Muslims) carry with them on their pilgrimages.

This synchronicity of Jewish, Muslim and Christian holy sites suggests that what makes the city holy to the various groups which “go up” to Jerusalem is not something found in the city but, instead, something brought from the outside and matched up there with monuments to, and markers of sacredness. (Bowman 1991a, 98)

For the volunteers, particular locative biblical stories and the eschatological narratives—often constructed on the basis of those stories—provide an interpretative framework through which they make sense of their experience in Israel. The “tension” of Jerusalem, and indeed that of Israel in general, might well be interpreted differently by different people who do not have this particular reservoir of stories to draw from when they encounter the land. In other writing, such as media reports and travelling narratives as well as ethnography, Israel is also often described as an intense—even tense—place (Ben-Ari and Bilu 1997, Markowitz 2013b). This intensity is understood by Jacob as spiritual in origin and nature. Other travelers, however, might rather understand it as emerging from the political situation and the resulting fears and anxieties this has produced; from the bricolage of different languages, cultures, and religions that animate the city; from the peculiar mixture of “Western” and “Eastern” elements it contains; or even from Jerusalem’s ancient historical heritage and architecture. Yet other travelers, of course, might not experience Jerusalem as particularly intense at all. Personally, I can relate to Jacob’s experience but for me, as an ethnographer and traveler in Israel, the intensity of the city emerges from all these things, but maybe particularly from the elongated and intractable conflict between Israel, the Palestinians, and large parts of the Arab world. Such extended strife, and the equally lengthy period in the media

¹¹³ Jacob 2012.

spotlight, has given rise to a politicization of language (see Chapters One and Two), and an ever present ideological component that structures encounters with strangers and places. Jerusalem is a particular nexus where this conflict comes to a head and the resulting tension can, like Jacob says, indeed be “felt in the air” at times. Yet, for Jacob, this feeling—or a similar one—represents something different than it does for me; it says that God has “put his name on this place”, that the “spiritual principalities” that Jesus defeated still “hang” over the city, and that you feel God’s “furnace” as you walk through the streets of Jerusalem. In a similar way as my understandings inform my experience of the place, Jacob’s understandings inform his; none of our “ways of seeing” has a definite claim on “ontological certainty” (Stromberg 1993, 95).

By drawing on some particular biblical passages, Jacob indeed directs our “attention in a particular way” (Smith 1982, 55) that frames Jerusalem as a sacred space. By having his experience of place filtered through the biblical text the Jerusalem of his narrative appears as a cosmological center where spiritual principalities linger and where God’s eye is ever watchful. This is achieved in a number of ways: first, by simply quoting these texts and thereafter creatively employing them in his discourse, Jacob makes an implicit argument for their applicability in his endeavor to make sense of his experience of Jerusalem. This perhaps seems to be an obvious point, but if it appears so, it is partly because reading Israel in relation to, or even through the Bible has become naturalized in Western cultures through the textualization process that Bowman describes and narrative constructs such as the “land of the Bible”. Even secular media at times utilize biblical metaphors and language in articles about Israel, or the conflict.

Secondly, the passages from which Jacob draws (chronologically in terms of his narrative: Isaiah 31:9; 1 Kings 11:36; 14:21; Ps. 121:4) are texts in which Jerusalem is portrayed as a cosmological center. In Isaiah 31—as in most texts believed to be written by proto-Isaiah— Jerusalem is an “enclave” or “strategic hamlet” (Smith 1993, 109) in which God’s presence on Zion is what protects the Israelites from a dangerous and hostile surrounding (see below). For Jacob, this presence is not so much a protection from dangerous surroundings as it is something that forces you to confront your own weaknesses and flaws, that exposes you to God on “a different level”, something that forces you to change. Nevertheless, it is a presence that sets Israel apart from the rest of the world; it is where “everything culminates”, he says.

Thirdly, and interestingly, Jacob draws on the metaphor of fire that he finds in Isaiah in order to explain the intensity of Jerusalem and how it has an impact on him. Fire is a potent metaphor. In the Hebrew Bible fire is often identified with God, particularly as an expression of God’s wrath and destructive powers

(Labahn 2006), but also as a signifier of divine presence as in the case of Moses' theophany by the burning bush in Exodus 3. Fire, however, is also a commonly used metaphor in many Western languages usually signifying intense emotions such as love, lust, and anger. Fire is also associated with both attraction and danger, sometimes simultaneously as in the expression "playing with fire". Drawing on the connotations of attraction / danger, creation / destruction, purity / pain, fire is related to catharsis, the flame that cleanses and purifies, and with a suffering that one needs to go through in order to become clean, or free (Diken 2011). Several of the connotations that fire metaphors carry in the English language, as well as in the Bible, seem to have some bearing on Jacob's interpretation of Jerusalem. He identifies Jerusalem with the intensity of strong emotions, with pain, with danger, and with exposure. In terms of catharsis, Jerusalem is understood as a place that will find your weak spots, expose your flaws, and force you to change. The Jerusalem of his narrative is a locus of personal transformation, but a transformation that comes only through the pain of being forced to confront that within you that you did not even know was there. For Jacob, Jerusalem is a flame that purifies.

This experience of Jerusalem is mirrored in Hanna's narrative about the place but she locates the origin of the tensions less in biblical passages and more in discourses about "spiritual warfare". In her view, too, being in Jerusalem forces you to change, and it is, she says, a painful experience.

H: Someone once told me that it's like an analogy of a bow and arrow and you're stretching the bow with the arrow. You're stretching the bow to the point where you think it's going to snap and then it keeps stretching and it keeps getting further and further and you think, "*Wow! I thought that would snap there and it didn't.*" And it's like the Lord knows exactly where you would snap and He never lets you go there. But being here is about the stretching; [it] is about the growing. And it's been painful but it's been a great experience.

A: Why is it painful?

H: Well I think when you get stretched it hurts because you don't learn through fluffy clouds and marshmallows, you learn through things going wrong. ... Something that I never understood until I came here (and to an extent I still don't fully understand) that's spiritual warfare. The fact that believing in Messiah is not about all of a sudden everything's sweet and lovely and isn't life great ... There are forces of evil in the world and they don't like you very much because of the fact that you're fighting

against them. You want people to be saved; that means they're not going to be in hell where [the forces of evil] would quite like for people to be in. And you're working against it and you're trying to bless God's people. And we know from the way that the world is so against Israel and so anti-Semitic and you know that that's not just human beings, there is evil behind that. There is such hatred that goes beyond what you'd think is reasonable or normal in any sense. So when you're here and you're seeking to bless Israel, you're seeking to bless the people that the enemy, being the devil, would quite like to wipe off the face of the earth.¹¹⁴

For Hanna, siding with “God's people” exposes you to the threat of evil. “Blessing” the Israelis puts you on the frontline in the battle between those evils and the redemptive plan of God. Being in the vanguard, as it were, is both a challenging, but also a rewarding place to be.

In both Jacob and Hanna's discourses Jerusalem is identified with presence: the presence of God; the presence of the “spiritual principalities”; and perhaps even with the presence of self (as in the part of you that you previously did not know was there). For Jacob, this understanding of Jerusalem emerges at least partly from his practice of filtering his reading of the place through biblical texts. In doing so, he creates a perspective, or “directs our attention” to particular phenomena that construct Jerusalem as sacred. If sacredness is a “relational category” as Smith has argued (1982, 55), Jerusalem becomes sacred primarily in relation to the biblical text.

The Cosmic Center

In *Map is not Territory* (1993) Smith discusses the role of Jerusalem in Jewish thought in terms of Mircea Eliade's category of “sacred space” (e.g. Eliade 1959). The problem that he wants to explore in Chapter Five (“Earth and Gods”) is directly related to the founding of the state of Israel.

The repossession of the land of Israel in 1947 and the repossession of the site of the temple in Jerusalem in 1967 have reawakened in an acute way the archaic language of sacred space and have reacquainted the modern Jew with a variety of myths and symbols which he had proudly thought he had forgotten, myths and symbols which he had frequently boasted to others that he never had. (Smith 1993, 105)

¹¹⁴ Hanna 2013.

This change in historical realities can be described in different terms, Smith writes: as a transition from “exile to return”, from “deterritorialization to reterritorialization” (1993, 106), but ultimately it implies that “a new world has been encountered, and a new mode of being must be assumed” (ibid., 107). In Smith’s interpretation of various biblical and rabbinical sources the land of Israel has been understood in different ways throughout history: in the canon of the Hebrew Bible the primary “structure” of the Holy Land was “one of an enclave, a strategic hamlet walled against the demonic forces of evil and chaos, a land of blessing whose walls and blessing requires constant renewal” (ibid., 112). Later rabbinical literature introduced another structure: “the Holy Land as the Center of space ... the very crucible of creation, the womb of everything, the center and foundation of reality, the place of blessing par excellence” (ibid., 112-113). A third understanding discussed by Smith is the tradition that the land of Israel is the center of time as well as space (ibid., 115 ff.). In this tradition the land of Israel, particularly the temple in Jerusalem, serves as a linchpin for history, the very point that keeps the cosmos together.

What is important for my purposes here are the quite striking similarities between these textual traditions about the land as a sacred space and the imaginaries of the land of Israel that surface in the volunteers’ narratives. It has already been discussed how “the land of the Bible” as a narrative construct serves to connect the biblical past with the eschatological future and the volunteers’ own present; how the volunteers describe Israel as an ontologically unique place where miracles happen more frequently than in other locales; how the history of the State of Israel is understood as evidence of God’s involvement with the world; how Jerusalem is surrounded by spiritual intensity and danger; and how Israel is discursively constructed as a place where God is especially present and experienced. Due to the frequency with which these themes surface in the interviews, these examples could easily be multiplied.

One of the themes which is connected to the idea of a center, Smith writes, is the notion of “home place” which has influenced much of the geographical literature on place (1987, 28-29). The “home” is somewhere of particular significance, of familiarity, a place where one belongs. It is a value laden locus of memory, and of nostalgia, fundamentally different from all other places. We have already seen in the previous chapter how “coming home” was an especially significant trope for the volunteers’ descriptions of their encounters with Messianic congregations, so it should not come as a surprise that “coming home” is probably the most frequently used description of the volunteers’ encounters with Israel. At least half of the interviewees explicitly refer to Israel as “home”. Additionally, many talk of it in terms of familiarity and belonging;

several of them describe how they feel “homesick” when they have to leave Israel; and one of the interviewees describes how, on coming to Jerusalem, she felt like “a bride that was being taken home to meet the family. Kind of like the Lord was right there with me, you know.”¹¹⁵ As I have already quoted Ruth and Jacob in the previous chapter mentioning these themes I will not repeat them here. What is important for the discussion, however, is the relationship between the metaphor of coming home and ideas about Jerusalem as a cosmological center. While there might be many other explanations for the centrality of the home-coming theme in the volunteers’ discourses—expressions of solidarity, an imagined unity in moral and political values, previous familiarity with biblical names and places, and I do believe all of these are relevant—those about Israel as “home” are also expressions of a religious geography that places Jerusalem in the center of the world.¹¹⁶ This geography is similar to medieval “T and O maps” that only contained three continents: Asia on top, Europe on the bottom left, Africa on the bottom right with Jerusalem placed firmly in the center. Then as now, this map was not so much an attempt to represent the actual geography but to emphasize the relative significance of places and to mirror biblical narratives. The frequently reported characteristic of Christian Zionist discourse whereby developments in other countries are directly causally connected to their political policies towards Israel should be seen in relation to a cosmology that positions Israel (and Jerusalem) in the spiritual center of the world and other countries as satellites (Durbin 2013a, b, Shapiro 2012). Echoing this cosmology, one of the American volunteers, when asked about the potential difference between doing the work that she does in Israel and doing it for some other Evangelical ministry elsewhere in the world says:

I think it begins in Israel. And as a result of doing it right in Israel, then all the other ministries around the world are going to do better. The needs are going to be met better, the supply is going to be more if we do it right here first. So we see it as beginning here. We see the Word of the Lord must go forth from Jerusalem for it to be the most authentic and

¹¹⁵ Cheryl Hauer 2013. Cheryl Hauer is the International Development Director at the Bridges for Peace.

¹¹⁶ My interpretation here differs slightly from Kaell’s in her *Walking where Jesus Walked*. “Home places” among the pilgrims that she studies are constructed through familiarity, for instance by well-known songs heard in new places, or other cultural artifacts that the pilgrims already know from home (2014, 91-95). Although I do not question that the dynamics that she describes are at work among Christian pilgrims in Israel, in light of the other themes discussed here it is probable that the volunteers are expressing something more than (imagined) cultural familiarity when they are describing Israel as a home.

powerful and from God Himself. And then all the other helps in the world are better benefitted.¹¹⁷

The transnational flow of resources, the possibility of functioning ministries around the world, even the authenticity of the Word is directly related to the work the volunteers do in Israel. This understanding does not only place Israel in the center of the cosmos, but also links the fate of the world to Israel through a kind of spiritual causality. Attempting an exegesis of the “counter-intuitive” statement—“Thank you Israel, for supporting America”—that was uttered by an unnamed Christian speaker at the Feast of Tabernacles, Faydra L. Shapiro explains that

Israel constitutes the center, an *axis mundi* around which transnational actors can flow. Support for the sovereign Jewish state of Israel allows members of “the nations” to perform a Christian identity and anticipate God’s favor through national security and prosperity in their enactment of standing with God. (Shapiro 2012, 13, emphasis in original)

On an individual and communal level, the performance of identity is certainly at work here but so is the construction of a cosmology, a map of how the world works independently of how humans relate to it. Without such a cosmology, the identity work that Shapiro describes would not make much sense. In this spiritual map, the rest of the world is dependent upon developments in Jerusalem, and the rest of the world will be judged in accordance with the particularities of its relationships to Israel, and to the Jewish people.

A Locative Thrust

The crucial importance of place in the volunteers’ discourses in many respects corresponds to what Smith has called a “locative” religious orientation (Smith 1993, 100-103). The emphases on Israel as a sacred space of miracle and wonder, as the land of the Bible, as somewhere of particular presence, and as a cosmological center, are all closely related to this particular religious orientation. In other respects, however, their understanding of Israel is not compatible with locative religiosity, particularly when considering the obvious lack of rituals

¹¹⁷ Sara 2013.

centered on purity,¹¹⁸ and the transnational character of late-modern Evangelicalism. Part of the volunteers' emphasis on Israel as a locus of God's revelatory activity comes, I believe, from the general textual reliance on particular locative passages of the Bible in Israel-centered Protestant eschatologies. As Pamela Eisenbaum has pointed out, ancient Israel, like virtually all societies in antiquity, was a locative culture and it produced locative texts (Eisenbaum 2013). In the passages where the people is chosen, where the various covenants between God and the Israelites are arranged, where the land is promised, and where the end of exile is discussed, the land of Israel, Jerusalem in particular, is central in the religious imagination. These texts have a definitive locative character.¹¹⁹ For modern Evangelical readers that identify the Israelites with contemporary Israeli Jews, the covenantal promises with the modern-day state, and the end of exile with the Zionist movement—rather than with the end of the Babylonian exile—the conclusion that God is particularly present in Israel is straightforward; in a sense, from this hermeneutical vantage point, the understanding is implied in the text(s).

Another reason for the locative themes that have surfaced in these interviews that might be worth considering is similar to Smith's understanding, already mentioned, of the change in Jewish thought that followed the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. As we saw in Chapter Two, Evangelical Christians also "encountered a new world" when the envisioned and hoped-for political construction finally took place following the British withdrawal from the mandate. In spite of the primacy of biblical imagination over concrete place in previous Christian understandings of the "Holy Land"—the "textuality" that Bowman argues for—radically changing historical realities tend to have a significant impact on religious thought. Up until '47, the Jewish state that Christian authors had wished for was a fantasy; in '48 it was suddenly historical reality. Now Christian thinkers were confronted with the need to determine if, and to what extent, this new political construct corresponded to the imagined

¹¹⁸ It might be argued that this aspect is fulfilled in some Christian Zionists' enthusiasm for work by the Temple Mount Faithful, the prophetic fascination with a coming third temple, and the numerous attempts to breed a red heifer, reported by Yaakov Ariel (1997), Paul Boyer (1992), Colin Shindler (2000), and Timothy Weber (1992, 1997, 2000, 2004). These perhaps more radical Christian Zionist positions are not very frequently expressed in the interviews, however. Furthermore, as the idea behind these phenomena is that Jews, not Christians, should re-instate the temple cult as it is understood from the Bible, it would be more adequate to label this a "vicarious locative religious orientation" than a locative orientation as such.

¹¹⁹ It should be noted, however, that these biblical passages have often been understood differently in Christian tradition, and have been interpreted in accordance with the development towards utopian religiosity exemplified by the early trajectory of Christianity.

millennial Kingdom. Was Israel the millennial kingdom, was it a precursor of it, or was it rather an unexpected historical development that did not correspond to the expected future? As several authors have shown, in spite of the radical futurism of classic dispensationalism, they rarely settled for the third option (Boyer 1992, Weber 2004). Biblical texts previously drawn upon to argue for eschatological scenarios became texts that were more or less *descriptive* of a contemporary state. As we saw in Chapter Two, this blurring of the boundaries between the present State of Israel and the millennial kingdom was also visible in the ICEJ's formulation of covenantal theology. An outcome of this process, at least as it seems from the perspective of the volunteers in Jerusalem, may have been a significant *surplus* of religious meaning. This surplus, applied to the State of Israel, provided it with some of the qualities previously ascribed to the millennial kingdom. For the volunteers, the State of Israel is not identical with the millennial kingdom, but it resembles it, even pre-figures it; for now, being in Israel is as close as it gets to the Kingdom of God.

In Jonathan Z. Smith's terminology, the volunteers' narrations of Israel seem to constitute a clear thrust in a locative direction. This characterization of their discursive practices is not introduced here for mere taxonomical value, however; I have chosen to discuss the discourses in these terms in order to illustrate the theological tensions inherent in the volunteers' understandings of place, presence, and mediation, to which we now turn. For many volunteers, as for Jennifer above, Israel is unique, and it is not; place is important, and it is not; Israel is an especially important locus for the presence of a God that is nevertheless believed to be universally available. These paradoxes will be examined in relation to what has been called the "problem of presence" (Engelke 2007).

Tensions

Protestant, including Evangelical, relationships to holy places, to material piety, and to localized religious practices have received considerable attention in theological, historical, and anthropological literature recently (Bielo 2016, Blanton 2015, Engelke 2007, 2010a, McDannell 1995, Meyer 2015, Morgan 2007, Kaell 2014, Keane 2007, 2009); several of these works have criticized earlier representations of Protestant Christianity that have too often described it as rejecting material forms of religion. While it becomes clear from these studies that Protestants, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals engage (and perhaps have *always*

engaged) in a range of practices in which both material objects and particular sacred places fulfill central religious roles, many authors have also stressed how Evangelicals in particular tend to emphasize a God that is readily available anywhere. Matthew Engelke has called this aspect of Evangelicalism “the fantasy of immediacy”, by which he means “a relation to the divine that is free from unnecessary and perhaps even counter-productive trappings” (Engelke 2010a, 2). In Engelke’s view, such a “fantasy of immediacy” is motivated by a “concern with mediation and its material instantiations” (ibid.). A similar argument has been raised by Webb Keane who has suggested that Protestant intimacy with the divine is often created precisely through an ideological rejection of materiality and sociality (2007). How can these different aspects (the material and the anti-material, the locative and the utopian) in contemporary forms of Evangelical religion be squared, and how do they relate to the discursive production of Israel as a sacred space which was discussed above?

A first step would perhaps be to recognize that anxieties about materiality are very real in certain forms of Protestant Christianity while *at the same time* acknowledging that these anxieties do not necessarily prevent Protestants from engaging with materiality and locality. “Ideological rejection” (Keane 2007) does not necessarily lead to a complete avoidance of material religious practices. Thomas Tweed, in his ethnography of Methodist pilgrimage for instance, has balanced these two poles by locating Protestant suspicion of sacred places, not in Protestantism as such but rather in reformation polemics.

In this Protestant view, establishing shrines and promoting pilgrimages risks endorsing the Catholic sacramental worldview with its mistaken, even morally dangerous, collapse of the distinction between the sacred and the secular. To designate a site as sacred, and venerate persons or objects there, muddles Protestants’ understanding of God’s relation to the world. It distracts from the authentic sources of religious authority and power: sacred Scripture and religious experience. (Tweed 2000, 42)

As Tweed’s own ethnography testifies, however, this “Protestant view” does not prevent the United Methodists that he is studying from worshipping at the shrine that has been erected at the place where John Wesley first stepped onto American soil. Similarly, in his *Hittin’ the Prayer Bones* Anderson Blanton has described “the way prayer, even within a historically iconoclastic Pentecostal tradition that overtly postulates no mediated grace and the immaterial nature of divine communication, subsists upon a material underbelly that actively

organizes and inflects the way divine communication is experienced and understood by the charismatic faithful” (Blanton 2015, 3).

In what follows I discuss two aspects of the relationship between materiality and divine presence that emerge from the Evangelical volunteers’ discursive construction of Israel as a sacred space: theological tensions concerning Israel’s unique ability to mediate divine presence, and instances where the empirical reality of the place collides with its sacredness. These aspects can be summarized under what has been called “a problem of presence” (Engelke 2007, Keane 1997b, Orsi 2005), namely, how religious practitioners claim to construct a relationship with God through the investment of religious “authority and meaning in certain words, actions and objects” (Engelke 2007, 9, Keane 1997b, Orsi 2005). Engelke understands the problem of presence as the outcome of a “core paradox of Christian thought” (2007, 9): the simultaneous presence and absence of God. It might be argued that this paradox is not a particularly Christian phenomenon and that similar tensions might be found within other religious traditions as well, but where “the problem” takes on its particular Christian shape is with the passing of the Christ-event (2007, 13). Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur (1998) and theologians John Milbank and David Tracy (1997, 1981), Engelke argues that Christianity is marked by two notions of “absolute difference” which in theological tradition are discussed in terms of the “creation” and the “fall”. While both events can be seen in terms of a fundamental separation between God and creation, the second difference has been understood in much Christian theology as being “closed” by the Christ event. Nevertheless, after Jesus’ tangible presence in the world the problem takes on a new (particularly Christian) form:

How is God present? This is a central Christian question, to which the answer is Christ. And yet, with his passing, the answer becomes conditioned by an absence. Christ is the definite presence; what comes after him is only ever a mediated one. (Engelke 2007, 13)

As Engelke points out, this question of the mediation of divine presence is the very locus of the church-in-history. It is a question over which battles have been fought, divisions have taken place, and new instantiations of Christianity have been formed. In Engelke’s reading of the Reformation struggles, the Protestant emphasis on “Sola Scriptura” was a conflict of representation. What material objects, inner-worldly structures, and events can authentically be claimed to represent the divine? Protestants had an interest in limiting inner-worldly representational artifacts and focusing on the Bible as the sole (or the main)

material object with a legitimate claim. The Protestant solution to the fact that the Bible is a material object was to treat it as “[in]significant in its materiality” (2007, 21), thereby theologically differentiating it from other material objects (icons, holy sites etc.) that possessed some claim to authenticity in representing the divine.¹²⁰ In Engelke’s ethnography of the Friday Masowe Church in Zimbabwe, the problem of presence emerges out of these Christians’ “simultaneous emphasis on the death of Jesus and the promise of a live and direct [i.e. unmediated] connection to God” (2007, 15), which make them reject the Bible as without value to their faith. In Hillary Kaell’s study of American pilgrims to Israel “the problem”, she writes, is primarily linked to the Christ-event and biblical history (*where the incarnation happened*); among the volunteers, as noted above, it is primarily linked to the “biblical” present (*where the restoration happens*).¹²¹ If God is readily available anywhere how is it that he is uniquely accessible in Israel? If Israel is understood as having a unique ability to mediate divine presence, to what extent is this experienced as a conflict with Evangelical understandings of how relationships with God are properly constructed and maintained? Finally, when Israel does not function as expected, how does this influence its ability to serve as a mediator of divine presence?

Another Problem of Presence

The Protestant heritage that Tweed describes, and with it, the lurking threat of fetishism (Keane 1997a, 2007), are genuine concerns for some of the volunteers. To some extent these anxieties need to be placed in relation to the polemical discourses about the meanings attached to the State of Israel in various Christian contexts that were described in Chapter One. What is safe to say about Israel without being subjected to iconoclastic critique from other Christians?

¹²⁰ A theological contestation of particular relevance here is the one Engelke discusses under the rubrics of “liberal” and “conservative” Protestantism. While “liberal” traditions have viewed the Bible as a “guide” and emphasized “interpretation”, conservative theologians saw the Bible not only as guide but also as “destination” and, instead of interpretation, emphasized “revelation”. “In the most stringent of these faiths”, Engelke writes, “the materiality of the Bible became presence of the divine—not representation, but presence; not sign, but actuality” (2007, 22). The most “stringent” conservatives then were the ones who limited the distance between sign and meaning so that they appeared as one and the same.

¹²¹ And I believe part of the difference in emphasis between Kaell’s and my analysis is accountable by the differences in our respective field sites. Kaell studies American Evangelical and Catholic pilgrims to Israel, a much more religiously and ideologically diverse group than mine. Many of her informants presumably would not have seen any religious significance in Israel as a state but only in Israel as the historical land of the Bible.

In the beginning of this chapter it was argued that the phrase the “land of the Bible” among the volunteers does not only refer to Israel’s history, but also to its “biblical” present. This investment of religious authority and meaning in contemporary Israel, in its socio-political, economic, and scientific developments, as well as in its cultural forms (Jewish music and dances, modern Hebrew, food customs, the social organization surrounding the Shabbat etc.), produces the State of Israel as a particularly potent sign. Not unlike the Bible, it becomes a signifier that to some extent—exactly to what degree remains contested—can be claimed as authentically representing God. However, explicitly arguing that Israel serves as a mediator of God might bring the volunteers into a theological conflict both with the more general utopian orientation in Evangelicalism and with the Protestant theological heritage. While liberal Protestantism is frequently engaged polemically in the discourses of the volunteers, however, some of them also seem concerned not to strive too far in terms of the mystification of Israel. Not all volunteers recognize these tensions; not everybody would care about them; the experience of Israel might have such an important role for them that other theological streams in their religious heritage are easily forgotten. Some do, however, quite often those higher in rank within the organizations, and quite often those with a theological education. In those cases, the role and importance of Israel is negotiated in relation to this heritage, and attempts to solve the tensions appear. In the discourse below, Tomas, an American volunteer involved in planning Evangelical tours to Israel, addresses these tensions in a discourse about the unique experience that Israel can provide to Christian travelers. For Tomas the solution lies in an emphasis on *individual readiness* to receive God.

I mean [someone] said, “*Why read about prophecy when you can live it?*”¹²² And obviously there’s an element to this question that you will never be able to fully convey to someone, or open their eyes to it completely in the way as when you’re here. ... And you yourself know that, I mean you’ve walked here ... You know, I can read about how to restore a car, you know, let’s say you take a ’67 Corvette. And I can read about, ok, this is how you can restore it, this is what it would look like if it’s restored; but then to actually do that will give you satisfaction beyond description that you may not even be able to convey to someone who’s never done that ... So I think there’s a unique connection to this land for the believer [that]

¹²² “Don’t just read about prophecy when you can be a part of it.” As we saw in Chapter One, this slogan is used by the Bridges for Peace in newsletters, pamphlets, and promotional material and it hangs on a big banner in the headquarters in Jerusalem.

you can't get anywhere else. And I'm not just talking about praying or seeking God, because you can do that anywhere and God will, God you know, you can't hide from Him. And God will speak to you anywhere. But there's a unique connection. So when a Christian walks this land, experiences God with an open mind, open heart, ready to be, ready to receive. Because the soil itself isn't magical, you know. It's not like you can pick up the soil and it will—poof!—and it becomes a bunny rabbit. You know, it's not like we literally and physically worship the stones and the soil ... And so it's not mystical in that.¹²³ But I think there is a deep connection to the heart of a Christian here and through that connection and the journey (because everybody's journey's different) but through that journey because God's speaking to you in a unique way, that if we are willing and able, transformation and change comes through that. And this goes back to the whole analogy of the car. You know, [the owners of the Corvette] didn't know how to fully describe it and convey it. I mean they could show pictures on a computer, they could point out this Scripture in the Bible, but there's a part that you just cannot convey unless you're here. And, that's I think the excitement [is] about, part of the excitement about coming here, part of the experience about coming here. But there has to be a destination. You know, we're not just coming here as an experience, like an emotional high as if it's some, like drug. You know, there is a destination which is really: am I cleaved unto God? Am I loving God with all my heart, soul and mind? Because it's all about God and not about Israel.¹²⁴

I have quoted this passage at length here because the discourse as a whole illustrates how Tomas oscillates between two different approaches to divine mediation—between discursively constructing Israel as a sacred space where God can be uniquely experienced and, at the same time, affirming the Evangelical “fantasy of immediacy” (Engelke 2010a, 2)—and how these two poles are negotiated. A similar negotiation was also visible in Adam's discourse, quoted above. Connected to this negotiation is an awareness of the threat of—and an attempt to shield the narrative construction of Israel as a sacred space from—theological fetishism.

¹²³ It should be noted that while the volunteers regularly refer to Israel as a “miracle”, none would understand Israel as “magical”, or “mystical” in the sense implied here. This reflects both cultural conventions about how divine agency is commonly described but also, I think, “the implied hierarchy of monotheism” that Shanafelt discusses (2004, 322).

¹²⁴ Tomas 2013.

The discourse is framed by the analogy of reconstructing a '67 Corvette that conveys the difference between abstract and experiential knowledge and at the same time illustrates why Israel is "unique": "restoration" is a concept applicable not only to the car wreck but also to Israel. Experiencing the restoration first hand, "being a part of prophecy" as it were, is the key to understanding Tomas' discourse about the transformative encounter with the land. However, "transformation and change", according to Tomas, comes through your personal readiness to receive God. You need to be ready to be blessed, ready to "experience the vibrancy of the Scripture", and you need to look at it "unbiasedly". On a conceptual level this implies that you need to be ready to move beyond your inherited "replacement theological" assumptions that hide the fact that Israel-of-today is a natural continuation of Israel-of-the-Bible, and you need to see the restoration without secular skepticism or modern bias. You need to be able to view Israel through the "Evangelical gaze". Being "ready to receive" requires a "suspension of disbelief": putting your skepticism aside and trusting in the conceptual links between the Scripture and the land that is conveyed to you in narrative performances. On the other hand however, Tomas repeatedly states that you can encounter God "anywhere" and that the soil of Israel is not innately magical: it cannot become a "bunny rabbit". Yet Israel has a unique mediating capacity to transmit divine presence; you receive God if you have a heart that is ready for it, but you do so through your encounter with Israel. This capacity does not come primarily through its ancient history, through being the place in which the Bible plays out—although that too is important; the mediating capacity comes through Israel as the land of the restoration. In the restoration of Israel, God entered history in a particularly tangible way, and as the restoration is a continuously ongoing project it is possible for people who are "ready to receive" to watch this restoration first hand. When biblical passages are linked to Jewish immigration, to Messianic forms of worship, to the development of agriculture or scientific discoveries, not only the land's social and cultural developments but also God's work become visible, and His presence comes to be intensely felt. It is through the implicit, and sometime explicit, links between the Bible and modern-day Israel that "transformation and change" happens. The soil is not magical, yet it seems that experiencing God is readily and particularly available in Israel. "It's all about God," Tomas says, but Israel is the vehicle through which (this specific) reception of God is made possible.

Can Israel Fall Apart?

Another question which concerns the problem of presence is whether the materiality of Israel presents a problem for its ability to serve as a mediator of divine presence. The “sacred space” discourse as it was outlined above often disseminates a highly idealized picture of Israel: it is the “land of the Bible”, a place of miracle and wonder, a place identified with deep spiritual belonging and the presence of God. Yet something which is material is something which in its very nature can *resist* interpretation or symbolification. What happens when Israel does not conform to the standards imposed on it by the religious imagination? In Engelke’s ethnography the fact that the Bible is a thing—that it can “fall apart”—is taken by his interlocutors as a sign of its functional limitations as a mediator. Something that can “fall apart” is material and as such takes away focus from what their Christianity is about: “a live and direct faith” unmediated by material objects (Engelke 2007, 7, 245). Can Israel too fall apart and, if so, how is that prospect handled by the volunteers?

As was discussed in Chapter Two, van der Hoeven frequently and explicitly criticized Israelis for not living up to their cosmological destiny, their self-denial, and their failure to accept the role given to them by God. Similar critiques, if phrased in much more careful terms, are at times heard from the volunteers. Agnes, for instance, describes how she was shocked the first time she realized that there were Israelis demonstrating *against* the occupation of the West Bank.

But the first time I saw it, it just really made my heart sick and it still kind of does because here, you know, here are Jewish people who don’t really understand that this land has been entrusted to them by God and they’re willing to trade it for, for something, you know.¹²⁵

As for van der Hoeven, the problem for Agnes lies with those Israelis who do not accept the role that God has given them, who even “decline” the offer of Judea and Samaria and are willing to trade them for peace. Similar critiques are sometimes voiced by other volunteers, either in relation to leftist Israelis, or to the Ultra-Orthodox movement Neturei Karta.¹²⁶

A related critique from volunteers concerns the treatment of Messianic Jews and congregations in Israel, and the general lack of a “spiritual restoration” of

¹²⁵ Agnes 2013.

¹²⁶ Neturei Karta is a fringe religious movement which opposes Zionism and calls for the dismantlement of the State of Israel. According to them, no Jewish state is legitimate prior to the coming of the Messiah.

Israel: in other words, too few conversions to Messianic Judaism. While at times this is phrased in terms of freedom of religion, and discrimination against Messianic Jews is condemned on that basis, the eschatological models commonly upheld by the volunteers also play a role here in evaluating the state of Israeli society. “Spiritual restoration” is generally understood to follow upon the “physical restoration” of the Jewish people but, as one volunteer observes, not much movement in that direction is observable within Israel. In his case, although this is the only time I heard this during field work, it makes him question whether, and to what extent, Israel should really be considered a “fulfillment of prophecy”.¹²⁷

As mentioned in Chapter One, a great deal of Christian Zionist activity in Jerusalem takes place within an “environmental bubble” (Feldman 2016) that to a certain extent shields the volunteers from aspects of Israeli society that do not fit neatly within their worldview. Many of them do not have any sustained relationships with Israeli non-Messianic Jews, and even fewer have any relationships with Palestinians. They spend most of their time with other evangelical volunteers at work, they often live in apartments organized by the ministries (which they share with other volunteers), they go to Messianic congregations during the weekends, and they generally travel little outside Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. There are certainly exceptions to all these general observations, some of which have been mentioned above, but when a volunteer socializes outside the environmental bubble it is usually because they have a personal wish to “learn more about Israel” or to make Israeli friends.

At one point during fieldwork I got the chance to explore the impact of the bubble, and to expose it to some external pressure. This happened mid-way through the third round of fieldwork when Adam, a young European volunteer, and I finally found some time to take a trip to Taybeh, a small Palestinian Christian town about twenty kilometers north of Jerusalem, and directly west of the large Israeli settlement Ofra. We had been talking about this trip for some time, and Adam had insisted on accompanying me there so that we could experience the Palestinian territories, and of course, the family-owned brewery where they make the famous Taybeh beer. It was a fine day, and Adam and I spent our time in various Palestinian buses talking about the connections between the Bible and the land, between politics and religion, and about Jews, Palestinians, and the various identities present in the country. I also used the time to try out my early interpretations of the interviews on Adam and discuss the results with him. As noted above, it is very uncommon for Evangelical

¹²⁷ Ben 2013.

Christians on the Zionist side to visit the Palestinian territories or even the Palestinian areas of Jerusalem except on guided tours to the Old City or to Bethlehem or Nazareth. All through the journey, Adam took obvious pride in being adventurous and going off the beaten track; he laughed and made jokes about Christian Zionist fears of Palestinians and he eventually bought a little coffee mug in Taybeh which he said he would put on his desk in the Christian ministry where he worked: partly, I suspect, as a joke, partly as a provocation to his Evangelical colleagues at the office.

Adam is very clear about the biblical promises to the Jewish people, the eschatological expectations of Israel, and about the importance of the Bible in understanding the rights of the various groups inhabiting the land. Yet, compared to many of the other volunteers, he is also unusually critical of Christian Zionist beliefs and practices, and sometimes even of Israeli policies. Justice is an important value for him, and he is very attentive to, and disturbed by, talk or practices that he understands as racist or otherwise derogatory. This became evident as, on the way back to Jerusalem, we had to pass through Qalandiya, which is the location of the main checkpoint between Jerusalem and the northern part of the West Bank. As is common at the main checkpoints, we had to get off the Palestinian bus we had been riding, walk through the fenced lines up to passport control, answer the questions of the bored IDF soldiers, and get on a new bus on the southern side of the wall. I do not know if this was Adam's first up-close experience of the checkpoints or if the experience simply triggered thoughts that he had long held but once on the other side Adam erupted in criticism of the injustice of the situation, the abnormality of the separation wall, and how this situation must end.

To my mind, Adam's experience can be read as one example of the collision between the idealized narrative identity of Israel which the volunteers often express and the physical realities of the place; or, in less confrontational terms, where the two "Israels" that Patricia describes at the beginning of this chapter surface at the same time. Insofar as I could tell at the time, the experience does not make Adam question Israel's divinely mandated right to the land but it certainly makes him question the forms under which control of it is executed. He criticizes military control, the law of return (as unacceptable to Palestinians and an obstacle to peace), and he contemplates the terms under which a two-state solution could be possible and in line with the biblical commandments. Although it is not allowed to divide the land, he says, referencing Joel 3:2,¹²⁸

¹²⁸ "I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat, and I will enter into judgment with them there, on account of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations. *They have divided my land.*" (NRSV, my emphasis)

Israel has already done so by building the wall, and besides, the land has been “divided” many times throughout its history.

Adam’s critique is obviously different from the others mentioned above: in the previous cases the problem was that Israel, or Israelis, did not live up to the demands of eschatological narrative; in Adam’s case Israel does not live up to his sense of justice. More importantly, while previous examples rely on the eschatological narrative to render judgment on Israel’s moral status, Adam is *explicitly negotiating that narrative* in an attempt to find ways in which to make it more “righteous”. To my knowledge, Israel never completely “falls apart” for Adam because of his experience of the Qalandia checkpoint, but while he keeps reaffirming the biblical promises to Israel he also enters a situation of re-interpreting the meaning of these promises. At the very least, Adam’s experience shows that while basing political support upon biblical promises sounds like a highly unyielding and inflexible ground for political beliefs, there is still room for negotiation if the conditions are right. “Absolutism” here, as in the case of biblical literalism that is discussed in the next chapter, better translates as “flexible absolutism” (Harding 2000, 275).

From a perspective of materiality all the examples above can be seen as instances where the material order resists, or fails to live up to, the demands placed on it by the religious imagination of the volunteers. However, none of these tensions seems to have the potential to overthrow the fundamental understanding of Israel as a sacred space, at least not insofar as these tensions have been experienced and expressed by the volunteers. I do think there are two rather straightforward explanations for this situation. First, as Jackie Feldman has observed in his study of Christian pilgrims to Israel, religious travelers to the land tend to have a confirmation bias. Pilgrims, like the volunteers, travel to the land more to be confirmed in their faith than to challenge it (2016, 90). In other words, they are more inclined to look for signs and listen to words that confirm their already existing understanding of the land, than to look for those that challenge it. This dynamic is probably further reinforced by the rather restricted social atmosphere of the organizations, and the limited exposure that most volunteers have to other ways of life within Israel. Second, when tensions arise, the volunteers are inclined to explain them as anomalies in the general structure rather than to take them as signifiers that their worldview is flawed. This is primarily achieved by relegating experiences that *do not fit* to the “Israel is a country like any other” discourse which was exemplified by Jennifer at the beginning of this chapter. In this discourse Israel is argued to be a normal country with similar problems to any other, and that it should be bound by the same moral standards as any other. As the sacred is constructed, so is the

profane, but these two faces of Israel need to be kept apart in order not to muddle the understanding of Israel as a step in the redemptive process. By returning to the trope of “a country among others” when things do not fit, the vision of Israel as a unique sacred space can be kept pure, distanced from the phenomenological dirt of empirical experience. Certain aspects of Israeli history and social life are taken as representative of the divine while other aspects are deemed unworthy of this special status and thus relocated to the “country among others” discourse. As a result, the experience of Israel is split in two: one unique and one normal; one that mediates presence and one that does not.

“To Live Between the Tensions”

Before closing this chapter I would like to return to the tension between sacred locality and the “fantasy of immediacy” that emerged in Tomas’ discourse above. Although there have been Restorationist streams in Protestant thinking since the 17th century (Boyer 1992, Smith 2013), and although many other Protestant movements have recognized specific pieces of land and particular peoples as especially significant to God (British Israelism, Puritan immigrants in North America, Dutch Reformed theology in South Africa among others), mainstream Protestant thought has gravitated towards the universalist approaches and allegorical interpretations of the land promises in the Hebrew Bible. Against this background, Evangelical Zionist understandings of the land of Israel and its spiritual uniqueness emerge as something of a theological innovation, or at least, reformulation. As I have argued above, the novelty of their approach, and the tension in which it exists with some other Protestant streams of thought, is something which the volunteers are aware of, to various degrees. In an interview with David Parsons (media director of the ICEJ) he addresses this tension in a particularly explicit way when he criticizes Christian theologians and scholars who fail to see the enduring election of Israel in Scripture.

The problem today is this “fulfilment theology”, that the land served a certain purpose up until Jesus, but that anything about the land going forward is just a metaphor that, you know, that Abraham, he didn’t know it, but he actually was inheriting the cosmos and not just some little piece of real estate. And so they spiritualize the land under the New Testament. And they universalize everything ... you know, it’s almost a type of

Marcionism.¹²⁹ But ... a lot of these Christian theologians, Christian scholars, whatever, they view the Old Testament as God revealing himself as a God of judgment and wrath. That the God who identified himself with Israel he just flew off the handle all the time and, was always getting angry and whatever, and that Jesus came along and revealed the God of love and mercy. Almost as if he's schizophrenic or he only wanted to reveal himself one way in the Old Testament and another in the New. And now everything is the universal love of God, there's no longer any preferred people, we're all children of God. And there's a certain truth to it. But Paul, his whole purpose in Romans 9 through 11 is— You know a Biblical paradox is an eternal truth presented in Scripture that has a parallel truth? And if you go and accept one truth to the exclusion of the other, that is the definition of a heresy: where you accept and propagate one paradoxical truth in Scripture to the exclusion of another. And, you know, a good example of this is predestination versus free choice. The Bible actually presents both. And the art of the Christian walk is to learn to walk between those two truths ... You know, I chose Jesus, but He chose me first; and, I may be predestined as a Son of God but, you know, I can also lose my faith. And what he [Paul] does in Romans 9 through 11 is he skirts with the exclusivity of election and predestination, but never to the point of excluding free choice and universal laws.¹³⁰

This discourse is essentially a defense for the unity of Scripture which is experienced as being threatened by “fulfillment theologians”. This unity can only be preserved, in Parsons’ understanding, by the embrace of paradoxical truths. The tensions inherent in the Christian Scriptures, and by implication in Christian faith, are solved by treating them as “parallel truths”. Emphasizing one of them to the exclusion of the other is the very “definition of a heresy”. The Christian walk is, rather, to learn to live with the tensions, to accept paradoxical truths and to remain faithful to the message of the Bible even in the face of paradox. Predestination versus free will is one of those paradoxes; the enduring election of Israel versus the universalism of the Christian message is another.¹³¹ In light of Parsons’ view, the oscillations in the volunteers’ discourses between

¹²⁹ Marcion was a 2nd-century theologian who rejected the deity of the Hebrew Bible. His teachings were later denounced as heretical.

¹³⁰ David Parsons 2012.

¹³¹ One might, of course, add other examples here: Engelke’s “core paradox of Christian thought”—absence and presence; the dual natures of Christ (as fully divine and fully human); the divine-human authorship of the Bible etc.

sacred space and quotidian Israel are not examples of indecisiveness but, instead, expressions of the tensions that define the Christian walk. Christian faith is inherently paradoxical, he seems to say; the “scandal of particularity”¹³² that emerges from Israel’s enduring election is just one paradox among others that defines it.

After having described how “the land promise” is a central theme in the Bible, including the New Testament, Parsons comes to a conclusion when he sums up the implications of this theology, and, by implication, the religious meaning that is ascribed to Israel in these discourses.

This is the whole teaching of Scripture. And even though it’s a specific land and it’s a piece of real estate, you know. It’s not about salvation and men’s souls, that is correct. But the land promise has to do with how you view the nature and character of God. This whole question of what we’re dealing with, your view on Israel, including the land promised to her, actually comes down to your view of the nature and character of God. And is He truly a covenant-keeping God who keeps his promises?¹³³

From Parson’s perspective then, the restoration of Israel signifies a God that keeps his promises. The land of the Bible is a focus point that assembles the various strands in the narrative about the redemptive works of God and proves His loyalty and faithfulness. As we have seen, this narrative is not without contradictions; it is not without theological tensions; but the “art of the Christian walk” is embracing these tensions as paradoxical truths and accepting them as equally significant.

Conclusions

In this chapter I first described the volunteers’ discourses about the land of Israel, and some of the ways in which Israel was constructed as a sacred space. I then discussed some of the tensions that can emerge in the encounter between these discourses and the concrete experience of place. If the problem of presence concerns how rightfully to construct a relationship to the divine given God’s apparent absence after Christ, different Christian orientations have provided a

¹³² David Parsons 2012.

¹³³ David Parsons 2012.

wide variety of answers to this question. In Evangelical pro-Zionist thought, the land of Israel emerges as one type of answer; God is present everywhere but particularly so in Israel. Via Israel—through observation of its history and engagement with its culture, social and political life—it is possible to construct a relationship to God. Even if not entirely harmonious, the materiality of Israel does not present a problem for intimacy with God (Keane 2007) as much as it mediates it, even reinforces it. In *To take Place* Jonathan Z. Smith quotes the 17th-century philosopher John Selden who said:

The Jews had a peculiar way of consecrating things to God, which we [i.e. Protestant Christians] have not. Under the law, God, who was master of all, made [the] choice of a temple to worship in, where he was more especially present: just as the master of the house, who owns all the house, makes [the] choice of one chamber to lie in, which is called the master's chamber. But under the gospel there was no such thing. (Selden, quoted in Smith 1987, xi)

This “peculiar way of consecrating things to God” is, of course, represented in large sections of the Scriptures that Christianity has inherited from ancient Israelite and Jewish tradition, and it is represented in various instantiations of Protestantism. That John Selden found these interpretations of these texts “peculiar” and without religious significance post-Christum does not necessarily mean that other Protestant Christians will agree with him. The Evangelicals in Israel obviously do not. They spend their time in the “master's chamber”, and even though the whole house belongs to Him, residing there is a particularly potent presence.

5. Text: Literalism, Prophecy & Authenticity

My Dad asked me a question when I was younger and he said to me, 'Karen how can you believe in the Bible? How can you believe that the Bible is true?' And I said, 'Well, you know, like I've been reading it, I've been taught it, and I think it is right.' And he said, 'Follow the history of the Jew ... [which is] God's story of His promises to a particular group of people and how he has maintained them throughout all the years against all odds.'

Karen, 2013

When asked to explain what motivates their activities in relation to Israel, and why they believe that this is what God wants them to do, the volunteers always refer in one way or another to the Bible. The biblical promises to the Jews; the prophecies foretelling their return to the land; and God's covenant with the Jewish people collectively constitute the mandate upon which both the organizations' and the volunteers' self-understanding ultimately rests. This identity as a Bible-believing Christian was central in the transformative experience that was described in Chapter Three and it was further strengthened through the encounter with Israel and the possibility of experiencing God in the land, as described in Chapter Four. These biblical mandates, however, remain contested within various Christian contexts and the volunteers are often highly aware of alternative interpretations and the positions of theological opponents. In many cases, their own position is also contrasted explicitly with theological opponents who, they feel, do not take the Bible seriously. Tomas, encountered in the previous chapter, says, for instance:

Now when I, and I don't want to just say this as an opinion as well, because when I look at the Bible it's so clear that God has a plan, purpose and covenant. And so yes, I do completely disagree with Christians that

have replaced Israel with the Church. It also reminds us that anybody can look at anything, or approach anything and twist it ... When I look at the Bible and God says that He has established an everlasting covenant, I believe that. Because it's a literal statement—why would I twist it and change it?¹³⁴

In the excerpt, Tomas argues that his view of the Bible's relationship to contemporary Israel should not be understood as "an opinion": a statement which exemplifies the literalist discursive dichotomy between literal readings and "interpretations" that is a highly salient feature of many biblically conservative communities. Simon Coleman, for instance, has remarked that "speakers" (preachers, Bible interpreters, witnesses etc.) in literalist cultures are not understood to be *interpreting* sacred text since

interpretation is opposed to disciplined speaking and hearing in the sense that it implies ambiguity of meaning in sacred text or inspired preaching—a result of the mind acting as distorting mediator between sacred language and receptive audience. (Coleman 2006, 49)

"Interpretation", in this literalist discourse is often understood not as an inescapable component of textual engagement but rather as a superficial, ultimately unnecessary, and sometimes even dangerous practice that opens up a gap between the biblical text and God's intended meanings. While Tomas is recognizing the possibility of different interpretations of the covenant he also makes it clear that these alternative interpretations are invalid and distorting ("replacing", "twisting", and "changing"). His own reading is different: it relies on a "literal statement", the meaning of which is provided by the very wording of the text. This means that for most, if not all volunteers there is an objectively available "biblical view" of the land and of the conflict between the various groups that lay claim to it, one that is generally understood to be embodied in institutions like the ICEJ, the BFP, and the CFI. On the other side of the fence, representing an un-(or a-)biblical view are organizations like the United Nations, the World Council of Churches and large sections of the global Church which are understood to be under the spell of theological liberalism, so-called "allegorical hermeneutics", and "replacement theology".¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Tomas 2013.

¹³⁵ Both "allegorical hermeneutics" and "replacement theology" are within quotation marks here because they refer to emic concepts; these are related to, but not identical with, allegory and replacement theology as the terms have more generally been understood within church history,

This chapter explores biblical literalism as it manifests within the Christian Zionist community in Jerusalem in relation to scholarly conversation about Evangelical textual ideology (Bielo 2015, Coleman 2006, Malley 2004). As we saw in Chapter One, biblical literalism has often been understood as a strict set of rules for textual engagement that explains Evangelical Zionist understandings of Israel. I believe this approach to be problematic not only because it simplifies the psychological, hermeneutical, and social processes involved in textual engagement but also because it naturalizes what is essentially an ideological claim. Instead, biblical literalism will here be understood as an ideological position of diverse, and at times ambivalent, interpretative possibilities. This textual ideology will be explored in two different yet interrelated areas that are central to the production of contemporary Evangelical Zionist identity: Bible prophecy and discourses about the “Hebraic roots” of Christian faith. It is argued that Bible prophecy is highly valued in what Malley has called “the quest for relevance” (2004), and that, in its retrospective form, it provides an epistemological framework that makes it logical to conceive of contemporary Israel as evidence for the truth of the biblical Scriptures. Yet the fundamental uncertainty of the future also leaves Bible prophecy unable to sustain, unassisted, the legitimacy of Evangelical Zionist readings of Israel. Further support for those readings is instead found through a reevaluation of early Christian history and Judeo-Christian identity. By employing historical narratives, contemporary Evangelical Zionists can subvert critical assessment of their faith and practices as modern manipulation of symbols and texts, and instead situate their religiosity as a rediscovery of an authentic biblical Christianity. In this reading, evangelical Zionism represents a direct continuation with Ancient Christianity as it was meant to be before it was eclipsed by Hellenism.

An Ideology of Literalism

Several anthropological studies have questioned the accuracy of Evangelical and fundamentalist claims to literalism as a description of actual interpretative practices and instead treated literalism primarily as an “interpretative tradition” (Harding 2000, 28, Malley 2004) or as a “language ideology or textual habitus” (Bielo 2015, 22, see also: Bielo 2009, Crapanzano 2000, Coleman 2006, Kaell

biblical exegesis, or modern theologies. See below for further discussion about the local meanings attached to these terms.

2014). Brian Malley, for instance, has described literalism primarily as an expression of theological and religious identity that separates adherents from ideological others. By identifying as a biblical literalist one also identifies what one is not (liberal, modernist, progressive etc.). As we saw from Tomas' interview excerpt, quoted above, such an identity is highly relevant in the Christian context in Jerusalem where arguments about "what the Bible says" are fundamental to broader arguments about the legitimacy of various historical narratives and theological positions as well as the distribution of political rights.

Literalism, however, is not only an identity marker. In several works it has also been shown to be closely associated with Protestant language ideologies in that it embeds assumptions about how language works and is supposed to work (Coleman 2006, Crapanzano 2000, Keane 2007, Bielo 2009). As a language ideology, literalism has been described as prioritizing the semantic and referential functions of language over pragmatic, performative, or context-relating aspects (Coleman 2006). In such readings, Coleman has argued that "the meaning of a text is taken to be ultimately decidable, and traceable to original, authorial intention" (2006, 42). Coleman also notes, I believe correctly, that the ideology of literalism has certain parallels with modern linguistic ideology such as "certain assumptions about the relation of intention to meaning, the nature of speaking subjects and the relative importance of speakers over listeners in processes of semiosis" (2006, 42, see also: Stromberg 1993, Robbins 2001). Literalism then stresses a close relationship between language and reality, and the ability of language to accurately reflect inner states, intentions, and identities.

As James S. Bielo has recently noted, however, several scholarly accounts of biblical literalism have suffered from an overly negative rendering of the amount of creativity and interpretative flexibility that is available to interpreters in literalist cultures (2015). Perhaps the most influential example of this characterization of literalism is Vincent Crapanzano's *Serving the Word: Literalism in America from the Pulpit to the Bench* (2000). While recognizing literalism as a language ideology rather than a set of hermeneutic rules, there is little in Crapanzano's account of literalism, which he describes as characterized by a focus on "single, essential lexical meanings" and "unambiguous correlation between word and thing", that suggests that literalists might be capable of interpretative imagination and flexibility. In Bielo's words,

[Crapanzano's] approach also positions the literalist as a particular kind of textual user, defined by an either / or logic; having little tolerance for ambiguity, polysemy, or uncertainty; hemmed in by a strict originalist fidelity; and confined to the genre of the written text. In short, literalism in this scheme is a small, closed universe. (Bielo 2015, 22)

In sharp contrast to characterizations of literalism as “a small, closed universe” stand several ethnographic accounts which have highlighted the often ambiguous, flexible, and creative reading practices of conservative Evangelicals (Bialecki 2009, Bielo 2009, 2015, Johnson Frykholm 2004, Malley 2004). An important feature of such textual practices is the ongoing attempt to connect the biblical text to personal experiences. In the previous chapters we have seen how this feature of Biblicism is highly salient in Evangelical Zionism, not only in relation to personal lives (Chapter Three) but also in relation to the construction of Israel as a sacred space (Chapter Four). In previous literature a number of different frameworks have been suggested for this close association between the biblical text and everyday lives within Evangelicalism. Susan Harding (2000), drawing on the work of theologian Hans Frei (1974), has described such practices as being guided by a figurative logic which—in Frei's account—was the dominant mode of reading the Bible prior to the advent of modernity. Brian Malley (2004), of whom more below, describes literalist Bible reading practices as guided by a “search for relevance” which, while embedded in a rhetoric of literalism, still displays a large amount of flexibility in concrete textual engagements. Perhaps most telling is Bielo's own ethnographic account.

Bielo (2015) writes that it is his fieldwork among the creative artists designing the conservative Protestant theme park, Ark Encounter, that has forced him to “reassess literalism” (22) as something more similar to “a generative mode than a restrictive ideology” (32).¹³⁶ In his account, “the paucity of scriptural detail” facing the creative artists trying to (re-)imagine and (re-)create a full-scale Noah's Ark “is not a straightjacket of confining limits; it is a bonanza of artistic opportunity” (32). The artists in Bielo's ethnography fill the textual gaps that emerge from Genesis' sparse account of the construction of the Ark by drawing on fictional textual resources including fantasy literature and art, graphic novels, contemporary Sci-Fi films as well as historic works.

Bielo's “recalibration” of literalism is also relevant for assessing the literalist culture in Jerusalem. Apocalyptic passages suffer a “paucity of scriptural detail”

¹³⁶ Information about The Ark Encounter is available here: <https://arkencounter.com/> (accessed 2015-11-17). I generally share Bielo's critique of Crapanzano but I do not think that “ideology” necessarily needs to be understood as “restrictive”.

as well, and coherent eschatological narratives are only made possible by creative intertextual work. Often it is precisely in the more eschatologically oriented readings that Christian Zionism seems the most inclined towards figurative readings and the least bound by the letter of the text. It is also here that they are most likely to fill the textual gaps with super-textual material (such as geopolitical information, Religious Zionist ideology, prophecy fiction, and media representations of the Middle East) but, at the same time, it is in relation to these readings that a rhetoric about the legitimacy of literalism (and the illegitimacy of “allegory”) plays the most crucial ideological role.

By approaching biblical literalism as a textual ideology I understand it both as a specific mode of approach involved in textual encounters and as a particular discursive location that needs to be defended and argued for. As Simon Coleman has remarked, “literalism has its own ambiguities and subtleties—indeed, its own subculture of interpretation—and there is very little that is simple about it” (2006, 58). With regards to Christian Zionism, this “subculture of interpretation” must be explored through a perspective that takes both tangible hermeneutical practices and broader ideological questions into account, and these questions need to be addressed in light of the literalist imperative, as well as the tensions and ambiguities that exist between literalism and prophecy belief.

Ambiguities of Prophecy Belief

In mid-spring 2013 I meet an older North American woman at the Shalhevetejah hostel, where I am staying during field work. Rachel is married to a Messianic Jewish Israeli and has lived in Israel for the past twenty years. Like many evangelicals in Jerusalem she feels that Christianity has lost touch with its Jewish roots, claiming that “we need to remove the paganism from the Church”, a phrase often used in reference to Christian practices and holidays which, it is felt, do not have a clear biblical basis. Rachel tries to counteract this disconnection through the adoption of a limited kosher diet and the inclusion of a variety of Jewish and Messianic religious practices in her personal piety. After hearing about my research into evangelical Zionism, and my links to the three ministries in Jerusalem, she invites me to spend Friday evening with her, first in a Messianic congregation at *Rehov Hanevim* and later at a conference—“*A World Turned Upside Down*”—organized by the evangelical organization Intercessors for Israel.

Rachel was open and interesting, and during the evening she talked almost constantly—about the situation in Israel, about believers and unbelievers, about the situation for the Messianic congregations in Israel and the need for Israelis (Jews and Muslims) to realize who the Messiah is, and about Bible prophecy—not only to me but to everyone we met: the Ethiopian Falashas in the Messianic community, the taxi driver who took us to the conference, and other participants in the fancy hotel on Mount Scopus where the conference was held. The speaker for the evening was the Evangelical preacher Chuck Cohen, a prominent figure in Evangelical circles in Jerusalem who is related to the three ministries in Jerusalem in a variety of ways. That evening he discussed the spiritual economy that determines the distribution of God’s “blessings” and “curses” and how the nations’ relationships to Israel lie at the heart of this economy. In his speech, Cohen connected a new round of debates in the United Nations General Assembly to the “valley of Jehoshaphat” from Joel 3.¹³⁷

I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat, and I will enter into judgment with them there, on account of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations. They have divided my land. (NRSV)

Cohen’s interpretation of this passage suggested that contemporary debates in the UN should be understood as biblical events and that the countries that voted for a “division of the land” will be subjected to God’s judgement. In the same sermon, Cohen was able to interpret several phenomena—which would, from a modern secular perspective, be viewed as discrete from each other—such as the mass shooting at the premiere of *Batman – The Dark Knight Rises*, the Columbine Massacre, homosexuality, abortion, and the secularization of public schools, and explain them in the light of God’s distribution of blessings and curses. In Cohen’s reading, and presumably in that of many of his listeners, all these phenomena are connected through the eschatological narrative that situates them as the “birth pangs” (Mk. 13:8) that precede the coming of the Messiah; and all are in some way connected to how various other countries treat Israel. The root of all the “birth pangs”, Cohen says, is “touching the Apple of God’s eye”: in other words, countries’ voting against the Israeli position in the UN, criticizing Israeli political policies, or acting in a way that is felt to be contrary to Israeli political interests. While the disparate events discussed by

¹³⁷ At this time, the general assembly was debating whether to upgrade the status of Palestine at the United Nations from permanent observer to non-member observer state; a move that was viewed unfavorably by most Christian Zionists in Jerusalem.

Cohen sometimes feel completely random, their interpretation relies on an underlying logical structure known to participants at the conference. Such “eschatological guessing”, writes Amy Johnson Frykholm, should be understood not as “random” but instead as “arising out of a coherent mythological structure ... The prophetic narrative ... lays out a formulaic series of events and characters. Believers do the work of filling in the blanks in order to understand and give shape to the world they live in” (2004, 120). Johnson Frykholm’s point is that while the eschatological structure is strict, and often comes embedded in a rhetoric suggesting biblical literalism, actual reading practices show a great deal of flexibility and creativity.

Among the volunteers, Bible prophecy is generally understood as valid and meaningful in relation to Israel, and a general eschatological narrative guides interpretation of historical events, contemporary experiences in the land, and expectations, fears, and desires for the future. Yet Bible prophecy is a complicated topic and, in the following, I divide discourses concerning it into two parts since volunteers deal with prophecies in significantly different ways depending on whether they are understood to have been fulfilled, or are yet to come to pass.

Prophecy: Past & Present

As we have seen in previous chapters, the founding of the State of Israel and sociopolitical developments in Israeli history are generally understood in reference to already—at least partly—fulfilled prophecies. But the volunteers’ own work in Israel is also often situated in this discursive context: by working towards Jewish-Christian reconciliation and by “blessing the Jewish people” the volunteers themselves become embedded in God’s meta-historical labor, becoming characters in the prophetic narrative. For instance, Tom and Susan, an older American couple who are involved in a ministry’s project involving elderly Israelis and war veterans, describe their work in reference to the biblical prophet Jeremiah. In their work they visit people in their homes, assess their needs, and collect stories that are later written down and published in the magazines and newsletters of the organization, to be distributed to members around the world. When I ask them about their work Tom describes it in reference to the ingathering of the exiles.

I mean that's the way the Bible says, "*I will bring my people from the north and put them in the land.*" And so here is Jeremiah, he's looking far into the future and he sees these people coming from the north. And Susan and I, now in 2013, are sitting down at their table and having tea with these people that the prophet saw and we're talking to them.¹³⁸

For Tom and Susan, this experience of sitting down and talking to the immigrants, collecting their stories and transcribing them for circulation is immensely spiritually fulfilling. Listening to them, I get the sense that these experiences are probably the major reason they keep going back and forth between Israel and their home country on a semiannual basis. While they seem genuinely happy to be able to help people in need, to make new friends from another country, and to record their stories, their work delivers an extra dimension of attainment by virtue of the fact that these people are not just anybody, but Jews that have returned to Israel in line with biblical prophecies. Every meeting with them testifies to the accuracy of those prophecies and it situates Tom and Susan as witnesses to the fulfillment of Scripture. The process of interpreting contemporary experiences through the biblical prophecies seems to close the gap between the biblical past and the volunteers' present. When Tom and Susan sit down around the coffee table to talk with the newly arrived Russian immigrants or elderly veterans of war they are experiencing the fulfillment of what the prophet Jeremiah "saw" millennia ago. They are experiencing the *literal* fulfillment of his words. It is almost "surreal", Tom says with a smile.

Biblical prophecy in this instance is figurative and retrospective. The ingathering of the exiles is a prophetic theme that is experienced as already (partly) fulfilled through the labor of the Zionist movement, immigration to Israel, and the social formation of the Israeli state. In its retrospective form, Bible prophecy is often utilized as a sense-making tool that imbues the volunteer work with transcendental meaning by figuratively connecting it to the biblical narrative. In Harding's ethnography of fundamentalist language (2000), she argues that Jerry Falwell's frequent use of figuration situates him alongside the biblical text, enabling him to assert a continuity between the biblical narrative and his own person. In doing so a double effect is produced: the continued relevance of the biblical text is defended and Falwell's own life becomes saturated with biblical meaning. What Tom, Susan, and other volunteers are

¹³⁸ Tom and Susan 2013. This reference is generally drawn from Jeremiah 30-31 where the return from captivity is prophesied in several different versions. The particular passage about the "north" occurs in Jer. 31:8.

doing is similar to Falwell in that it situates them as witnesses of the fulfillment of Jeremiah's ancient prophecies.

In addition to the personal importance attributed to witnessing the fulfillment of biblical prophecy by the volunteers, the figurative use of Bible prophecy also plays an epistemological role by serving as an evidence for the truth of the biblical Scriptures. This function of Bible prophecy has lately been observed in several studies of Christian Zionism (Spector 2009, Durbin 2013b, Smith 2013, Stewart 2014, 2015). Here the primary goal of Bible prophecy practices seems neither to be to interpret real world events in order to make them understandable, nor to produce political support for the State of Israel. Rather, it is to establish the connections between the Bible and historical experience as such, because this connection successfully produces the Bible as an inspired text, relevant to past, present, and future: prophetic evidence legitimizes the textual ideology of conservative Evangelicalism. The validity of this interpretation is repeatedly supported by the interview data. Karen, for instance, when asked about the "prophetic picture" and whether "it is important for her work in Jerusalem" replied:

Very. Very important. And that's the difference between ... other religions [that] I've done any research on and the one that I believe. I believe in the Bible, in the whole Bible ... My Dad asked me a question when I was younger and he said to me, "*Karen how can you believe in the Bible? How can you believe that the Bible is true?*" And I said, "*Well, you know, like I've been reading it, I've been taught it, and I think it is right.*" And he said, "*Follow the history of the Jew ... [which is] God's story of His promises to a particular group of people and how he has maintained them throughout all the years against all odds.*"¹³⁹

The "history of the Jew", and "his" survival "throughout all the years against all odds" here serves as an evidence that the biblical Scriptures are "true". This is a grand claim, but not an uncommon one. The story of Karen's father—here retold through the use of direct reported speech—bears close resemblance to a story that has often been repeated within both philo-Semitic and anti-Semitic circles: what Stephen Haynes has called the "'Jews, your [sic] Majesty' legend" (Haynes 1995, 58). This is available in a multitude of different versions but it always involves one European ruler (Frederick the Great of Prussia, Louis XIV of France, Queen Victoria) and some sage (a court physician, the Christian

¹³⁹ Karen 2013.

philosopher Pascal, Otto von Bismarck, the Protestant preacher Furchtegott Gellert, the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli). In the story the ruler asks the sage either if there is evidence of God, or how one can know that the Bible is true, and the sage always replies, “The Jew, Your Majesty”. In Chapter Three we saw how direct reported speech could be used to displace responsibility for a particular claim that is being made in discourse. As Parmentier (1994) and others (Good 2007, Vincent and Perrin 1999) have argued, such use of reported speech can bolster the authority of particular claims since the authority of reported speech resides with the “original” speaker who is allegedly closer to the events being told. Karen here places the claim about the Jews’ capacity to validate the truth of the biblical Scriptures with her father; in the “Jews, Your Majesty” legend this authoritative function is even more pronounced since it places the dialogue in a historical context and attributes it to a historical sage of either Christian or Jewish origin and a powerful ruler.

Haynes makes the point that the popularity of this story in both anti-Semitic, and philo-Semitic discourses testifies to the “Jews’ signifying function” in the modern mind—and argues that this function positions the Jew as a “reluctant witness” to Christian truth (see also: Feldman 2007, 351, 366). Furthermore, the prevalence of the story in both spheres lends weight to Zygmunt Bauman’s claim that the common root of both these phenomena is “allosemitism”, the tendency to view the Jews as a cosmological Other (Bauman 1998, 2009). In Haynes’ analysis of the role of the story he writes:

In its many variations, the “Jews, your [sic] Majesty!” legend is a post-enlightenment version of a conviction that is deeply embedded in the Western (Christian) imagination: The Jews are a unique people and their dispersion, survival and very existence are a “miracle.” For Christians the miracle of Jewish life has always indicated God’s providential care. But in a deistic or agnostic environment where God’s involvement with the world is not taken for granted, the Jews become invoked as proof of God’s very existence. (1995, 59)

As can be seen from Haynes’ argument, this “deeply embedded conviction” has long roots in Christian history and existed prior to the establishment of the State of Israel; thus it is not necessarily connected to beliefs in Bible prophecy in a strict sense. Nevertheless, since the establishment of the State of Israel it has increasingly become connected to its fate, not only among Evangelicals.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Haynes discusses how the prominent Protestant theologian Karl Barth, for instance, “increasingly ascribed theological significance to the State of Israel” and that “Barth’s theology of

Moreover, Haynes' description of the development of the Jews' signifying function is related, if not explicitly, to Frei's description of the changes in biblical hermeneutics following the advent of modernity (Frei 1974). The unity between the real world and the biblical text that previously could be presupposed now needed specific empirical evidence. In Karen's response to my question she paraphrases this legendary story to explain why Bible prophecy is important to her: it serves as a theological backdrop, an underlying logic against which the Jews' signifying function as a "witness-people" makes sense.¹⁴¹ By observing their history—the exile and the ingathering—through the lens of Bible prophecy it has become evident to her that the Scriptures are true. In other words, Jewish history, for Karen, serves as an index of a divine plan that guides the logics of history. Moreover, from her story it becomes clear that "reading it ... being taught it ... thinking it is right" is not enough. The "empirical evidence" provided solely and completely by the Jewish historical experience is necessary in order to "know" that the Bible is true.

Prophecy: Future

Amongst the volunteers, what I have here called "the retrospective form" of Bible prophecy is uncontroversial and generally accepted. It is rather in relation to the future that Bible prophecy becomes ambiguous and more difficult to handle. When questioned more specifically about Bible prophecy and the future, two (somewhat contradictory) conditions are simultaneously salient among the volunteers: (i) a general belief in the legitimacy of Bible prophecy in relation to Israel, and the assessment of prophecy beliefs as "biblical"; and (ii) a striking vagueness about eschatological detail and a stress on the ultimate unknowability of the eschatological future. This latter "eschatological agnosticism" is clearly exemplified by Jacob:

I don't know a lot of eschatological stuff, I really don't, I mean one minute I believe in the rapture, [chuckles] and the next minute I'm not sure about it. But you know what? One thing I do know is that God watches over this place and He is not going to let anything happen that

Israel evinces distinct parallels with classical Christian apprehensions of the Jews as witness-people" (1995, 78).

¹⁴¹ Since the Jews' signifying function is not necessarily connected to Bible prophecy other such theological backdrops, such as Augustinian theology or Karl Barth's theology is also possible, as Haynes shows. Within Evangelicalism however, Bible prophecy is the dominant mode.

shouldn't ... What do I see as the future here? I have no idea, Aron. No idea. I don't know what it holds; I don't read a lot of that stuff, the eschatological and all that kind of thing because there are arguments for every side that I read. And I just get confused.¹⁴²

Prophecy belief is confusing, Jacob says, so he prefers not to dwell on it much. He seems fully content to focus on the present, leaving any future fulfillment of the biblical prophecies in the hands of God. But he is certain, he says, that God is in control, and that nothing will “happen that shouldn't”. This eschatological agnosticism can also take different forms. Other Evangelical Zionists whom I have met approach the question of Bible prophecy with humor, or even keep an ironic distance, treating it as something that is fun to speculate or make jokes about, but nothing that should be taken too seriously (see also: Johnson Frykholm 2004, 109). In the pilot study that I did in 2011 I interviewed a Swedish Pentecostal who had enrolled in the IDF because he was committed to the idea that he had a calling to defend God's people (Engberg 2014).¹⁴³ His approach to Bible prophecy is representative of this ironic tendency.

[To] speculate¹⁴⁴ [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 too much¹⁴⁵ into detail.¹⁴⁶

Bible prophecy for this Pentecostal is presented as interesting, fun, to some extent important, but ultimately as something better dealt with in a bar than in the pulpit. It is an area for theological speculation rather than dogmatization; a “narrative mode of reading history” (Harding 2000, 232). The relative distance maintained towards the various eschatological scenarios that are available in the Evangelical culture explored here is also shared by many of the volunteers; the stories, characters, and tropes are well-known but it is a matter of negotiation how they should be understood, and to what extent they are applicable to present-day contexts.

¹⁴² Jacob 2012.

¹⁴³ The interview was conducted in Swedish and the translation is provided by the author.

¹⁴⁴ Lit. “Theorize”.

¹⁴⁵ Lit. “a lot”.

¹⁴⁶ Swedish Pentecostal 2011.

These agnostic and ironic relationships to future fulfillment of prophecy provide a sharp contrast to scholarly representations of the certainty with which Christian Zionists express their views about the end times. Several authors have recorded Evangelicals' descriptions of fairly elaborate scenarios of the future and how the coming apocalyptic cataclysm will play out (e.g. Clark 2007, Halsell 2003), views are, to some extent, represented amongst the volunteers, but to a much lesser degree than I expected when I first went out into the field. When I asked the volunteers about the future, some expressed more certainty than others about what to expect, including various well-known apocalyptic themes and tropes in their discourses such as "wars and rumors of wars" (KJV, Mt. 24:6, Mk. 13:7), a future third temple, and the arrival of the anti-Christ. The future was often anticipated as dark, even dangerous, but with a silver lining suggesting that whatever comes, it will only be temporary. If Jacob among the volunteers can be seen to represent the most agnostic end of the "views of the future continuum", Sara is one of the more detailed and specific in her eschatological expectations:

I view that there's going to be greater and greater struggles ... We're going to have a false peace of course, when the anti-Christ comes to unite all the groups together and there's going to be an inter-faith happening on Mount Zion, right there where the Mosque of Omar is, we're going to have inter-faith. There's going to be this false peace – that's going to happen. But before then I think there's going to be greater and greater turbulence and possibly even war for there to be, you know, a declaration of, "Ok, this is the peace agreement, let's go settle the issue." So I don't think it's going to get better for now.¹⁴⁷

Sara has fairly precise views of what is going to happen to Israel in the future: "a false peace", an "inter-faith meeting" on Mount Zion organized by the anti-Christ, and "greater and greater turbulence", perhaps even wars.¹⁴⁸ It is a bleak vision of a future where Israeli society is in a downward spiral of increasing

¹⁴⁷ Sara 2013.

¹⁴⁸ The referent for "Mount Zion" has shifted during the history of Jerusalem. While today it usually refers to a hill just outside the Old City walls, it has previously been associated with the Temple Mount. The "Mosque of Omar", however, is not located on any of the hills that have been called "Mount Zion". Rather, it is a 12th century mosque just next to the Holy Sepulcher in the Christian quarters of the Old City. It is a reasonable guess that Sara is confusing the "Mosque of Omar" with either the al-Aqsa mosque, or the Dome of the Rock on the Haram al-Sharif / Temple Mount area since this usually holds a central place in Christian Zionist imaginaries.

violence and hostility, and where the relief from chaos comes only in the form of a “false peace”: one that is bound to fail eventually since it is orchestrated by the anti-Christ. In its socio-historical pessimism and its emphasis on a false peace this vision comes close to many classic pre-millennialist scenarios where history is in a constant decline until Jesus returns to rapture the faithful and, later, to judge humanity and establish his millennial reign (Boyer 1992, Weber 2004). In spite of the dark picture of Israel’s future, Sara expresses no fear for her own personal safety, but admits to being “anxious” at times, wondering how she would handle it if, or when, war breaks out. She describes how she was in Jerusalem during the IDF’s operation, “Pillar of Defense”, in November 2012 and heard the explosions of rockets launched from Gaza, an experience which “jolted” her “out of the surreal moment to reality”. While saying that, out of concern for her family back home, she probably would not stay in Israel through a full scale war (as suggested by her future expectations); she also tells me that her expectations for the future make her work harder because she knows that time is short.

In relation to the textual ideology of biblical literalism, however, it is important to note that the apocalyptic themes in Sara’s discourse are fairly loosely connected to the Bible and, arguably, might be drawn more directly from super-textual apocalyptic material (such as the Left Behind Series, or one of the many Evangelical commentaries on Bible prophecy) than from the biblical text as such. In a sense, the salience of these themes here testifies to the generativity of these genres, and how literalism can function more as a starting point for cultural work, than as a “straightjacket of confining limits” (Bielo 2015, 32). In her ethnography of readers of the Left Behind Series, Amy Johnson Frykholm describes how this genre of literature is meant (by its authors) to convey biblical truth through the use of fiction (2004, see also: Maddux 2010). By translating the prophetic passages of the Bible into a fictional narrative that then is “placed back onto the biblical text” readers come to recognize the fictional themes as the “plain meaning” of the Bible. For instance, Sara’s vision of an inter-faith meeting orchestrated by the anti-Christ is a theme that one might argue has taken this detour through the apocalyptic narratives of prophecy fiction before resurfacing here in the form of scriptural truth. The understanding of the anti-Christ as a unique individual who is the physical embodiment of the anti-thesis Christ and who will play a crucial role in the eschatological future (as opposed, for instance, to 1st and 2nd John’s “anti-Christ” in plural that exist in the present) is also a central feature of the genre of conservative Christian fiction. So is the emphasis on an “inter-faith” meeting that ends in a “false peace” between Israel and the world.

Kathleen Boone has pointed out that it is ironic that extensive commentary is of such great importance in fundamentalist movements that are so deeply wedded to the authority of the text (1989). In relation to Bible prophecy, such commentaries have been of immense cultural importance, in the form of the Scofield Reference Bible, theological works, and later prophecy fiction. Yet the simultaneous occurrence of these two phenomena—an ideology of literalism and extensive commentaries—within the same cultural field is only ironic in so far as being wedded to the authority of the biblical text is understood as confining or limiting the possibilities for theological or cultural work. As Bielo has convincingly argued, literalism—understood as a generative mode—need not function that way (2015). While the biblical text is understood as authoritative (inspired), it also has gaps that leave plenty of room for intertextual work and creative imagination. Evangelicals, like other readers, are not bound exclusively to the Bible but rather draw from a variety of different texts to make sense of their faith and practices, some of which are invested with considerable authority. Such “textual economies” (Bielo 2009, 110-111) are also visible when it comes to Bible prophecy. In so far as intertextual work takes its departure from a “literalist imperative” it is still often understood by conservative readers to represent the literal meaning of Scripture, or at least a good guess that might be shown to be correct—or incorrect—in God’s own time. Arguably, the genre of Protestant Bible prophecy has, at least for the past hundred years, existed almost completely in the intertextual gaps that are the consequence of the combination of both a literalist imperative and the impulse to mold a coherent historical narrative (covering past, present, and future) out of a disparate and heterogeneous textual mass.¹⁴⁹

One final important point about the ambiguities surrounding the relationship between Bible prophecy and local literalist ideology among the volunteers comes from the interview with Tom and Susan, the American couple introduced above. In the excerpt they discuss a common theme—the expected future expansion of Israel’s territorial borders—with a rhetoric suggesting certainty, and yet with a surprising vagueness with regards to the particularities of their vision.

T: Well, the borders yes, they’re specified [in the Bible] too, and they’re much greater than they are right now. So some day, I don’t know whether that will be before or after Messiah comes, but the land will be,

¹⁴⁹ It has been noted, for instance, that dispensationalism can be viewed as an ambitious attempt to unify the different parts of the Christian Bible into one singular historical narrative, from creation until the end of times (Markham 2009).

the land of Israel will be bigger than it is now. It says it will stretch from the Euphrates to what? The river of Egypt or something. So it...

S: It does upset us. We don't like to see them giving up any of their land, you know. It's just, it's yeah... It upsets us.¹⁵⁰

The future borders are “specified [in the Bible]”, Tom says, but he is uncertain where the (south-western) border will be, and more importantly, he confesses that he does not know if this expansion will take place in *historical times* or in the *post-Parousian future*. This, of course, is a temporal distinction which has been central to much prophecy debate throughout the 1900s, and which can be seen to represent a central conundrum of Evangelical Zionism: to what extent, and in what ways, is the present separated from the millennial era? As we saw in Chapter Two, this question is also related to ideas about social agency. If there is a complete separation, as in classic formulations of dispensationalism, there is really no reason to believe that any kind of social or political action in the present can have an impact on the future. In other words, whether Israel “gives up land” in the present or not should not really matter, at least not from a theological point of view. Yet, despite her husband’s uncertainty, Susan says that when Israel gives “up any of their land” it upsets them, as if these borders are of utmost importance for the eschatological future.¹⁵¹

The point here is not to highlight Tom and Susan’s fairly limited attention to geographical, theological, eschatological, or political detail: that they do not know what they are talking about. Indeed, logocentrism can be an ethnographic problem (Michael Lambek in Kidron 2009, 20) and ethnographers often risk expecting their interlocutors to be more eloquent, coherent, and able to verbalize their thoughts and experiences than can realistically be expected. Thus it is important to be careful here. Yet, both with regards to the fundamental explanatory role apocalyptic theology—particularly premillennial dispensationalism—has been given in extensive previous research on Christian Zionism, and the rhetorical force with which it is insisted that certain views are rooted in the Bible, the “eschatological agnosticism” of the volunteers and the

¹⁵⁰ Tom and Susan 2013. Tom’s reference is to Gen. 15:18: “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates’” (NRSV).

¹⁵¹ It should be noted that Susan’s indignation over Israeli land concessions is not generally shared. Some volunteers argue that Israelis need “to make their own decisions” (Ruth 2013) without being guided by Evangelical prophetic speculation; some express concerns about Evangelical Christians who treat the Israelis as “a means to an end” (Anna 2013); and most clearly state that these things are ultimately beyond human knowledge.

inattention to detail do seem somewhat surprising. If Bible prophecy is constitutive of the social worlds of Evangelical Zionists, and Bible prophecy is unanimously evaluated as “biblical” by the volunteers, would it not be reasonable to expect a little more precision about the eschatological details: How does contemporary Israel relate to the millennial Kingdom? What—if anything—needs to happen before Jesus returns? Will there be a rapture of the faithful; a third temple on the Haram al-Sharif / Temple Mount? Does Israeli territorial expansion—or land concessions—in the present have an impact on the ways in which the eschatological future will play out? With regards to all these questions the volunteers often seem strangely undecided and commonly combine references to a few well-known apocalyptic tropes with a general emphasis on the fundamental impossibility of knowing the future. Yet, in the midst of all this uncertainty and negotiation, they still emphasize regularly and forcefully that their views—despite their imprecision—are the outcome of a literal reading of the Bible: that they are based on what the “Bible says”.

Bible Prophecy as an Interpretative Tradition

The situation outlined above: the simultaneous appearance of a rhetoric of literalism and a general belief in the legitimacy and importance of Bible prophecy, combined with an eschatological agnosticism, suggests that Bible prophecy among the volunteers comes close to what Brian Malley has described as an “interpretative tradition” (2004). In his *How the Bible Works* Malley has developed what he calls an “empirical model” of Evangelical Bible interpretation based on his observations in an American conservative Baptist church. This model involves four components: (i) Evangelical literalists have an “interpretative tradition” in which beliefs are attributed to the Bible with the goal of establishing “transitivity” between the text and cultural, theological, and moral beliefs; (ii) they do not have a “hermeneutic tradition” (an explicit set of rules that guide interpretative practices) that they employ systematically; (iii) Evangelical Bible reading is driven by a “search for relevance”; and, (iv) the interpretative tradition is caught between “the Scylla of interpretative freedom and the Charybdis of irrelevance” (2004, 73-74). The challenge for Evangelical reading practices, according to Malley, is to navigate between these two poles: to allow a certain amount of interpretative freedom in order to be relevant for individual lives yet not too much and thereby risk violating the interpretative tradition.

Malley understands the Evangelical interpretative tradition as a set of beliefs which is rationalized by reference to the (biblical) text. Establishing those connections, he emphasizes, can well be done even without access to a hermeneutical system. In fact, the absence of such a system might be beneficial in the quest for relevance.

Given the general principle that doctrines are somehow connected to the Bible, and as absence of formal rules to determine those connections, the interpretative tradition can harness Evangelicals' hermeneutic imagination anew in every generation. (Malley 2004, 101)

One might question Malley's sharp distinction between "interpretative" and "hermeneutic" tradition and argue that an explicit and coherent theory of textual engagement is a common feature of elite circles, not of religious cultures in general. Conservative Evangelicals are hardly alone in this sort of non-formalized reading practice. That however, is not the point here. Rather, what Malley demonstrates about the interpretative tradition is how this "lack" of formal—and explicit—rules, together with the general principle that the Bible is able to explain *all* human beliefs and experiences, creates an environment that successfully stimulates the "quest for relevance" and produces the Bible as a sacred text. Maintaining a reasonable amount of interpretative freedom and individual hermeneutic creativity is key in this process:

Too much interpretative freedom and the tradition disintegrates, losing [sic] its epistemological appeal; too little interpretative freedom and the Bible becomes merely an irrelevant historical artifact, rather than the ever-living word of God. (Malley 2004, 123)

In relation to the discussion about Bible prophecy there is much to learn from Malley's model. It suggests, for example, that whether a belief is experienced as "biblical" is less a matter of actual exegesis than of whether the belief is possible to connect to the text in a way that is relevant for the scriptural community. Malley argues that Evangelical reading practice "emphasizes the *fact* of connection [between the Bible and beliefs] more than of particular connections", which, according to him, means that "a great deal of what the 'Bible says' may be transmitted quite apart from actual exegesis" (2004, 73, emphasis in original). This explains why inattention to detail and the absence of a systematic eschatological narrative does not prevent these statements becoming, nevertheless, embedded in a rhetoric suggesting biblical literalism.

Since the eschatological narrative common among Christian Zionists has already established a connection between the redemptive drama and the State of Israel, and since this narrative is understood as *the* biblical narrative, particular interpretations can safely be speculative, incomplete, even inconsistent, yet experienced as “biblical” insofar as they do not threaten to undermine the interpretative tradition or other core Evangelical beliefs.¹⁵²

But eschatological speculation seems to make a more positive contribution to the interpretative tradition as well, significantly contributing to “the search for relevance”. One area in which this aspect is particularly visible is in the figurative readings that connect biblical referents to historical events (and by doing so, effectively biblicalize cultural, political, and theological beliefs). In Christian Zionist literature and preaching such as that at the Intercessors for Israel conference described above, as well as in the interviews with the volunteers, it is very common that descriptions of the situation in Israel / Palestine, the peace process, the work of the organizations, or geopolitics in general are linked to scriptural passages in a way that directs attention to how a particular event fits into the more general eschatological narrative. To return to the example quoted above: What is of importance is not whether all Evangelical listeners agree with Chuck Cohen’s interpretation of *particular* events, and how they fit into God’s economy—not all do, which becomes apparent in later interviews with volunteers—but rather how Cohen’s examples taken together contribute to the (re-)production of a *general* prophetic narrative which places Israel at the center of historical causality. While listeners might disagree on whether the mass shooting at the Batman premiere should be read as a sign of divine intentionality, they might agree that the general spiritual causality explained by Cohen is accurate. Whether particular expectations or prophecies can be shown to be true or not is not necessarily the most important thing; the very possibility that they are true is enough to create the sense of urgency, relevance, and moral indignation that is sought.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Arguably, this was precisely what happened in the controversy that surrounded the publication of John Hagee’s *In Defense of Israel* (2007) in which Hagee was accused of propagating a dual covenant theology. In the book Hagee criticized Christian supersessionism by arguing that Jesus never intended to be the Messiah to the Jewish people, which was understood by some Evangelical critics as Hagee questioning Jesus universal mission. After severe criticism Hagee had to publicly deny that he was teaching dual covenant theology and subsequent editions of the book changed the controversial passage (Shapiro 2011).

¹⁵³ A similar discourse, by Pastor John Hagee, has been analyzed by Sean Durbin as a contemporary “Jeremiad” discourse, a moral critique of the US (Durbin 2013a, see also: Harding 2000).

Similarly, in the organizations' literary productions Mordechai's words in Esther 4:14—"for if you keep silence *at such a time as this*" (NRSV, my emphasis)—frequently accompany new developments which the organizations deem to be in crucial need of community response: such as a new round of violence between Israel and Hamas, an EU decision to change the label for products produced in the territories outside the green line, terrorism, or anti-Semitic violence. What is curious about those readings and the way in which biblical texts are used is how they are able to *continue* to meaningfully speak to a particular situation despite the fact that they are being used over and over again in different contexts, times, and situations. For the Evangelicals involved in these practices, it does not seem to matter that these biblical tropes have continually appeared in Christian Zionist discourse over the past hundred years and nor does it matter that the "valley of Jehoshaphat" is invoked every time there is a new round of debate about the two-state solution or the peace process. While the semiotic content of the phrase "at such a time as this" and the biblical context in which it occurs seem to suggest that the present is a particularly crucial moment in God's timetable, discursive practices and the frequency with which the phrase is put to use suggest a slightly different interpretation: for the ministries in Jerusalem, it is always "such a time as this".¹⁵⁴ These textual practices come rhetorically embedded in an ideology of the "single, lexical meanings" (Crapanzano 2000, 2-3) of biblical literalism but the discursive practices rather suggest a high degree of flexibility, contingency, polysemy, and creativity. What Susan Harding called the fundamentalists' "flexible absolutism" (2000, 275) is also applicable here: the fact that biblical referents are put to theological and ideological use, and that this usage changes over time, does not prevent them from becoming embedded in a rhetoric of literalism. Yet, as Webb Keane has argued, since processes of entextualization and (re)contextualization "exist in a dialectic relationship to each other", neither of the contexts of the utterance (biblical or contemporary) can serve as final arbiter in the analysis (Keane 1997b). Instead, the frequent (re)contextualizations of Mordechai's words in a new place and time should be seen as a discursive practice that simultaneously (re)connects listeners to the biblical past (and the sense of importance and urgency that the phrase conveys) *and* one that makes the biblical texts relevant by demonstrating their applicability in the present. By rhetorical practices such as these, the prophetic interpretative tradition can

¹⁵⁴ Since 2012, the phrase "such a time as this" has occurred about 4 times per year in the newsletters from the ICEJ, BFP and CFI combined, which seems to suggest that the phrase is fairly regularly invoked when new developments are felt to prompt a Christian response. For more about Christian Zionist reading of this particular verse see Durbin (2012).

“harness Evangelicals’ hermeneutic imagination anew in every generation” (Malley 2004, 101).¹⁵⁵

Following Malley’s description of an interpretative tradition, and given the forms that Evangelical eschatological thought takes in contemporary Jerusalem, Bible prophecy—dispensationalist or otherwise—appears less as a systematic configuration of beliefs than as a field of reference: a textual universe where particular connections between the biblical Scripture and real world events are made possible. For those so inclined (which, as can be seen above, is not everyone), this field can function as a “generative mode” (Bielo 2015, 32) that invites intertextual labor and apocalyptic speculation about the end-times, the identity of the anti-Christ, and the connections between biblical symbolism and contemporary geopolitics (Johnson Frykholm 2004). But even for volunteers not particularly interested in apocalyptic speculation, such as Jacob for instance, the field of Bible prophecy contributes to the production of the sense of importance, urgency, and contemporary and personal relevance which are common features of Evangelical Zionist thought. Bible prophecy is fundamental to the identity of the volunteers as characters involved in God’s historical project to restore the Jewish people to their land. It contributes to a sense of historical mission and importance, and it is highly spiritually fulfilling, as we saw in Tom and Susan’s discourse above.

These features of the Evangelical scene in Jerusalem lead to a conclusion which is slightly different from that of much historical work on Bible prophecy and Christian Zionism to date (e.g. Gunner 1996). The heterogeneity and imprecision of this field is not necessarily only an outcome of insufficient attempts at systematization by leading figures, or the adaptation of theology to constantly changing historical realities (although these certainly play their part), but perhaps also a by-product of the more general structure of Evangelical Bible

¹⁵⁵ One might be reminded here about the theory of the “cognitive dissonance”—first articulated by Festinger et al. in their 1956 study of “the Seekers” (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956)—that suggests that apocalyptic movements need to utilize different strategies to cope with the failure of prophecy. To connect a particular round of debate to the valley of Jehoshaphat, after all, is a prediction of sorts in that it suggests the approach of divine punishment to the countries that vote for a “division of the land”. Nevertheless, I do not think that cognitive dissonance is particularly applicable here since these pronouncements are not presented (by speakers) or received (by listeners) primarily as falsifiable predictions of the future but rather as moral judgements of political positions and as an incentive for political (and spiritual) action. The sense of urgency and spiritual importance that these connections between biblical tropes and contemporary events create does not suffer from the “cry wolf” effect simply because they do not follow a hypothetical-deductive logic. They are “Kairos moments” that draw listeners into a scriptural universe, and situate them as moral actors in a redemptive drama. “For such a time as this” listeners are called to pray, contribute financially, and to take political action.

reading practices as such. Since these practices are geared towards the production of personal and contemporary relevance—“to make the Bible come alive”—and since they require a certain amount of interpretative freedom, apocalyptic thought constantly challenges the boundaries of the Evangelical interpretative tradition. Because these hermeneutic practices connect the biblical text to contemporary events, framing them in an eschatological narrative, they are highly beneficial in the quest for relevance, as the appeal of Israel-centered theologies testifies, but less so in terms of creating a systematic belief tradition. In their wake, Israel-centered theologies emerge less as a dogmatic system and more as a bricolage assembled from an assortment of biblical narratives, Israeli nationalism, extra-biblical apocalyptic fiction, and sometimes flamboyant apocalypticism: as theological drama rather than systematic theology. Nevertheless, in spite of this theological heterogeneity and imprecision, or perhaps because of it, the prophetic view of Israel becomes a linchpin in the quest for relevance, and consequently a central factor in the development of personal faith for these volunteers.

Bible prophecy, however, is not the only area in which Evangelical textual ideology surfaces in relation to Israel. In the final part of this chapter I discuss a more recent development within Evangelical Zionist thought which, to a certain extent, eclipses the previously dominant focus on Bible prophecy: discourses about the historical roots of Christianity, and Christianity’s dependence on earlier Jewish tradition (see also: Durbin 2013b, Engberg 2012, Kaell 2015). This development towards a more comprehensive historical consciousness is a consequence of a willingness to theologically distance themselves from the more radical expressions of dispensationalism, the development of closer co-operation between Christian and Jewish Zionist organizations in Jerusalem and abroad, and perhaps also recognition that the ambiguities of prophecy beliefs makes them insufficient to function institutionally as an ideological basis.¹⁵⁶ The turn towards history is guided by a search for the “Hebraic roots” of Christian faith, an authentic form of Christianity that pre-dates the Hellenization of the Jesus movement during the second and third century CE.

¹⁵⁶ This latter point is made explicit in an interview with David Parsons of the ICEJ where he argued that eschatological speculation is insufficiently stable to function as the theological basis of a large scale Christian ministry.

Hebraic Roots of Christian Faith

In February 2013 I was invited to take part in a full-day “foundational teachings” seminar at the Bridges for Peace headquarters in Jerusalem. This is a day-length lecture series that all volunteers at BFP are expected to go through some time during their stay in Jerusalem in order to be instructed in the theological framework of the organization’s work, better equipped to act as “ambassadors” for Israel upon their return to their home countries, and empowered to speak for Israel ideologically as well as theologically. The teaching series is divided into five lectures: “Why Israel”; “The Hebraic Roots of Christian Faith”; “Israel and Bible Prophecy”; “Christian anti-Semitism”; and “Partakers of the Root”. Taken together the lectures neatly sum up BFP’s theological platform.¹⁵⁷ While all the lectures were highly interesting and would warrant a discussion in themselves, particular focus is here given to the second lecture covering the theme of Hebraic roots, since it is here that the production of textual identity on the basis of historical narratives becomes most visible. Before turning to the discourse on the Hebraic roots of Christian faith, however, a few words on the relationship between history, authenticity, and Evangelical identity are necessary.

History and Authenticity

How history is told, not only for its own sake but also in terms of the formation of contemporary communities and identities, has been widely explored in recent decades in historical research as well as several other fields such as memory studies, narratology, and sociology. By investigating how a particular group narrates history we can also understand something about how they understand themselves and the surrounding world: the social identities that they wish to construct. From this perspective, Evangelical discourse on the Hebraic roots of

¹⁵⁷ The lectures follow a pre-decided format and are delivered by different leaders at the organization. When I attended the event, four lectures (1, 2, 3, and 5) were delivered by Cheryl Hauer and one (4) by Peter Fast. I was granted permission to record all lectures except the second, which was refused for unknown reasons. Perhaps the topic of “Hebraic Roots” was felt to be more sensitive in an Israeli context but, if so, it is unclear to me why, since nothing in the lecture was of a particularly sensitive nature. All other lectures were recorded and transcribed. In addition to the lectures, I draw here upon additional printed material that accompanied them, primarily Cheryl Hauer’s contribution in *Israel and the Church: God’s Road Map* (Hauer 2006). The quotations below are from the published article.

Christian faith can be approached as an identity discourse that delineates authentic Christian identities from inauthentic ones, that strengthens commitment to culturally accepted moralities, and that constructs a solid historical basis for Evangelical textual ideology. By “authenticity” I follow Charles Lindholm in approaching it as a condition of purity, where “appearance” is understood to match “essence” (Lindholm 2008). Inauthenticity, on the other hand, would be a situation of symbolic manipulation where appearances are not felt to represent accurately what they are said to represent.

As was argued in Chapter One, Evangelical Zionist faith and practices take place within a polemical discourse that is centered on “symbolic manipulation” and theological fetishism. The ritualization of Israeli national symbols, the widespread use of Jewish ritual objects or “Judaica” (Feldman 2016), and the sacralization of the land have all been criticized for an inappropriate attribution of meaning to “non-Christian” objects (e.g. Ateek, Duaybis, and Tobin 2005). Similar dynamics have been observed within other evangelical contexts. John Dulin, drawing on Lindholm and Trilling (1972), has argued that the pursuit of authenticity within American Messianic Judaism is intrinsically related to modern civilization because in modernity the “widespread acknowledgement of the arbitrariness of symbols” (2013, 36) gives rise to both an anxiety over authenticity and an urge to find it. In a similar vein, James S. Bielo has described “authenticity” as an a central “organizing trope for emerging evangelicals” within the North American context (2011, 16). As Bielo notes, there is nothing surprising about Christian movements’ prizing authenticity; a return to the sources of faith has been a common organizing principle amongst new Christian movements throughout history. Yet to argue for the authenticity of one’s own faith practices is a normative claim that often situates one’s own community in opposition to surrounding “inauthentic” Christianities. Dulin argues that the conflicts over authenticity connected to contemporary Messianic Judaism in North America can be explained by a shared “evaluative grammar of authenticity” which “values causal / metonymic indexes over manipulated symbols and is undergirded by a suspicion that general appearances are symbolically manipulated in order to mask actual indexical underpinnings” (2013, 35). Since this (modern) sentiment is shared by both Messianic Jews and their critics, disagreement arises from their different “models of reality” (2013, 35) which guide whether a particular act of signification is understood as arbitrary (with the effect of being taken as inauthentic) or as causal / metonymic (and hence, authentic) (2013, 36). In order to prove authenticity an agent needs to establish a causal / metonymic link between a particular belief, practice, or

symbol *and* its indexical underpinnings. As I argue below, a constitutive aspect of Evangelical faith is that these indexical underpinnings are strongly related to ideas about divine agency. Authentic religious practices are those that can be plausibly connected to divine intentionality either through Bible readings or personal religious experience. While certainly representing a sincerely felt need to reconnect Christianity to its Jewish roots, I argue that it is also important to view the Evangelical Zionist discourse about the Hebraic roots of faith in relation to contemporary contestations surrounding the legitimacy of Evangelical Zionist faith and practice. Thus, by employing this discourse, Christians with a “heart for Israel” are able to counter a critique of their beliefs and practices as a modern (and hence manufactured) use of symbols. Furthermore, within this discourse it becomes (ideally) possible to defend this passion for Israel without recourse to apocalyptic speculation, instead situating it in a historical trajectory that frames it as biblically authentic. At the same time, the discourse about Hebraic roots frames their opponents’ beliefs and practices as constructed and, hence, unrepresentative of biblical faith.

Hebraic and Greek Worldviews

We are seven people in a small house which is surrounded by a nice little garden in the backyard of the Bridges for Peace headquarters in Jerusalem: the speaker Cheryl Hauer, five volunteers, and myself. According to the speaker, the building was originally constructed to house the queen of Ethiopia during her planned pilgrimage to Jerusalem.¹⁵⁸ Now the BFP rents the facility from Jerusalem’s Ethiopian Orthodox church which is located nearby. The room is nicely decorated in Middle Eastern style with many-colored blankets and pillows, and lamps hanging from the low ceiling. After a short prayer, the second lecture by Cheryl Hauer begins by describing “discipleship” as a central Christian calling. Making disciples was a fundamental part of Jesus’ ministry, she says, but unfortunately one that the Church has too often forgotten in its prioritization of making converts. Today, discipleship has returned to prominence in Evangelical churches and is generally recognized by many Christians as of great importance, but the problem is that most Christians do

¹⁵⁸ Most likely this refers to Menen Astaw who married Haile Selassie in 1911 and hence later became Queen of Ethiopia. During her exile from Ethiopia during WWII she spent some time on pilgrimage in Jerusalem allegedly praying for the liberation of Ethiopia and promising her crown to the church when her prayers were answered.

not realize that they are “building [discipleship] on the wrong foundation”.¹⁵⁹ Our notion of discipleship, according to Hauer, is derived from “Greek thinking” when it should have been based on “Hebraic thought”. Hence, to understand what it really means to be a follower of Christ we must understand the “Hebraic worldview” in which Jesus was raised, lived, and worked; we need to understand the Jewishness of Jesus.

Yeshua was Jewish. He was raised in an observant Jewish home by parents who followed Jewish law and tradition; He lived in a Jewish homeland called Israel and spoke its language, Hebrew. He was a part of a robust and lively community that was identified by its active relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He started life as all Jewish baby boys would—circumcised on the eighth day. His mother probably saved his swaddling cloths [sic], delicately embroidering them over the years, to give Him as a gift at His coming-of-age. During His first eight years of life, Yeshua would have stayed close to Mary’s side, watching her as she lived the life of a committed follower of the one true God. Each Friday evening, He sat quietly as she welcomed *Shabbat* (the Sabbath) and laughed with glee as Joseph told and retold the stories of the forefathers. At six, He most likely began attending school at the synagogue, having already learned the *aleph bet* (Hebrew alphabet) from Joseph and committed many Scripture verses to memory. When Yeshua was eight, He began receiving intensive vocational instruction from His father. His life was laced with *Torah* (first five books of the Bible) and the teachings of the sages. He celebrated every biblical holiday and traveled to Jerusalem with His family for the pilgrim feasts. At thirteen, He may well have graduated from synagogue school to a *beit midrash* (school of higher learning), where He would have studied the writings of all the great Jewish teachers and debated with the sages and teachers of the Torah. Upon turning 30, He went to the *mikvah* (place of ritual immersion) for ceremonial purification, and then stepped into His adult ministry. (Hauer 2006, 4-5)

Even as recently as a few decades ago, this thoroughly Jewish depiction of Jesus would have been uncommon in most Evangelical circles (Kaell 2015); today, among the volunteers in Jerusalem, this understanding of “Yeshua” as completely embedded in Jewish culture and religion is rather the norm. The

¹⁵⁹ Since this lecture was not recorded and transcribed, all quotations are from my field notes unless otherwise stated.

reevaluation of Jesus' identity in relation to his historical context is obviously not exclusive to Evangelical Christianity although it has been an important part of Evangelical, liberal as well as secular, biblical research at least since the 1800s (commonly known among New Testament scholars as the "quest for the historical Jesus"). As an outcome of these debates, few modern exegetes would question the assertion that Jesus was Jewish, that he lived a Jewish life, and that he had some knowledge of Jewish traditions. The problem facing historians is that apart from these fundamental yet vague facts, not much else about Jesus' relationship to Jewish religious culture can be known with any certainty since there are very few historical sources apart from the accounts of the gospels.

Cheryl Hauer's narrative of Yeshua is another example of how literalists may work with intertextual gaps in order to create coherent biblical narratives amidst the "paucity of scriptural detail" (Bielo 2015, 32). This narrative of Jesus' first thirty years is constructed from a literalist position in the sense that it does not problematize the gospels as historical sources, nor the subjectivity and eclecticism of authorial accounts. But it is also noteworthy that Hauer's account adds several events and characteristics that are neither found in the gospels, nor in any other biblical text or historical source.¹⁶⁰ This, however, is obviously beside the point since historical criticism is hardly the main purpose of the narrative. Here, as in many Evangelical reading practices, historical detail is subordinated to the power of biblical narrative and the ways in which this narrative can be put to theological, moral, or spiritual use today. Thus, the account of Jesus as thoroughly embedded in Jewish religious culture should be read as a narrative primarily directed towards modern concerns. As such, it provides a historical basis for modern Evangelicals' identification with the land of Israel—"a Jewish homeland called Israel"—as well as with Jewish symbols and practices (circumcision, Torah study, ritual purification, Jewish holidays). If Jesus was completely Jewish, these practices must be legitimate for modern Evangelicals too; optional perhaps, but certainly acceptable and valid expressions of Evangelical religiosity.

¹⁶⁰ I am thinking here particularly about claims concerning the "swaddling clothes", about the Shabbat and Josef (who virtually disappears from the Gospel accounts and might have died early), that Jesus spoke Hebrew and studied at the synagogue, that he celebrated "every Jewish holiday", that he went to a Beit Midrash, and about Jesus' use of *mikvah* for ceremonial purification. That this characterization is historically correct is possible, in some cases perhaps even probable, but there is no way to know for sure. For more recent scholarship on the language(s) Jesus used, whether he could read and whether he had any formal theological training see (Keith 2011, 2014). For more on the type of Judaism that was practiced during Jesus' life see (Sanders 1992). My sincere thanks to Magnus Zetterholm and Dan Nässelqvist for information and discussion about recent New Testament scholarship on the historical Jesus.

Furthermore, by describing Jesus' early years as thoroughly situated in a Jewish religious culture, Hauer is able to explain what is wrong with the notion of discipleship that present-day Christians have inherited from Christian tradition: it comes embedded in a Greek worldview rather than the Hebraic worldview in which it originated. When Jesus called his disciples, and later commanded them to "make disciples" of all peoples, he did so from his Hebraic understanding of discipleship, not from the Greek, which was added later by the Church Fathers. In other words, the "essence" of discipleship can only be found within a Hebraic symbolic universe. It is important to note here—in light of historical research into conservative Evangelical and fundamentalist polemic against "higher criticism" in the early twentieth century (Balmer 1993, Marsden 1991, 2006)—that Cheryl Hauer's argument in this discourse is that Jesus' historical context needs to be understood in order to understand his message, not that the context of the authors of the gospels needs to be taken into account in order to understand their portrayal of Jesus.

What then, is the problem with the Greek worldview? In what ways has its influence severed the link between contemporary manifestations of Christianity and authentic biblical beliefs and practices as "originally" conceived? In the 2006 article that the lecture builds upon, and in several of the lectures in the foundational teaching series, Greek culture is identified with theological, hermeneutical, and ideological modifications of Christianity: changes that are felt to be antithetical to authentic Christianity. According to Hauer, the start of this process can be dated quite precisely to the early Alexandrian church.

The first Christian school of theology was established in Alexandria, and the immediate task became the mingling of Greek philosophy with the Bible. Literal interpretation of Scripture gave way to allegory, opening the door to a myriad of heresies, among them Christian anti-Semitism. The vibrant personal and community relationship between the early church and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob became intellectualized and systematized Christian doctrine. By the third century, this Hellenization of the Church helped to tear Christianity away from its Judaic root and create a chasm between Christians and Jews that would remain for 1,700 years. (Hauer 2006, 7)

The Greek worldview, and the influences it has had on Christian tradition, is understood as *historically contingent additions that human agents have made to biblical religion*. In other words, through its abstraction of the biblical message, Greek philosophy represents a symbolic manipulation of the transcendental

meaning contained within the text. The “chasm between Christians and Jews” is also the chasm between “the Bible” and “tradition”, and between the essence of Christian symbols and practices and their appearances in the modern day Church. When Christianity was mixed with Greek philosophy it became detached from its roots in Jewish culture, and the “vibrant and personal community relationship” with God that was at the heart of Jesus’ message gave way to an abstract, intellectualized, and allegorized form of Christianity. It is this detached form of Christianity that is responsible not only for theological liberalization but also for “a myriad of heresies” including replacement theology and Christian anti-Semitism.

There is much of interest in this portrayal of the Greek influence on Christianity. Scholars of early Christianity would hardly question that Greek culture and philosophy has had a significant impact on the development of Christianity, but while the extent and precise content of this influence is debatable, few would recognize a strict separation between Hebraic and Greek worldviews, and would rather argue that the entanglement between the two cultures is both much more profound and of an earlier date than Hauer’s account would have it. More importantly, most biblical scholars would claim that the Greek influence is visible not only in Christian history and tradition but also within the very biblical text itself, particularly in Johannine and Pauline theology (e.g. Breytenbach 2015). The extent to which Hebraic and Greek “worldviews” influenced the authors of the Bible, the early Jesus movement, and even Jesus himself is still very much discussed, but that both cultural systems had an impact on all these features we probably can say for sure.

But what is more important about this discourse for my purposes is what it says about the relationship between the Bible, tradition, and the preferred form of Christianity in the present. The characterization of Hebraic vs. Greek thought to a large extent circles around a conceptual dichotomy between *proximity* and *distance* that is reminiscent of more contemporary Evangelical debates about Christianity and surrounding culture. The “Hebraic worldview” corresponds to an ideal Evangelical culture with its focus on direct and unmediated access to the divine, on intimacy, and on community (Bielo 2008, Luhrmann 2004, 2012, Moberg 2013). Hebraic thought is described as fundamentally theocentric and monotheistic, in contrast to all the surrounding ancient cultures including the Greek. The main critique here is not towards the polytheism of ancient culture—although this is mentioned as well—but rather towards anthropocentrism. The Greeks, we are told, placed “man at the center of all things”; they “venerated the human body”; preferred “individuality”; and they

“sought knowledge” not in order to know God as the Hebrews did but rather “for the sake of knowledge alone” (Hauer 2006, 10-11).

Furthermore, in Hauer’s description, the Hebraic worldview fostered personal and intimate relationships with God, a strong supportive community, a direct and literal reading of the Scripture, and an integrated faith that pervaded all parts of life. The Greek worldview, on the other hand, is identified with terms that signal a distance: allegory, intellectualization, systematization, and Christianity’s rupture from its roots. This dichotomy of proximity and distance is related to what was discussed in terms of “the problem of presence” in the previous chapter (Engelke 2007); in other words, the distance associated with Greek culture is understood as a separation from divine presence. Hebraic culture, on the other hand, is seen to represent authentic biblical faith, which makes it able to mediate divine presence in a way that the artificiality of Greek culture, and its accompanying theological and cultic developments, are unable to do. In the historical narrative of the Hebraic roots of Christian faith the development of allegorical exegesis, replacement theology, and Christian anti-Semitism are understood in the light of this detachment from God’s presence: as a movement of increasing distance between Christian culture and authentic Christianity. Human symbolic manipulation (i.e. church tradition) separated Christianity from its source. Christian anti-Semitism, particularly as it was enacted in the Holocaust, is the ultimate outcome of this separation.

Purification

In Hauer’s discourse “Hebraic” and “Greek” semiotic content is incommensurable; as with Rachel’s search for a more Jewish form of Christianity (referenced towards the beginning of this chapter), the disentanglement of the Greek influence upon Christianity here is an act of purification in the search for authenticity. In Dulin’s above-mentioned article he draws attention to a similar production of authentic biblical faith among members of the Messianic Jewish community that he studies. He also, I believe rightly, connects this tendency to the modern preoccupation with “purification” (Keane 2007, Latour 1993, see also: Bialecki 2014b). The Greek influence in Hauer’s discourse, in contrast to the Hebraic, is understood as socially conditioned and man-made, in other words, manufactured. The human agency implicit in the influence of Greek material in Christian tradition evidences a manipulation of symbols that makes beliefs and practices allegedly derived from Greek thought inauthentic by definition. In comparison to the discussion about human and divine agency in

Chapter Three it is interesting to note that a similar thought pattern underlies both the discussion of the Hebraic roots and the Christian calling. Authentic religious expression is attained by locating divine agency and by placing human “agency in abeyance” (Miyazaki 2000); being able to rhetorically link a particular belief, practice, or symbol to divine intent guarantees its authenticity. Where divine agency is located, and how this origin is tested, naturally varies within different strands of contemporary Evangelicalism. While Pentecostal / charismatic churches tend to place a high value on personal religious experiences, more fundamentalist forms of Evangelicalism generally consider the Bible the final arbiter of authenticity (Bialecki 2009). Since the Evangelical culture in Jerusalem incorporates people from different denominational and theological backgrounds both the Bible and personal religious experience play a role in their validation of religious authenticity. In Chapter Three it was discussed how a calling often underwent a discernment process which could involve prayer, conversations with friends, and bible studies. Similar methods are also applicable here: practices, traditions, and beliefs that cannot plausibly be argued to have a biblical origin are deemed inauthentic and hence subject to the purification process. Among the volunteers it is common to question “pagan” Christian holidays and un-biblical Christian belief and practices. Sara, for instance describes how the Church has adopted these pagan customs and beliefs and how realizing this was a major turning point in her religious life.

Well, realizing that Christianity is actually from Jewish roots we [Sara and her husband] also saw that the Christian world was pagan in a lot of practices. So in the study of Scriptures we saw that God never did away with His feast days. We saw ... that Christian[s] needed to govern their lives by the appointed times of the Lord and not turn towards the paganism that Constantine took to the Church. You know, Easter and Christmas and Santa Claus and those kinds of things. But to also teach the Church... that Christ fulfilled the Law and that He didn't do away with the Law.¹⁶¹

As was discussed in Chapter Three, the movement of the religious self towards a Judeo- or Israel-centric form of Christianity is often construed as a form of conversion experience, and it is often associated with a deeper and more profound study of the biblical Scriptures. For Sara, this realization of Christianity's Jewish roots led to a reassessment of the theological and cultic

¹⁶¹ Sara 2013

heritage of the Church and a search for a different form of Christianity that is disentangled from this baggage. Whether Bible study is a “method” in this disentanglement or rather a post-facto rationalization of a previous movement of the religious self is difficult to know; nonetheless, it is safe to say that the volunteers often associate the purification of Christianity with a return to biblical faith. To my knowledge, however, few volunteers go all the way in their reformation of religious practices: despite criticizing the paganism of the Church and celebrating Jewish forms of religious life, it is quite uncommon to meet Evangelicals who strictly adhere to biblical Sabbath commandments, for instance, or refrain from eating food which is prohibited in the Hebrew Bible. Rachel, whose husband is a Messianic Jewish Israeli, is one such, but even in her case and in spite of her insistence on the need to return to the Jewish roots of faith, a cab was deemed an appropriate means of transport to get to the conference on a Friday evening. While eclectically practiced and understood, however, the return to biblical faith is of prime concern among the volunteers, not only for the individual but for the Church as a whole. As for Sara, quoted above, purifying Christianity of the Greek philosophical heritage is perceived as the responsibility of all who call themselves Christians: purification is understood as reform.

A Vanguard of Reform

Interest in the Hebraic roots of Christian faith is shared by both gentile and Jewish believers within Messianic Judaism and Evangelical Zionism. While much previous literature has approached Messianic Judaism as a marginal and controversial branch of Judaism (e.g. Cohn-Sherbok 2000, Feher 1998, 2001), I believe Hillary Kaell is right in identifying the gentile majority of the movement with “born-again seeking” (2015, 42). In Kaell’s account these born-again seekers are characterized by an appetite for spiritual growth and they understand their affiliation to Messianic Judaism as part of an “ongoing commitment to biblical study, prophetic theology, or a relationship with Jesus” (47). Volunteers in Jerusalem often also explain their involvement with Messianic congregations and their interest in Jewish (alternatively “Judaic” or “Hebraic”) religious forms in terms of personal religious development and as a way to deepen and enrich their religious lives. Yet the analysis here has demonstrated that contemporary discourses about the Hebraic roots of Christian faith in Jerusalem also serve broader ideological interests: they provide a historical narrative that posits contemporary Evangelical identification with Judaism and Israel as an expression

of authentic biblical faith *as opposed to* other forms of Christianity that are interpreted as passive receptacles of man-made traditions. Thus, this narrative is also an important part of an argument in an ideological debate about the truth of different forms of Christianity, their connected (and differing) textual ideologies, and the theological legitimacy of the religious symbolification of the land—and the State—of Israel that is central to contemporary Christian Zionism.

Pierre Bourdieu argued in *Practical Reason* that this usage of history is a feature of particular importance in groups that challenge the reigning hegemony within any particular cultural genre or social context. To challenge the very foundations of a discourse or a genre often requires, at least in practice, a return to the sources from which a new interpretation can be made and legitimacy be acquired (Bourdieu 1995 [1994]). Approached from this perspective, Christian Zionism in Jerusalem can be seen as a movement that is bent on religious reform, on challenging what is perceived as the reign of theological liberalism and allegorical interpretations within the Church. In many ways, this is also precisely the way the volunteers and the ministries in Jerusalem understand themselves: as the vanguard of a reform movement that is biblically-centered, Israel-loving, and unmarked by centuries of anti-Jewish theologies.

There's such a move of God right now out ... in Latin America, Africa, and Asia and these are people, they don't have the Scofield Bible, you know, they don't have so much the Dispensational teaching. They don't know, they've never met a Jew, they don't know much about the history of persecution of Jews in Europe at all. They just have their Bible, the Holy Spirit. It opens to them, this revelation that God is involved in the restoration of Israel, and the doors that are opening to us in a lot of these countries, it's quite amazing.¹⁶²

This global imaginary, here expressed by David Parsons, is central to the sense of confidence and reform that permeates the ministries' work in Jerusalem. The most significant part of this reform takes place not in the Western countries but in the Global South; in the view of the ministries this development is connected to the charismatization of Global Christianity. In Chapter Three I stressed that divine agency coupled with "the plain reading of the Bible" are understood as the central explanatory factors in the realization of Israel's spiritual significance. Since the teachings of the Church—including that in many Evangelical and

¹⁶² David Parsons 2013.

charismatic churches—are bearers of a theological and philosophical tradition that hides the simple truth that lies in the Bible, the Southern Churches' paucity of Western tradition is understood to enable and make space for divine agency to be enacted in Bible reading practices.

The authentic Christian faith that would be the outcome of such a reversal would be Bible-centered, purified from centuries of Greek theological and philosophical influences, and have a central symbolic role reserved for Israel. In the ministries' view, this would constitute a return to early Christianity as it was meant to be prior to the Hellenization process and the so-called "parting of the ways" between Judaism and Christianity. The logics of this return rely on a grammar of authenticity that not only prioritizes causal / metonymic connections over symbolic manipulation but also divine over human agency. Israel is at the heart of this reversal of the Christian gaze: as an index of authenticity and divine agency, Israel is the catalyst of this act of purification.

Conclusions

As in considerable previous research on contemporary Christian Zionism I have here paid extensive attention to the relationship between biblical literalism, Bible prophecy and Evangelical understandings of the State of Israel. This exploration began with a discussion about the relationship between literalism and Christian Zionism where it was argued that a linear causality that explains Christian Zionist views of Israel as derivative of literalist readings of Biblical prophecy both misrepresents Christian Zionists' engagements with the biblical text and misconstrues Christian Zionists' religious symbolification of the State of Israel.

I have here argued for a partial reversal of this causality. It is not simply that Israel's theological significance is dependent on literal readings of biblical prophecies but also that the symbolification of Israel authenticates particular Evangelical reading practices. When the "Evangelical gaze" is allowed to structure the experience of Israel, not only prophecy beliefs are felt to be validated but also, significantly, a particular Evangelical textual ideology. In other words, Israel as a religious symbol is important for the Evangelicals in Jerusalem not primarily because it is the outcome of a specific textual process but more so because Israel has become entangled in the very machinery of Evangelical textual ideology. Within this ideology, Israel serves as an index of divine intentionality as well as biblical authenticity. It is the material symbol through which Evangelical literalist ideology makes sense.

6. Walking on the Pages of the Word of God

For many Evangelicals, the State of Israel has come to occupy a central place in the imagination and articulation of Christian faith and practice. Israel is admired for its “miraculous” historical achievements, embraced as a fulfillment of biblical prophecies, cherished for its particular proximity to God, and defended with much fervor in political and theological debates. These sentiments are also frequently translated into religious practices: tours and pilgrimages to Israel; celebrations of Jewish holidays; intercessory prayers for the “peace of Jerusalem”; political lobbying; financial contributions to Israeli society; and volunteer work in Israel in order to be a blessing to the Jewish people. All of these activities point to an extended and profound religious interest in the State of Israel that shows no sign of waning in the near future.

Protestant Christians, who had long speculated about—and sometimes also worked towards—the national restoration of the Jews, embraced the new-born state in 1948 and were hugely enthused by its territorial expansion following the ‘67 war. For many Evangelicals, these events signaled the fulfillment of biblical prophecies: when the people of Israel returned to a homeland that had been “trampled on by the gentiles” (Lk. 21:24, NRSV) for near two thousand years, it provided affirmation that history was moving towards its fulfillment and, furthermore, that the Bible was a reliable source for the interpretation of the present. That the State of Israel became a sign of the times, however, also made it fundamentally different from any other political construct: it left Israel shimmering in an other-worldly light. For many Evangelicals Israel became an index of divine intent, a meta-historical, semi-spiritual entity by virtue of which one could not only gain insight into, but also interact with divine realities.

The Six-Day War in ‘67 was followed by great prophetic excitement. In Jerusalem, expat Evangelicals formed a variety of networks during the ‘70s which eventually led to the founding of three Christian Zionist ministries: the Bridges for Peace; the International Christian Embassy; and Christian Friends of Israel. These ministries were developed to serve as a bridge between the State of

Israel and the Evangelical world; to educate Christians about Israel; and to “comfort the Jewish people” by practical means. While initially not as broadly representative as they often claimed to be, more than three decennia of socio-political navigation within Israeli society has eventually established them as central players in what they themselves perceive as a global—and eschatologically significant—Christian movement that is aligning with God’s chosen people prior to the conclusion of the eschatological drama. Joining this movement, for instance as a volunteer, means becoming involved in the meta-historical redemptive process.

I have in this work approached Christian Zionism primarily as a discursive process that is concerned with the *ongoing production of connections between the State of Israel, its formative ideology, and Christian sacred history*. In the analytic section (Chapters Three, Four, and Five) I examined this process within three broad discursive domains: talk about *the religious self*, about *the land of Israel*, and about *the biblical text*. While analytically separated in this work, I have consistently argued that the religious significance of the State of Israel emerges primarily from the interactions between these three domains.

Chapter Three focused on the religious self and described how Evangelical coming-to-Israel stories are articulated in relation to two classical Christian narrative genres: the calling narrative and the conversion narrative. Among the Evangelicals in Jerusalem, the transformative experience of “realizing Israel’s spiritual significance” is embedded in Evangelical narrative forms that emphasize the dialectics between divine and human agency and the authentic knowledge of “the heart”. Through these narratives, Zionism comes not only to have a personal religious value but, in the process, also recalibrates Evangelical symbolic systems into a partly new articulation of Evangelical faith. Understanding and supporting the State of Israel becomes an important part of what it means to be a born-again Christian. Among the volunteers, the sometimes ritual-like performance of these narratives situates the encounter with Israel as a religious conversion process.

Chapter Four explored how the experience of Israel has reawakened previously slumbering religious traditions concerning sacred space. In the volunteers’ narratives Israel is discursively produced as a special place with a unique capacity to mediate divine presence. While such traditions have never been entirely absent from Protestant Christianity, they have frequently been theologically rejected and subjected to polemic, particularly by Protestants who understand materiality as a problem for authentic experience of the divine. The discursive practices of the volunteers showed how the notion of sacred space is finding new currency in Evangelical Zionism but also how these reawakened

narratives, myths, and symbols need to be negotiated both in relation to the encounter with the empirical realities of the place, and Protestant ideas about religious fetishism.

The final analytical chapter focused on “biblical literalism” as the textual ideology of the Evangelicals in Jerusalem. It was argued that while “biblical literalism” has often been understood as the *cause* for Evangelical Zionist views of the state of Israel—both among volunteers and academic observers—it also needs to be understood as an *outcome* of Evangelical engagement with Israel. Bible prophecy in its retrospective form and discourses concerning the “Hebraic roots of Christian faith” are deeply embedded in arguments about biblical authenticity and the legitimacy of Evangelical religious forms. While the former often serves as empirical evidence for the truth of the biblical scripture, the latter constructs a historical narrative within which Evangelical Zionism is situated as a rediscovery of authentic biblical religion. In addition, the same narrative construes ideological opponents as descendants of Greek symbolic manipulation and man-made traditions that lead them into the theological quagmires of allegory, replacement theology, and anti-Semitism.

By its substantial discursive and practical engagement with a modern state, Christian Zionism significantly de-stabilizes the boundaries between religion and politics as they have traditionally been imagined within secularized societies. Since the late '60s, Evangelicals in Jerusalem have negotiated these boundaries by engaging in a range of activities that have often been construed by observers as inappropriately political. The organizations, as well as the volunteers in Jerusalem, however, consistently—and more or less univocally—prefer to construct their identities along apolitical religious lines and often deny political interests and motivations. In their view, their activities are based on a biblical mandate and they are simply friends of God’s chosen people who are trying to heal the wounds of the past. Yet, as much as it would be a mistake to treat Evangelical engagements with Israel merely as political expressions of conservative religious beliefs, it would also be flawed to turn a blind eye to how thoroughly embedded these religious discourses are in ideological concerns. I have tried to balance these perspectives here because I find that interpreting them as one or the other would only serve to re-inscribe boundaries that privilege particular narratives about the legitimacy of these expressions. However, I also believe that the analysis has shown how porous these boundaries are. I have emphasized how ideological and political constructs enter Evangelical religion *as religious symbols*; in other words, as something that *significantly contributes to, and clarifies what it means to be a born-again Christian*. The analysis has been geared towards the religious significance attributed to the State

of Israel in these discourse; a significance which, as we have seen, is both profound and wide-ranging in terms of the religious identities of the volunteers. Before closing this work I would like to return to some of the questions that were raised in the introductory chapter and finally to turn to some areas that I believe will be important for future academic explorations of Evangelical Zionism.

Continuities and Discontinuities of Evangelical Zionism

In the first chapter of this dissertation I identified the continuities and discontinuities between Christian Zionism and Evangelicalism more broadly as the main theoretical focus of this project. I was (and still am) interested in the ways in which Evangelicals negotiate the place of the State of Israel in their personal faith, and in relation to the Bible, to theological tradition, and to the empirical experience of living and working in Israel. In all these areas, the exploration has shown a Christian movement which emerges from Evangelical ways of being in the world, but that is also structured by ancient Christian ways of perceiving the Jew / Israel as a signifier of divine intent (Haynes 1995). The Evangelicals in Jerusalem place high value on personal and intimate relationships with God (Bielo 2008, Luhrmann 2004, Moberg 2013), draw on well-established Christian speech genres in order to articulate their journeys to Israel (Stromberg 1993, Williams 2013), engage with the Bible in a radically personalized way which is primarily focused on presence and relevance (Bialecki 2009, Malley 2004), continuously search for traces of divine agency in the world and in their own lives (Harding 2000), and generally understand themselves as Evangelicals in terms of belonging, beliefs, and practices. In all these areas, the volunteers, perhaps unsurprisingly, are in fundamental continuity with more general Evangelical religious forms.

However, I have also continuously stressed how the ministries and the volunteers in Jerusalem perceive themselves as part of a global movement that is set on reforming Christian faith and practice. These reform ambitions are visible in several areas but perhaps most in the ongoing discursive contestations surrounding the religious meaning of Israel: narratives about the Hebraic roots of faith; questions about biblical authenticity and fetishism; and the focus on the

transformative encounter with Israel and its accompanying hermeneutical changes.

The analysis has also shown that these ambitions are more than mere talk: by introducing Zionism and the State of Israel as religious concepts some central Christian questions receive partly new answers: How does God make Himself known in the world? How can one rely on the biblical message? What is authentic Christian belief and practice? What problems, if any, does materiality pose for religious experience? In the discourses described in this work the State of Israel is deeply embedded in the answers to all these questions. Whether approached from an historical, theological, or anthropological perspective, these are significant changes that need to be considered not only on a superficial but also on a structural level; rather than simply adding new elements to Evangelical faith they propel a (partial) restructuring of the religious system and a re-evaluation of core theological, hermeneutical, and semiotic questions. Some of these questions have been addressed in the preceding chapters but many also remain to be considered in future explorations of Christian Zionism. In the hope of contributing to the ongoing academic discussion about contemporary Evangelicalism I will draw attention in the following to three areas which I believe will be particularly fruitful.

Globalizing Christian Zionism

To date, scholarly research and media representations of Christian Zionism have overwhelmingly focused on the North American ecclesiastical, political, and cultural context, sometimes to the extent that the trajectories along which Christian Zionism has developed in North America have also been taken as paradigmatic of its development elsewhere. However, while Evangelical forms of Zionism lately seem to have lost some of their momentum in European and North American contexts, Evangelical and Charismatic Christianity in the Global South is becoming an increasingly important field of interaction between Zionism and Christianity (Pew Research Forum, 2011). How that relationship will develop in future years will in no small part depend upon the activities of the Christian ministries in Jerusalem: how able they are to tap the potential of the Global South and include Southern voices in their articulation of faith; and how they fare in the discursive contestations that have surrounded the State of Israel since the late '60s. As the comments from David Parsons in Chapter Five testify, this is a development of which the ministries in Jerusalem are highly

aware, and something which they consider to be both politically and eschatologically significant.

In spite of the growth of these ideas in various Christian contexts, this development has seen little extended research so far, although there are a few exceptions (Clatterbuck 2014, Gifford 2001, 2003, 2009, Girard 2014, Helgesson 2006, Kalu 2008). This oversight becomes even more visible by comparing it to another phenomenon within Southern Pentecostal and Charismatic churches which has received an enormous amount of scholarly attention in recent years: the “prosperity gospel” and its connection to various local understandings of society, economics, agency, morality, health, and the body (Attanasi and Yong 2012, Gifford 2004, Haynes 2012, Heuser 2015, Meyer 2002). As with prosperity preaching in Pentecostal churches, it is likely that Christian Zionism in the South is affected by both global and local factors: local theologies, ethnic genealogies, narrative traditions, Bible reading practices, missionary histories, and the globalization of Evangelical media. It is also likely that Christian Zionism, like the prosperity gospel, connects with various understandings of society, economics and politics but also that it contributes to reshape these understandings when introduced in a new context. Yet, so far, very little about these processes is known: how Christian Zionism globalizes; its paths of circulation; and the ways in which it localizes in different contexts and communities. While it is, of course, very difficult to estimate with any precision either the size or the global reach of the phenomenon—not to mention the heterogeneous movement that is crystallizing around these ideas—the information that does exist points to a Christian interest in Israel that far outweighs the paucity of research that exists on the topic.

An added benefit of research into Christian Zionism in non-European / non-North American contexts would be the possibility of comparing the trajectories along which it develops, and to test interpretations of it that are available in research to date, including those in this study. As already pointed out, existing research has stressed theological trends such as premillennial dispensationalism (Weber 2004), (“literalist”) bible reading practices (Ariel 2002, Spector 2009), and, more recently, the connection to national or communal identities (Smith 2013, Stewart 2015). How well would those interpretations hold water when applied to Zionist Pentecostals or Charismatics in Brazil, Nigeria, South Korea, or South Africa? In what ways would they challenge or support existing theories about the phenomenon? While cross-cultural comparison is difficult, and perhaps should be embarked upon with some caution, it would also provide interesting questions of benefit to the field. If Christian Zionism is approached less as a fixed belief tradition and more as a “cross-contextually recognizable

system of symbolic associations” (Engberg and Stewart 2014)—between biblical Israelites and modern day Israelis, between biblical Israel and the State of Israel, and between historical events and eschatological narratives—such comparisons might not only be feasible, but highly beneficial to the understanding of the phenomenon as a whole.

Contesting Language Ideologies

In *Beyond Logos* (2011), Jon Bialecki and Eric Hoenes del Pinal develop an argument for an expanded study of Christian language ideologies as competing, contrasting, and contested. As I noted in Chapter One, they argued that, although Christian language has been studied in many different contexts, the general picture of Christian—particularly Protestant—language has been surprisingly uniform: centering around the sincere speaking subject, and privileging interiority, intimacy, and intentionality as an ethics of speech (2011, 580). While several authors have recognized the reality of competing language ideologies, these contestations have often been analyzed in missionary contexts where a pre-Christian language ideology has been contrasted against ideological stances arriving with the missionaries (e.g. Keane 2007, Robbins 2001). The emergence of new language practices in these accounts has often been understood to be derived from a modern Christian culture fundamentally shaped by Western Protestantism.

In comparison, this exploration of contemporary Evangelical Zionism has shown a language ideology which emerges from, and also contrasts with other Protestant understandings of what language is, and what it is supposed to do. Furthermore, the emergence of new language practices in Jerusalem is not the result of external forces but rather of the Evangelicals’ own mobility—which has brought them to this new geographical context—and their attempts to harmonize this experience with already existing Evangelical language. This example raises questions about the flexibility and adaptability of Protestant speech, as well as about the possibilities for human subjects to shape and re-shape their communities’ language ideologies to meet the needs of the present. In the examples presented herein, what can, and cannot, be said is being negotiated in relation to both theological tradition and the context within which the subjects currently reside. To what extent do these results reflect more general aspects of how Christian language works, and in what aspects, if any, are they unique?

Further research, both into Christian Zionism and into other Evangelical contexts would be needed to shed more light on how general these observations are but I believe a few things might already be said with confidence. First, while the State of Israel, as I have argued, can be understood as a sign that mediates divine presence, it is also a constantly evolving social and political formation. Such a situation, as discussed in Chapter Four, forces the volunteers to adapt their language to contextual circumstances and situations to an extent which possibly would not have been necessary in other contexts where this duality does not exist to the same degree. A second aspect which is peculiar to Evangelical Zionism is the inevitably unique role that the land and people of Israel has in the Bible and in Christian theological traditions. For a Biblicist community, this implies that talk about Israel is always partly structured in advance by the Bible, and that theological traditions already in place need to be addressed, negotiated, and discussed. I have here emphasized the formative role of these sources and contestations for the volunteers' talk about Israel.

Studying Christian language ideologies as competing, contrasting, and contested (Bialecki and Hoenes del Pinal 2011) implies the acknowledgment that concrete language practices change with social and cultural circumstances; that the very contestations can be influential in shaping said speech; and that even communities which are deeply wedded to the authority of the biblical text and / or theological dogmas can nevertheless prove highly flexible in practice. More studies in that direction would greatly increase our understanding of religious language and the ways in which it shapes and reshapes religious identities.

Alternative Readings of Israel

The symbolic role of the State of Israel in Christian imaginaries has in this work been explored through a deliberately one-sided perspective: that of Zionist evangelicals in Jerusalem. At an early stage in my research I was interested in doing a comparative project with Christians from both sides of the political fence; however, I ultimately decided against that due to practical limitations, and the amount of time in the field that would require. Yet, using the perspective taken towards Christian Zionism in this study, a similar project exploring the symbolic role of Israel for Christians who are critical of the State and / or who do not view it as the fulfillment of biblical prophecies, would not only be highly interesting but also contribute to the more general understanding of Israel's symbolic role. In such a context, similar questions to those I have

asked here would apply: How is biblical and theological authenticity created and maintained? How does the encounter with land shape political, moral, and religious identities? What sort of language practices are being used to legitimize political and religious activity—and how similar are they to those explored in this work? Are there similar conversion stories being told among pro-Palestinian Christians? While Christian pro-Palestinian activism has historically mainly relied on more liberal theological platforms, the Christ at the Checkpoint Conference organized every second year by Bethlehem Bible College shows that there is also an increasing identification with Palestinian narratives in the Evangelical camp. Additionally, just as there are biblical prophecy tours to Israel, there are organized trips that focus on Palestinian Christian links to the land, and their situation under military occupation (Feldman 2011, Kaell 2014). Considering the role of the State of Israel in Christian contestations about authenticity, fetishism, and materiality, including these Christian communities in future research would contribute to a more solid understanding about how that role is being put to use in the construction of Christian identities.

Walking on the Pages

Five years ago, I started this research project eager to try to understand why the State of Israel evoked such strong emotion among many Evangelical Christians. Was their support the result of (mis-)interpretations of biblical prophecies, as considerable previous research had suggested? Was it a consequence of the cultural influence of dispensationalism and biblical literalism? Or was the religious language merely a chimera obscuring the real motivations: conservative political beliefs and support for the military alliance between Israel and the U.S.? Now, some years later, I believe all of these explanations are relevant, but that none of them really goes to the heart of the matter. Evangelicals, at least the volunteers in Jerusalem, embrace Zionism simply because they feel that it is what God asks them to do. In their experience, this embrace brings them closer to God, and to the plan that He has for their individual lives. They struggle with how to understand it, with the ways in which it resonates with their Evangelical faith, but in the end what really matters, as with most Evangelicals, is their personal relationship with God.

It has been argued that Christian intimacy with God is created through an ideological rejection of the material (Keane 2007). Considering the narratives in this work, that perspective seems, if not wrong, at least misleading. Among the

volunteers, intimacy with God is not constructed through such a rejection but rather in a negotiation with Israel as a historical and material reality. The individual's walk with God is centered on engagement with Israel; the realization of Israel's spiritual significance is articulated as the discovery of a new, more religious self; and the land of Israel is understood as a sacred space that has a unique capability to mediate divine presence. In all these cases the land and State of Israel emerge as a route to cultivating intimacy with God. It is not an unproblematic way to construct such intimacy, and it is not final but, judging from their stories, it works, and it is deeply spiritually fulfilling.

There are people that are tremendously spiritual, like they spiritualize absolutely everything—I'm not sure if you understand what I mean? And yet, here [in Israel], *it's just more real*. I don't consider that those were Bible times [before]; I consider that we're in Bible times [now] and that we're literally *walking on the pages of the Word of God*.¹⁶³

When Karen tells me this, it is spring 2013 and we are sitting in an ordinary office in a Christian-run food bank on the outskirts of Jerusalem. There is nothing about the office that particularly catches the eye; it is small, a bit cramped with books, files, and folders; the sun is shining in through one of the windows. Where Karen “literally” walks is on the hard concrete floor of the food bank: between the office, the shelves with their food products, and the pallets that are sent to different locations in Israel and in the territories on a daily basis. Sometimes she also helps register newly arrived Jewish immigrants who are in need of help: her favorite part of the volunteer work, she says.

Insofar as I can tell, Karen is entirely sincere when she tells me where she walks, and how she understands it. Yet the conflation between biblical and contemporary times is puzzling. Her statement not only collapses the biblical past and the eschatological future into an expanding present but also, crucially, juxtaposes the biblical text with a contemporary state. In spite of her comment about the people who “spiritualize absolutely everything”, to me, it seems like an immensely spiritual thing to do. Perhaps, however, it is this very juxtaposition that is responsible for the deeply felt intimacy with God. Embedded in the Word, Karen experiences how her faith has become more “solidified”, more “real”, she says. In a sense it is easy to imagine why: she is walking on it.

¹⁶³ Karen, 2013, emphases mine.

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What does it mean to be “literally walking on the pages of the Word of God”? In what sort of religious imaginary does it even make sense to say that one is? Considering that this claim comes from an Evangelical Christian currently working as a volunteer in Jerusalem, it raises interesting questions not only about the relationship between the biblical text and a contemporary state, but also about faith and politics, sacred space and its capacity to mediate divine presence, and the ways in which the State of Israel is finding its way into Evangelical religious identities.

This dissertation explores these questions through an ethnographic account of Christian volunteer workers and their stories about themselves, the land, and the biblical text. The volunteers are attached to Christian organizations in Jerusalem which consider their work a natural consequence of the biblical promises to Israel and their responsibility as Christians to “bless the Jewish people”. The dissertation relies on an up-close portrait of the discursive practices of the volunteers to explore a central puzzle of Zionist Christianity: the narrative production of Israel’s religious significance and its relationship to Protestant language ideologies.

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