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The Geopolitics of the Chosen People's Apocalypse: The Los Angeles Jews for Jesus and the Judeo-Christian Tradition

Abstract: Jews for Jesus (JFJ) is an aggressive American Christian Zionist missionary organization. Their particular worldview is both Jewish and Christian by faith whilst bridging American and Israeli national identities. Through critical discourse analysis of a key text, as well as a series of interviews, this article explores the apocalyptic geopolitics of members of the JFJ's Los Angeles branch and compares these views with a book on the apocalypse written by the JFJ Executive Director, David Brickner. This article shows that discourse analysis of apocalyptic social movements alone often misses the everyday and discordant discourses surrounding their theo-political imaginations. The three interviews examined show vast deviations in understanding and motivation that are unaccounted for in previous scholarship on religious geopolitics. This article concludes that these everyday discourses have influence on the cultural conceptualizations of both Christian and Jewish apocalypses and on many text-based academic findings concerning evangelicals and Messianic Jews.

Keywords: Messianic Jews; Apocalypse; Israel-Palestine; Christian Zionists; Judeo-Christian Tradition; geopolitics.

Jews for Jesus (JFJ) emerged in 1970 San Francisco as a northern California chapter of the Hebrew Christian Alliance of America (HCAA). The HCAA was a non-Jewish run organization seeking to convert Jews to Christianity. The chapter director and founder of JFJ, Moishe Rosen,

a Messianic Jew (or "Jewish believer in Christ") who was "born in Kansas City, but raised in Denver" to a family of Reformed Jews from Austria, felt that the Christian evangelical methods were not morally justified or effective in converting Jews to Christianity (Rosen 2012, 3). As a result, JFJ split off from the HCAA in 1973. In 1974 they opened the Los Angeles branch. Rosen and his group of converted or "Messianic Jews" saw themselves as part of the counterculture movement in San Francisco, borrowing both the hip missionary style and urgent message of the popular Hal Lindsey: the End was nigh (Lipson 1990; Sturm and Albrecht 2021). Unlike the traditional missions by evangelicals, JFJ targeted young people at universities, "adopting the young people's style in dress, hair, and music, the new mission proved successful with the new generation" (Ariel 2000, 4). By 1979 it had grown to have 100 employees in 6 branches in the US (Lipson 1980, 102), and today has offices in 13 states with over 200 employees.

The Los Angeles Branch of JFJ is a store-front institution (see Figure 1). Often the idea behind the "storefront church" is not simply because the institution could not afford a church but rather to draw in interested adherents in a religious marketplace. Weightman (1993: 7) describes Los Angeles area storefront churches: "in the first half century, 'white' Pentecostal and Adventist storefronts lined the main streets of Long Beach, landscape manifestations of fundamentalist Protestant individualism

Figure 1: Los Angeles Jews for Jesus Store Front. Photograph by the Author

delivered by in-migrants from across the nation." However, JFJ is not a church rather it is what one interviewee called an "information agency" and another called a "professional organization, not a member organization", clarifying that, "you can run away and join the circus and not Jews for Jesus."[1] The storefront acts as a middle-venue of conversion for local churches to prosper in Weightman's (1993, 1) religious marketplace where belief is sold through the spatial "appropriation of extant structures through adaptive reuse." The JFJ storefront is a staging ground for "witnessing" (their word for proselytizing) activities on the UCLA campus and elsewhere around the city. As Cyril, a JFJ missionary explained, they often go "witnessing" twice per week frequenting Bruin Walk (the UCLA main corridor) but also Santa Monica College, Cal State Northridge, 3rd Street Promenade in Santa Monica, and Venice Beach. The Westwood location was chosen, according to Cyril, because "there are many Jews that go to UCLA."

Their mission statement is that the JFJ "exists to make the messiahship of Jesus an unavoidable issue to our Jewish people worldwide" (Rosen 2012, vi).[2] JFJ publicly targets Jews for conversion through missionary work and through media sources by, for example, running full page advertisements in the *New York Times* and *Haaretz*. In tandem with this proselytizing is an apocalyptic geopolitical story about the direction of history and the signs that reveal the prophetic historical stage we are in. In a full-page *New York Times* advertisement during the Persian Gulf War in 1991, JFJ declared that Saddam Hussein "represents the spirit of the Antichrist about which the Bible warns" (Boyer 2002, 326). JFJ, consistent with other American evangelical prophecy institutions, found renewed apocalyptic meaning in Middle East events. Hussein's rebuilding of Babylon was seen as particularly prophetic by many JFJ members as the throne of the Antichrist.[3] While Saddam was firing scud rockets into Israel, Tuvya, former Executive Director of the Los Angeles JFJ, explained in an interview that he was expecting one of them to "ironically hit Mount Moriah, destroying the Dome of the Rock perhaps leading to the building of the Third Temple."[4] These Messianic Jews emerge and borrow a particular geographical vision from Christian Zionists that sees the world crystallizing into biblical geopolitical blocs (Dittmer and Sturm 2016). Christian Zionists often adhere to an eschatology known as premillennial dispensationalism and believe the modern state of Israel is the penultimate sign of Christ's return (see Boyer 1992; Weber 2004; Sturm 2018).

The modern history of Messianic Jewish movements can be traced to premillennial dispensationalism (Power 2011) and the JFJ's geopolitical imagination of the apocalypse also mirrors that of Christian Zionists.

1 Tuvya Zaretsky, interview by author, Westwood, California, September 2008.

2 For a fascinating series of testimonies of how Jews came to believe Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and join JFJ, including the influence of Timothy Leary, Buddhism, and travel to Israel see, Rosen's *Testimonies of Jews Who Believe in Jesus* (1992).

3 Hussein's rebuilding of Babylon was a tool for Iraqi nationalism. By identifying himself as the pre-Arab and pre-Muslim Nebuchadnezzar II, he was attempting to appeal to all of the religions and ethnicities of Iraq by transcending the trappings of "Arab nationalism" (Dijkink 1996). But as Nebuchadnezzar II, evangelicals are able to read Hussein through the prophecies of the Book of Daniel (Ch. 2–4) as the Babylonian leader who sacked Jerusalem, enslaved the Jews, and erected images of himself for worship. The Antichrist is argued to enact these very things immediately prior to the apocalypse (e.g., Dyer 2003 [1991]).

4 Tuvya, interview.

Ariel (2000, 227) notes, "their understanding of Zionism and the state of Israel resembles that of premillennialist evangelicals." They share a type of masculinist and muscular Christianity concerning imminent End Time battles presaged by geopolitical signs, but their concern for the future history of Jews deviates in important and under explored ways. This article explores those geopolitical signs and how they differ internally between members of the Jews for Jesus and between Christian Zionists and Messianic Jews. Research on Messianic Jews generally, and the JFJ specifically, has concerned their culture through ethnographic methods (Lipson 1990), their emergent history (Ariel 2000; Power 2011), and their theology (Harris-Shapiro 1999), but there is a distinct gap in the literature concerning their politics and specifically their geopolitics. Their geopolitics is an understudied yet crucial aspect in the social and political science of religions, that, I argue below, helps prepare the political and cultural ground to justify foreign policy decisions and provides a reinforcing prism for national self-definition in counter-distinction to biblically inspired conflations of evil and territory.

The first section gives a brief history of apocalyptic thinking among American premillennial dispensationalism and their relationship to Israel. The second section engages with the seeming paradox of being both Jewish and Christian *vis-à-vis* Islam as an internal Abrahamic Other (cf Jansson 2005). The third section conducts a critical discourse analysis of the geopolitical signs identified by the Executive Director of JFJ, David Brickner, in his book, *Future Hope: A Jewish Christian Look at the End of the World* (1999). Considering his power within the JFJ, his book represents an authoritative statement concerning the apocalyptic geopolitics of the JFJ community. To put his ideas into context, Brickner (1999, 53–54) explains, "what some westerners might consider ancient conflicts and antiquated concerns are, in fact, current events to many people in the Middle East." Brickner's elite and most public representation on the apocalyptic geopolitics of JFJ is then contrasted via a 2008 interview with the more agnostic geopolitics of the former LA Branch Director and JFJ Staff Development Officer, Dr. Tuvya Zaretsky. In the final section the critical discourse analysis of Brickner's JFJ apocalyptic geopolitics and Tuvya's agnostic geopolitics is compared with two in-depth semi-structured interviews with LA Branch JFJ missionaries in 2008, immediately preceding the election of President Barak Obama. Central to the argument in this paper here is a methodological one, specifically how individual lay missionary and even less public elite members deviate in their perspective of apocalyptic geopolitics from speciously representative voices like Brickner's.

Geopolitics of Religion

Almost a decade ago Gearóid Ó Tuathail in his book *Critical Geopolitics* (1996) wrote that "there are many connections between geopolitical thought and religious thought (vision, prophecy, father figures, and so on) that deserve investigation." Since then, there have been many attempts to incorporate religions and religious thought into the canon of what has come to be called "critical geopolitics" (Agnew 2006; Dittmer 2007; Dittmer 2008; Gerhardt 2008; Dittmer and Sturm 2016; Foster, Megoran, and Dunn 2017; Sturm 2018; Sturm 2021a). Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992, 192) in an earlier definition suggest that "the study of geopolitics is the study of the spatialization of international politics by core powers and hegemonic ones". There are evident state-centric and Eurocentric problems with this definition, of course. It is to suggest that non-'hegemonic' or 'core' states or even people or religions do not 'geo-graph' with convincing results as though political elites were in some way separate from culture, or outside hegemony (Sharp 2000, 362). Ó Tuathail (1995, 195) would later clarify in writing, "geographical knowledge is produced…from the classroom to the living-room, the newspaper office to the film studio, the pulpit to the presidential office". He continues that the act of geopoliticking is done by those "who wish to make the world in the image of their maps".

Dalby (1991, 274) redefines geopolitics as a boundary producing performance of excluding and internalizing. Dalby (ibid) writes that an important "moment of geopolitical discourse is the division of space into 'our' place and 'their' place; its political function being to incorporate and regulate 'us' from 'them', the same from 'the other'". Otherness involves exclusion and, for Dalby, exclusion is inherently spatial. Dalby conceptually opens up a space for studying both evangelicals and Messianic Jews as they imagine a racialized distinction between believer and heathen, good and evil, by partitioning the world in early digestible dualistic geo-categories. These geopolitics are productive of a biblical hermeneutics that reads foreign policy and international politics headlines through the specious inerrancy of biblical text. Agnew (2006, 188) argues that religion can "inspire and justify geopolitical claims" and has fabricated its own geopolitical discourse. Concerning American evangelicals, Croft (2007, 692) argues they have developed their own views on foreign policy that challenge Realist, Liberal, and Marxist positions, what he terms "evangelical foreign policy". If we are interested in 'making sense' of geopolitics, we must attend to all of its influencing factors such as how it is affected by religion and, reciprocally, how geopolitics has pervaded religion. It is how geopolitics get

blurred between porous boundaries of influence that is paramount to understanding the subject (Gallaher 1997).

As I have argued elsewhere (Sturm 2013, 135), a distinction between the geopolitics of religion and religious geopolitics can be useful in such analysis: "The former refers to conflicts between actors who are clearly and rather unproblematically concerned with theologically inspired representations of how the world should be divided. The latter refers to plainly secular geopolitical discourse and action that nevertheless can be seen to employ political-theological vocabularies, symbols and action." This paper is concerned, then, with the geopolitics of religion, the ways in which JFJ imagine and enact their own religiously inspired geopolitics. In the next section, I outline how Jews became insiders in Christian Zionism and as a result made space for the identity of Messianic Jew.

Making Jews Christian and the Judeo-Christian Tradition

In Great Britain there were cycles of belief that it was the new Jerusalem, but the Jews were usually portrayed as related to the evil, and not the good of the Bible. This notion changed in 19th century Great Britain where Jews were sought from around Europe to immigrate to Britain to fulfill the Last Days prophecy, albeit functionally. It was within this air of ideas that John Nelson Darby was able to fashion modern premillennial dispensationalist eschatology now shared by many Messianic Jews and American evangelicals. Darby believed that 144,000 Jews would need to be converted to Christianity, and that all Jews would need to return to Palestine (Rev. 14:1). These ideas (along with British-Israelism) would play a role in British support for an independent Jewish state and the creation of modern Israel itself in 1948 (Cohn-Sherbok 2006).

Darby's theology was influential in the United States and was perceived as a missionary calling to convert Jews. From the 1880s to the 1910s Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe crowded the streets of major American cities like Boston and New York, and Christian missions operated in the immigrant quarters offering services, food, and money in hope that these efforts would open doors for conversion (Ariel 2000, 3). Founded in the early 20th century and still the largest organization to narrowly focus on Jewish conversion to Christianity in the United States, is the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (formerly the HCAA). The HCAA took on a dual theo-political focus with their adopted Darbyite ideas: (1) convert American Jewry and (2) support the creation of a state of Israel in the Ottoman

province of Palestine. In Ariel's (2000, 227) words, the HCAA "organize[d] tours of Israel and take a deep interest in the fate of that country."

The concept of a Messianic Jew has both an eschatological and a socio-cultural precursor foundation in the U.S.A. The term "Judeo-Christian" is often used as a tool in American electoral politics to refer to the American solidity of a wide range of beliefs. Its use transcends exclusion by not referring to either Christian or Jew but by referring to both. It is also used to mark the shared aspects of each religion, namely the Tanakh. The term Judeo-Christian emerges in 1930s America as an anti-fascist moniker (Silk 1984; Schultz 2011; Sturm 2012). The term would later be theologically nuanced and politically solidified in American academia and culture with Jack Hexter's (1966) *The Judaeo-Christian Tradition*. American theologian and novelist, Arthur Cohen (1970, ix) in his book, *The Myth of Judeo-Christian Tradition*, responded to Hexter, as "not only a myth of history (that is, an assumption founded upon the self-deceiving of man) but an eschatological myth which bears within it an optimism, a hope which transcends and obliterates the historicism of the myth." Cohen argues that the hyphen that connects the adjectives is rhetorical American politics, theologically incongruent, and an obscure evangelical interpretation for the role of Jews for the End Times. Moreover, Cohen (1970, x) accepts his own supersessionism describing the relation as one elapsed by time: "for such terms as continuity, coalescence, and relation describe the disposition of objects in space, whereas the essential character of the Jewish and Christian connection is a relation of time and not in time alone but in filled time, time in which events are numbered." But, as explicated below, the Judeo-Christian relation at Jews for Jesus exists in a spatial field of eschatological prophecies centered on Israel and the imagination of geopolitical enemies of both the U.S and Israel.

In matters of geopolitics, Judeo-Christian is short-hand to refer to "Western civilization" by Samuel Huntington (1996) and Bernard Lewis (1987, x). In both of these cases, it is used specifically to mark a difference between Islam and the 'West'. Žižek (2006, np), in a typical unsettling reversal, poses a 'Jewish-Muslim civilization'. He argues that because "we usually speak of the Jewish-Christian civilization—perhaps, the time has come, especially with regard to the Middle East conflict, to talk about the *Jewish-Muslim civilization* as an axis opposed to Christianity." Bernard Lewis (1987, x), however, anticipated this hyphenation twenty-years before Žižek argues that "the term 'Judaeo-Islamic' is at least as meaningful and as valid as 'Judaeo-Christian' to connote a parallel and in many ways comparable cultural tradition."

Regardless, the JFJ understand Judaism to anticipate Christianity and therefore geopolitically exclude the third Abrahamic religion, Islam. To Messianic Jews, Judaism and Christianity are not different, but instead part of the same story. Jesus was who Zechariah (12:10; 13:1), Daniel (7:14, 9:26), and Isaiah (9:6,7, 53:1–6) had predicted: he was the Messiah, the prophet they had been waiting for (Goldish 2004). This hybrid-identity is contentious to many in the Jewish and Christian communities. In *The Vanishing American Jew*, Alan Dershowitz (1998, 324) disparagingly wrote, "A Jew for Jesus already has a name: a Christian." JFJ activities led to a counter-missionary group called "Jews for Judaism" which spoofs the name but also provides "information to help Jews refute Christian arguments in favour of conversion" (Jews for Judaism 2021). Despite some groups like the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington who condemn Jews for Jesus for disrespecting interreligious dialogue, the vast majority of evangelical Christian groups accept JFJ membership.

Messianic Jews retain rites like Passover and the Messianic Haggadah (Ariel 2000, 245). They sing different hymns than Christian evangelicals, and "many of the hymns relate to Israel's role in history, convey a messianic hope, and refer to Jesus as the Savior of Israel" (ibid, 227). They retain the Bar Mitzvah as one of the social and communal institutions in American Jewish life, however, they do not perform the traditional Jewish rites of the full Parasha. Instead, they read from the New Testament to promote their Messianic creed (ibid, 245). The JFJ see themselves and associate themselves as Christians, but of a different ilk. They are the 'Chosen People' believing in the 'true messiah'. Regardless, JFJ members are encouraged to attend evangelical, neo-Charismatic, and fundamentalist Christian churches and attend Hebrew Christian fellowship groups to retain a sense of ethnic identity and cultural heritage. It is common today to hear of Protestants and Jews united in the sphere of "moral values", sharing a kind of public religiosity. But within evangelical spheres it has also been historically common to see Jews as either Antichrist or responsible for the Antichrist's global economic empire. JFJ was deeply offended and demanded an apology from the late Rev. Jerry Falwell when he once said, "of course he [the Antichrist] will be Jewish" (cited in Bronner 2020, 376). Some Christian Zionists hold the belief that the Antichrist will be Jewish (many others think he is Catholic). Brickner (1999, 135), the Executive Director of JFJ, gives several reasons why the Antichrist is *not* Jewish, and since Jerry Falwell's late-1970s visits to Israel, most Christian Zionist texts would agree.[5]

Ariel (2000) argues that a reinforced Jewish identity among those who converted to Christianity came about because of the Sixth-Day war. Prior

5 For example, Messianic Jews differ in that they see the Torah as valid while dispensationalists see this keeping of the Torah as a confusion of the present dispensation of the church age with the great Tribulation where Jews will become prominent in god's plan for the world. Cohn-Sherbok (2006, 159) argues that "observation of the mitzvot is seen as a failure to distinguish between the dispensation of the law in the Hebrew Bible and that of grace in the New Testament." On the other hand, Messianic Jews argue that keeping Torah is in keeping with God's Covenant with Israel.

to this, most Messianic Jews attempted to merge into the Anglo-Saxon or "gentile" congregations organized around the HCAA (ibid, 198). Their self-perception, as well as evangelical Christian perception gave "them more room within the larger evangelical community to give expression to their unique heritage" (ibid, 229). It was here that the movement found its own voice outside of Christian evangelical churches. Emphasizing ethnicity in American culture was a source of pride but it was not unpatriotic or un-American. It was at this time that America had renewed interest in supporting Israel both culturally and politically (McAlister 2000; Gregory 2004). Prior to this time, the U.S. was reducing its presence in the middle East but overthrowing Syria and Egypt's non-aligned governments meant Israel was an important Cold War ally. To the JFJ, Jews were not betraying their heritage by accepting Jesus, rather they were becoming better, more American Jews. This hybrid ethno-religious identity also bridges a double national territorial identity: one Christian American and the other Jewish Israeli. Identifying as a Jew for Jesus both reinforces this hybrid territorial identity and blurs their religious identity. By representing Israel as having a prophetic role, JFJ is simultaneously making their own privileged identity in relation to it. Complicating the story, many Jews for Jesus were never Jewish, that is, they do not have Jewish parentage. They are often married to a Jew or prefer messianic communities over evangelical assemblies. However, many of these non-Jewish Jews for Jesus will still refer to themselves as "Jewish" (Ariel 2000, 250).[6]

In an interview with Jews for Jesus in September 2016, a JFJ volunteer, Darrell, told me for example, that while he was not ethnically Jewish, he nevertheless identified as a "Messianic Jew". He justifies this with the language of "true Jew": "What Romans 2:29 and Deuteronomy 30:6 call a true Jew, one with a heart circumcised from uncleanness by the Holy Spirit." Here there is a supersessionist logic at play, that the New Testament replaced the Old, and that "Jewishness" itself was transmuted into a spiritual disposition. I followed-up asking, "Does that mean that any true believing Christian can identify as Jewish?" Darrell responded cementing the loose ambiguity of "Jewish" within the JFJ by writing, "Paul in Romans writes about a true Jew being one inwardly, with a heart of true trust and belief in Christ as the Messiah; We are true children of Abraham by faith in Christ... a true Jew, is the New Testament spiritual one, Messianic Jews believe this."

The JFJ movement has been described as "syncretic", which implies the sharing of multiple values, customs and cultures (Lipson 1980). However, it combines what Di Rienzo (2002, 83) calls "non-optional" elements into a "symbiotic relationship", that is, there is an "absence of choice" as

6 My recent research (2017–present) in the Belfast Messianic community reflects this trend. A group of approximately 50 people who identify as "Messianic Jews" meet regularly at Synagogue nights, Israeli food celebrations, and International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem events. None of the members trace maternal (or paternal) Jewish parentage.

to the ability to change that part of the religion. The non-optional element according to the Ohr Somayach Tanenbaum College, a Jewish center for learning, is that "the Christian idea of the trinity contradicts the most basic tenet of Judaism—that G-d is one... In Jewish law, worship of a three-part god is considered idolatry; one of the three cardinal sins for which a person should rather give up his life than transgress" (quoted in Di Rienzo 2002, 89). Therefore, according to common Jewish understanding, these religions cannot be hyphenated. Other scholars, like theologian and Professor, Rabbi Cohn-Sherbok (2000), see the JFJ as the seventh and last branch of a menorah representing a linear progression of Jewish evolution: Hasidism, Orthodox Judaism, Conservative Judaism, Reform Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism, Humanistic Judaism, Messianic Judaism; therefore attempting to normalize it by placing Messianic Judaism on a linear continuum. Similarly, others have called messianic Jews the "thirteenth tribe" (Sobel 1974, 1). While largely rejected by Jews, we must contend that "JFJ may be seen as sharing or occupying (depending on one's ideological position) Jewish space and time" (Cohen 2011, 206).

What should be clear is that the combination of Judaism and Christianity is in part a matter of spatial representation, imagination, and interpretation. What should also be clear is that being Jewish serves certain functional roles as not only being Chosen by God through a covenant with Jacob's sons, but also having belief in Christ and the knowledge of his prophetic master plan. JFJ can define themselves as not merely Christians, but as Jewish believers in Christ: a type of God given belief married to a God given parentage.

Los Angeles Jews for Jesus and the Variability of Geopolitical Visions

Method and Theory

This section is split into two notwithstanding this introduction. The first is a critical discourse analysis of the geopolitics of David Brickner's (1999) book, *Future Hope*.[7] This text was chosen because it is the only eschatological statement for the JFJ and because Brickner, as the JFJ Executive Director, holds doctrinal authority in the organization. The second section is split into three interview sections with JFJ employees: Susan, Cyril, and Tuvya. Susan and Cyril were interviewed in person in 2008 (during the Obama campaign), Tuvya was interviewed in person in 2008 and by email in 2016. Each interview is compared to Brickner's eschatology and

7 By discourse analysis, I mean the systematic investigation of a discursive structure in relation, at least here, to the theme of geopolitics. By critical I mean the Foucauldian inspired investigation of texts into the power relations within an institution and also the social power exacted by such elites may lead to dominance, inequalities, and the closing off of other ways or modes of knowing (see Foucault 1980; van Dijk 1993).

apocalyptic geopolitics. The interviews were semi-structured but much flexibility was required. The interviewees were hesitant when talking about matters of the apocalypse, but having held informal discussions in JFJ Los Angeles branch periodically for a year prior to the politically delicate period during the Obama campaign, the interviewees were already familiar with the researcher.

This paper is interested in the cultural aspects of geopolitics, the "geopolitics of religion". As such, a cultural geopolitics approach concerns the everyday non-elite geopolitical discourse which explores the diverse and detailed analysis of how geopolitics are framed, and how these geopolitical visions can lead to future oriented narratives about the way the world is or ought to be. As Megoran (2006, 625) explains advocating for more ethnographic and observant methods, "the study of elite discourses remains only a partial contribution to the construction of a fuller understanding of the spatiality of political processes. Without a complementary study of the reception of these discourses by 'ordinary people,' there is an ever-present danger of crafting lopsided or even irrelevant accounts." It is for this reason that contrasting Brickner with these interviews of, on the one hand 'ordinary people' in the case of Susan and Cyril, but also, on the other, with less public elite voices like that of Tuvya, is important so as not to overdetermine and essentialize beliefs within a religion, sect, or organization. As we see below, while Brickner's apocalyptic geopolitics are typically masculinist assertions of the prophecy of foreign policy found in the dispensationalist evangelical movement, some of the interviewed members of the Los Angeles branch of the JFJ are more agnostic or cautious about the role of geopolitics in apocalyptic prophecy.

Elite Grand Apocalyptic vs Geopolitical Agnosticism: Brickner and Tuvya

1. David Brickner's *Future Hope*

According to Brickner, it is believed that upon all "true believing" Christians being Raptured into Heaven, the Antichrist (Satan's representative on Earth) will be fatally injured in a war and subsequently resurrected "on satellite television" for the whole world to see (Brickner 1999, 46). The world assumes from this act that the Antichrist is the Messiah. He uses this hegemony to achieve "economic manipulation" requiring all consumers to wear the Mark of the Beast "666" (Rev. 13:18).

The founding of Israel in 1948 is the central prophetic theme is Brickner's geopolitics. Brickner (1999, 7) writes:

> The rise of the Zionist movement in the late 19th century, the founding of the modern State of Israel in 1948 and Israel's recapture of Jerusalem in 1967 have cleared the way for all the end times events the Bible speaks of to take place. The fact that the Jewish people are back in the Land and once again in control of Jerusalem clearly signals that these are indeed the End Times.

For the first half of the Tribulation period (seven years before the apocalypse) the Antichrist signs a peace-pact with Israel. Because of the Antichrist's peaceful and charismatic world leadership, he brings détente between Israel and other nations and groups (citing Daniel 9:27, 11:40–41; Ezekiel 38–39; Matthew 24:15–20). At this time, he encourages Jews to build the Third Temple. Such an accomplishment, we are told, "would be sure to win the respect and trust of many Israelis and religious Jews worldwide" (Brickner 1999, 61). However, upon the Temple's completion, the Antichrist takes it as his throne and systematically kills "a full two-thirds of the population of Israel" (ibid, 62; Zech 13:8). Brickner compares this act to the Holocaust: "The acts of Adolph Hitler and his SS troops will pale in comparison to the desolation caused by the Antichrist and his henchmen" (62). Brickner attempts to normalize the prophetic death of members of his own ethnic group. However, Brickner offers the Messianic Jewish reader an escape; via the "reconciliation today in the person of Y'shua, Jesus the Messiah" (63).

To make things worse soon after this second Holocaust, still within the first half of the Tribulation, comes the battle of Gog and Magog, including the other biblical 'nations' Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal (Ezek 38:1,2,8,9). Although not as committed as to who these 'nations' represent today as Hal Lindsey was in his book *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) (Sturm and Albrecht 2021), Brickner (1999, 71) is still willing to suggest that (see Figure 2):

> Magog, Meshech and Tubal were tribes of the ancient world between the Black and Caspian Seas, which today is southern Russia. The tribes of Meshech and Tubal have given their names to cities of today, Moscow and Tobolsk. Rosh is believed by some to be where the name "Russian" came from.[8]

These 'nations' (variably confused with modern states) attack Israel from the north reaching the Valley of Jezreel (where Armageddon will take place). Flanked from the south reaching Beer Sheva are Gog's allies "Persia, Ethiopia and Put" (see Figure 2). Persia, we are told, is Iran and "the

8 Moshe Rosen, the founder of JFJ, in the mid-1950s was a member of the 157th Regiment Combat Team just outside Colorado Springs and for some time thought that he would be mobilized to Berlin to fight the Soviet Union (Rosen 2012, 37). Although his daughter's biography of him is vague of this moment, it is likely he would have been inculcated to the geopolitical imaginations of an evil Russia in a highly evangelical geographical setting.

others appear to be African nations, perhaps including Libya" (ibid, 71). But as these armies squeeze Jerusalem, God intervenes and destroys them (Ezek. 38:21, 22). In Brickner's text, God's wrath against the armies of Gog shows Jews that their Real God is a Christian God and they convert en masse. According to Brickner, this is only the beginning, "the battle of Gog and Magog is [...] the prelude to this final battle, often referred to as Armageddon [Har Megiddo]" (ibid, 72). Marking the second half of the Tribulation, the Antichrist breaks his covenant with Israel by leading his army into northern Israel (Daniel 9:27; 11:40–41). The rest of the armies of the world, although America and Europe are left out, follow the Antichrist for this final battle. They are followed by the "Kings of the East" who are probably "the Arabs kings East of Jordan" but Brickner is not sure, they may be from "China" (ibid, 73). All of Jerusalem is completely destroyed, including the Third Temple, but as the remaining Jews "cry out to God for deliverance," Y'shua (Hebrew for Jesus, see Rosen 1984) then descends upon the earth, exterminates the nations of evil, and rules on earth for a millennium.

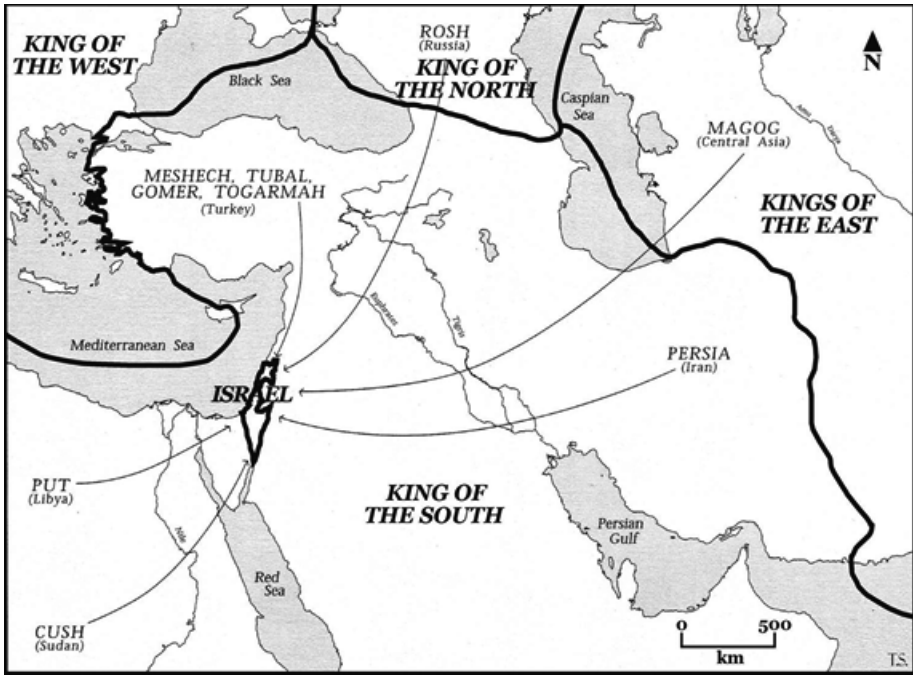

Figure 2. The Battle of Gog and Magog. Source: Author

In an attempt to strike urgency and vindication into the minds of his readers, Brickner is utilizing what Bernard McGinn (1998, 378) calls "psychological imminence", which he defines as "the conviction that the final events of history are already under way even though we cannot determine how near or far off the last judgment may actually be." Brickner (1999, 74) concludes that "the battle of Armageddon will be the climax of a spiritual battle that has been going on since the beginning of time, a battle which is going on even now." He continues giving his Jewish readers a Manichean ultimatum, if they do not *choose* to be with Jesus and to *believe* in Jesus as their Savior, they are choosing to be against him:

> To believe in Jesus you need to know that the battle lines have been drawn. God wants you to stand with him. There is no such thing as neutrality when it comes to this cosmic conflict; no spiritual Switzerland. Not choosing is a decision not to stand with God (ibid, 74–75).

Brickner imagines, and in so doing invites, genocide on his fellow ethnic Jews, a scenario where all but the predicted 144,000 Jews will survive this epic battle. But such a belief is not his alone; rather it is estimated to be shared by more than thirty-million American evangelicals (Weber 2004, 9). What is striking in this passage is that while identifying himself as a Jew, whose grandparents are Holocaust survivors, he is able to disregard any compassion for Jews who do not convert to Christianity from the position of the certainty of his biblical hermeneutics. Perhaps what would make sense is this identification of geopolitical enemies as shared between the US and Israel: both anti-Communist and both embroiled in Middle East conflict.

2. Tuvya: Our Mission Now, Let Christ Sort-out the Future

Tuvya Zaretsky, the former Los Angeles Branch Director and the JFJ International Staff Development Officer, attends the evangelical University Bible Church just south of UCLA on Wilshire Blvd. On the church's jewsforjudaism.org website in 2008 (although no longer stated), the mission creedal statement reads: "we believe that humanity in its natural state is in an eternally lost condition, in helpless bondage to sin, and under the power of Satan, who is the great deceiver."[9] Tuvya, who holds a Doctorate of Missiology from the Division of Intercultural Studies at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, revelled in his experiences with participant observation as a graduate student in Portland, helping "gentile-Jew couples", as he put it, work out their differences.[10] Tuvya had lived in Jerusalem for 4 years in the 1990s. Tuvya's management roles in JFJ and his

9 Tuvya, interview.
10 Tuvya, interview.

doctorate means that Tuvya represents a counter elite representation of the JFJ; one, as we will see below, that is far more agnostic and open to how their shared messianic end will be reached geopolitically.

More critically agnostic, when asked about specific prophecy interpretation in Brickner's book, Tuvya responded that there is "no single eschatology, it's non-essential."[11] Rather than eschatology, he explained, his "primary driver is to make Jesus an unavoidable issue, to make everyone aware of Jesus."[12] He explains, "to many Messianic Jews, this is the time we should go back to Israel. The reestablishment of government means that it is time to return. There have been many governments in Israel, [the] Macabees, Hasmonean."[13] Tuvya denies this calling, warning Christians of setting dates for Christ's return. He continues in contrast to Brickner, "1948 is potentially a huge sign [of the End Times] but if it is, it will also be the most tragic times for the Jewish people. I do not read of Gog and Magog with any relish; I'm not inclined to a Holocaust [...] I would like to take an allegorical view but it doesn't fit my hermeneutic."[14] Tuvya's premillennial 'hermeneutic' means the Bible is both infallible and is to be read literally albeit through a dispensationalist lens. What is significant with this latter part of Tuvya's discourse is his compassion for the "two-thirds of all Jews who did not convert before the Rapture."[15] He does not see the geopolitical events of the Tribulation, as Brickner did, as a "Future Hope." Brickner's text very much falls into the apocalyptic discourse of having the knowledge to break free of history's tragedies but also get a handle of the protean geopolitical events and alliances (Sturm 2016). The apocalypse provides the fear in his life to keep him secure against perceived evil forces.

When asked if he thought the nations of prophecy—Rosh, Magog, Cush, Put, Gomer, and so on—could be grafted onto modern states as Brickner had done, Tuvya replied "you cannot slap a label on a modern nation-state. You would want to make a distinction between modern boundaries and the boundaries of the Bible."[16] Tuvya, then, reads prophecy as referring to nations not as they are today, but as they were then. I asked, "Was it that the prophets were talking about past events?" Tuvya responded that unlike other premillennialists he does not conflate these "nations" to "territory," they are "nations, people, not states." That said, he feels that these nations still exist today, and used the Armenians as an example of an "age-old" nation. The "only geographical element" Tuvya was willing to explicate about was the "35 acres of the Temple Mount."[17] He explained that he did not care if Israel gave everything up to the Palestinians save for these 35 acres, that was a Jewish right and the place where the Third Temple would be built for Christ's return.

11 Tuvya, interview.
12 Yuvya, interview.
13 Tuvya, interview.
14 Tuvya, interview.
15 Tuvya, interview.
16 Tuvya, interview.
17 Tuvya, interview.

In closing, Tuvya disclosed a story about his 1999 trip to Israel during the Netanyahu/Barak election. He said that most of the Messianic Jews he was with prayed for Netanyahu to win because "he promised to increase the settlements and take a hardline with the Palestinians."[18] Tuvya instead presented a theory of geopolitical agnosticism continuing, "I said, 'no, we should vote for Barak.' They said, 'we can help guarantee Christ's return.' No, listen. If God wants his Son to return, he will return."[19] He continued by explaining that it was a good thing that Barak was elected because he granted the JFJ's application for non-profit status in Israel, something Netanyahu would have never done for fear of Christian proselytism. This can be described as a "clash of fundamentalisms," to use Taliq Ali's (2002) term, between Netanyahu's Likud party that most Messianic Jews saw as progressive for the prophecy of Israel but simultaneously stultified Brickner's (1999, 9) prophecy for "more [conversions] than ever in the past, only comparable to the first century AD as Jews became Christian converts." In an interview with Binyamin Klugger, director of the anti-missionary and anti-cult department of *Yad L'Achim* (a militant Haredi organization in Israel), he castigated Barak's decision to give the JFJ a base from which to proselytize to Jews. Klugger was sympathetic, however, to other evangelical organizations like the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem who do not proselytize to Jews but rather facilitate the *Aliyah* (or return) of mostly Russian and Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

Tuvya has obviously taken a more patient, less zealous, and ultimately more agnostic look at the geopolitics of prophecy relative to Brickner. Tuvya's knowledge of various apocalyptic geopolitics helped him choose his own, less fantastic interpretation of coming events. While the ultimate End for Tuvya and Brickner are the same, the geopolitical journey there is far less certain for Tuvya. Tuvya's thought, although not in print and therefore less widely heard, is unavailable to the critical geopolitician who reads elite level texts on a subject without talking to individuals about their worldviews. That said, Tuvya admits that he is "an exception to the rule."

Everyday Geopolitical Visions of the LA Branch: Susan and Cyril

In this section I explore the more everyday perspectives on the relationship between apocalypse and geopolitics. Like the contrast between Tuvya and Brickner, we see below deviating perspectives that would again be obscured by a focus on the official accounts or representations by public elites.

18 Tuvya, interview.
19 Tuvya, interview.

3. Susan: Fandom and an Indifferent Apocalypse

My first interview took place with the JFJ administrative assistant, Susan, who is not Jewish but identifies as an evangelical Christian. Susan is an example of the entwining of fundamentalist American evangelicals (Christian Zionists) and Messianic Jews. She is not a member of the JFJ, but in her words, "shares the Christian faith [with the Jews for Jesus] and has a deep love for the Jews."[20] She attends "all" of the Jewish festivals that the JFJ staff organizes. Apparently, many "gentile Christians" come to the Westwood branch to take part in Jewish rites and customs. The gentile Christians in attendance, she explains, are often "over zealous" at the prospect of participating in Jewish culture.

Susan does not focus her faith on Bible prophecy. Neither does she condemn those who do study it. To Susan, those of her congregation and those at JFJ who study biblical prophecy are "geeks" and comparable to "Trekkies" among the sci-fi fandom world, such categorical descriptions would include both Brickner and Tuvya. Dittmer and Dodds (2008, 452) also observe this geopolitical and "conceptual overlap between fandom and premillennial Christianity," they are fans of God. This imaginative fascination with other worlds and geopolitics of the future is wholly consistent with the work of Barkun (2003) who argues that American evangelicals have a fascination with science fiction; some evangelicals even contend that aliens are angels sent on an observational mission by descending from the sky in flying saucers (e.g., Hitchcock and Overbey 1997). It is contended that just as knowledges of the past have impact on the present by way of origin myths and memories, so do knowledges of the future (Weldes 2003; Rosenberg and Harding 2005). This is clear in the world of American evangelicals whose patient waiting punctuated with intermittent fervour can have determining effects on their daily lives (Boyer 1992). Outside mainstream premillennialism there have been several examples in the last thirty years of self-defined Christian groups gazing at the stars in anticipation, including Branch Davidians (Faubion 2001), Heaven's Gate (Harding 2005), and Raelians (Battaglia 2005) to name three, whose future orientation have led to future-present preparation and even violence (Sturm 2021b).

The End Times are important to Susan, though in a less detailed way than Brickner and other evangelical "Trekkies." She feels for example, that "we're in a war with the Devil" and that 1948 and 1967 were signs that the end times have begun, as she described it, the "olive leaf has grown."[21] She continued, now prompted by her admittedly "vague" memories of her knowledge of biblical prophecy, saying that "there is a set plan [for history] and there is only one way to [accept] God. Every prophecy in

20 Susan, interview by author, Westwood, California, September 2008.

21 Susan means the "fig tree." This is Jesus' last eschatological teaching understood by premillennists as legitimating their ability to look for "signs" of the end times but forbidding them to date set. Mat. 24:33: "Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh."

the Old Testament about Jesus came true, it's a billion to one chance!"[22] Evangelicals usually do not feel the need to justify Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, although Susan does here. Among the general discourse at the Jews for Jesus this aspect would be the crux of their religious hybridity. When asked if any states today were involved in the End Times, Susan was hesitant but suggested that Hal Lindsey's book, the *Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), was "pretty accurate" and that Russia will be involved and possibly China.

In 1989 Susan traveled to Israel with a group called the "Soldiers of Jesus." She described her tour guides, Ken and Bill Henderson, in masculine troupes as "tough guys who rip phonebooks in half."[23] Her group went to Har Megiddo, in the Jezreel Valley where Armageddon will take place. "It was like I could see the armies [at Armageddon]," she described to me.[24] When asked what it was like going to Israel during the first Intifada, she did not recall the reference to the event which is consistent with the cloister of such evangelical bus tours in Israel (Feldman 2007). Susan quickly tired of my questions concerning geopolitics and biblical prophecy, but had suggested that I watch the "Left Behind video" or a film produced by Matt and Laurie Crouch, the founders of Trinity Broadcasting Network called, 'The Omega Code'. The JFJ bookstore was sold out of the first film, but did have "The Omega Code 2: Megiddo". Susan had not seen the sequel but was impressed with the first movie; she attended the red carpet premier at the Mann Theatre in Westwood which was just two blocks away from the JFJ LA Branch storefront headquarters. The images are consistent with Brickner's and other premillennialist prophecy. At the bottom right of the DVD sheath, the Dome of the Rock has F-15s flying overhead and the Colosseum in Rome, said to be Babylon and the seat of the Antichrist by many evangelicals. If we can conclude anything about Susan in relation to apocalyptic geopolitics, it is that she believes in it saying "the world is a big ol' mess" but is rather indifferent about the details, leaving such pursuits to more "geeks" and "tough guys", and therefore does not let it motivate her actions as many of the elite level books published by American evangelicals would suggest (cf Gribben 2009).

4. Cyril: Apocalypse Now

If Tuvya is the exception, then Cyril is the rule. Cyril is a missionary for JFJ.[25] When asked about prophecy, he replied that "everyone has their own ideas," but continued that "most of the staff at Jews for Jesus would agree that God is not done with Israel."[26] When Cyril first accepted Christ in 1994 he was enthralled with End Times prophecy but that now he was

22 Susan, interview.
23 Susan, interview.
24 Susan, interview.
25 Cyril prefers a Messianic Jewish church called "Adat Y'shua Ha Adon" (Hebrew for "Congregation Where Jesus is the Lord") in Woodland Hills to the evangelical churches of Tuvya and Susan.
26 Cyril, interview by author, Westwood, California, September 2008.

less interested. That said, he believes that "times are getting interesting in Israel" and that "God wants me [Cyril] back there."[27]

In relation to the geopolitics of the apocalypse, Cyril interprets "Zechariah 14[:2], 'all the nations coming against Jerusalem'" literally, and as with Brickner, confuses states with nations. He explains that there is clamouring among "nations" today over Jerusalem, and that "the Jews have a biblical right to the land and a lot more that they don't have yet."[28] In an attempt to socially validate this belief, he adds that "most of the staff at the Jews for Jesus would agree with that."[29] Cyril describes the metes and bounds of biblical Israel as reaching into Iraq and Saudi Arabia including all of the Levant, concluding that "it's a big land." Cyril's views are in line with the Israeli 'Neo-Zionists'. Their scripts are shared between Christian Zionists as well. Newman (2001, 242) writes of the Neo-Zionist movement, who "makes public declarations against the 'surrender' of territory to foreign rule, arguing that this is against the 'Divine plan' and therefore negates God's law."[30] The Kach (or 'take') movement similarly argues, with much internal contention, that Israel's borders need to be stretched out to biblical Canaan; it is the land's destiny (Nyroos 2001). When asked about Bush's Road Map peace process, Cyril refuted its existence by saying, "there is no peace agreement. 'Land for Peace' is terrible. God even says in the Bible, 'punish those who cut up His land.'"[31] This is of course at odds with Tuvya's more flexible interpretation of Eretz Israel. But this is consistent with Brickner's immutable and infallible geopolitics. On this topic Cyril concludes, "the day will come when Israel will possess that land. There will never be peace in the Middle East until the Lord comes back."[32]

Cyril's view of Armageddon's second Holocaust (Zech. 13:4) was closely aligned with Brickner's book (1999). Cyril warns that by "not accepting [Jesus Christ], you are committing yourself to the Devil's work."[33] He then addressed the Author, saying: "you have to have a master, either the Lord or the Devil. A lot of people are serving Satan at a deep level, they just don't know it."[34] Cyril, like Brickner, is unwavering in his ideas of punishment for non-believers. They were given the choice to accept Jesus Christ and by not choosing they will be embroiled in a Holocaust-like mass murder of Jewish non-believers. All Middle East politics and all tragedies to Cyril are simply examples of God's wrath. He normalizes his geopolitics not in the way that Friedrich Ratzel had who saw the state in social Darwinist terms as an organic entity that needs to grow "naturally," rather, Israel grows "supernaturally." When asked what role the Unites States would have in these events, he paused, and lamented:

27 Cyril, interview.
28 Cyril, interview.
29 Cyril, interview.
30 Cyril, interview.
31 Cyril, interview.
32 Cyril, interview.
33 Cyril, interview.
34 Cyril, interview.

> Deep down, I think [the USA] will abandon Israel. If Obama is elected, I think this will happen. I don't trust that guy and he has connections to Muslims. There's something wicked about him. He's a people pleaser. I think he has Islamic ties. If he gets elected, maybe I will move to Israel [to await the End Times].[35]

At this point Cyril ended the interview, perhaps conscious of the fact that he had revealed too much or perhaps overwhelmed by the possibility that Obama would take the highest office in America. Cyril was hinting that Obama is the Antichrist and that he thinks that the election of President Barack Obama has End Time significance to the point that Cyril would feel the calling to move back to Israel to fulfill his Judeo-Christian role in the apocalypse.

End Time

As this analysis has shown, there are varying ideas about and commitments to prophetic scenarios that span from JFJ's highest rungs; between Tuvya and Brickner to the lesser heard voices like the Los Angeles JFJ office of Susan and Cyril. There is a clear premillennial dispensationalist weave that runs through all of the eschatological embroidery. The details do have significance, but they are the most powerfully heard emanating from those with the loudest, most authoritative, and most distributed voice. Brickner's book has this authority. Both Cyril and Tuvya had read it and were admittedly influenced by it, whether agreeing with it as in Cyril's case or having reservations about its certainties in Tuvya's case. At the scale of the JFJ, these discordant discourses are influential to those with the power to coalesce them into acceptable representations. Sharp's (2000) observation that politicians do not just make the headlines and gossip, they also read them and are influenced by them, applies here within and beyond the JFJ.

Beyond the methodological argument and justification for the investigation of everyday perspectives within apocalypse and geopolitics studies, this research also found a growing emergence of new Judeo-evangelical identities and the cooptation of "Jewishness" among American evangelical groupings. While I wouldn't go so far to claim that JFJ are the next development in the linear continuum of Judaism (Cohn-Sherbok 2000), I would add that Messianic Jews more generally have become part of a discourse of authoritative cooptation within the evangelical and neo-charismatic movements. Here, and without rejecting Judaism as in suc-

35 Cyril, interview.

cessionist theologies, some American evangelical discourses have transmuted the 'Chosen' or elect mantel within Judaism and replaced it with the volunteerism of Christianity. Here Darrell for example and to a lesser extent Susan, neither of whom were ethnically Jewish, could claim identity as "Jewish." Such a hybrid religious identity is deserving of further investigation both within the confines of the JFJ but also more broadly as a phenomenon within Christian Zionism (Spector 2009; Hummel 2019; Durban 2020; O'Donnell 2021). What was at one time a strictly evangelical preoccupation with Israel as it related to the penultimate return of Christ and apocalypse, has begun to adopt and coopt Jewish identity into the practices and discourses of apocalypse. But, as is concluded above, such a conclusion will always be complicated by the messiness of perspectives within any social movement or institution. And it is precisely this messiness, and not the simplistic essentialisms, that scholarship should strive to interpolate. Judeo-evangelical apocalyptic identities are not stable or universal categories.

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