

“Birthed by Divine Providence”:

Entanglements of Christian Zionism, American Exceptionalism, and Jewish Ritual in an
American Pentecostal Congregation

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Introduction

While on the way to my field site for the first time, I was feeling somewhat nervous about what I might encounter. Although I had been to Omega Center International in the past, it had always been casual visitation, nothing research-oriented. After only a few minutes of driving from my apartment, I arrived at the driveway leading into the parking lot. As I turned into the lot, I glanced at the LED sign standing at the entrance to the complex. It displayed several rolling images, but one in particular caught my attention. The background of the slide displayed a picturesque view of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, with the Dome of the Rock shining in the sun. After briefly panning across the view, letters appeared over the image: “Celebrating Israel’s 70th Anniversary.”

Omega Center International, more commonly known as OCI by locals, is a large, evangelical congregation established in Cleveland, TN, by televangelist Perry Stone. Founded in 2009, OCI hosts hundreds of members during its weekly services and prayer meetings, as well as thousands of visitors from around the country during special events and conferences. OCI is a self-described Pentecostal community, putting considerable emphasis on spiritual experience and prophetic revelation. Additionally, the ministry is well known for its Christian Zionist and fundamentalist beliefs, based on Stone’s teachings, which have garnered a somewhat suspicious reputation from local critics.

As Pentecostal evangelicals, members of OCI are certainly not alone in their affection for Israel. Recent data suggests that over 80% of white American evangelicals believe the land of Palestine was given by God to the Jewish people, showing a significant connection between political support for Israel and religious belief (Lipka 2013). Christian Zionism has been a historically distinctive aspect of American evangelicalism since the foundation of the modern

state of Israel in 1948, acting as a consistent and profound influence on US support for the nation, both through foreign policy and direct funding (Miller 2014, 8; Sturm 2017, 8). Yet, despite playing such an important role in geopolitics, there remains a major deficiency in ethnographic research concerning a holistic Christian Zionist worldview. As such, this paper aims to shed light on the core motivations of evangelical Christian Zionists from an anthropological perspective.

Research Methods

The bulk of my field research consisted of participant observation on-site at Omega Center International. I attended weekly services at OCI on Tuesday nights over a period of four months, as well as some of their Thursday night prayer meetings and other functions. This mostly involved sitting amongst congregants in the main sanctuary during services, listening to and taking notes on Perry Stone's sermons, and participating in worship and prayer. Additionally, a considerable amount of my data was also collected before and after services through conversation and observation in the lobby. My main method of recording observations was jottings in a notebook, which were later converted into full fieldnotes and coded using qualitative data analysis software.

Aside from participant observation, I conducted both formal, structured interviews and informal interviews in order to better understand the perspectives of OCI congregants in their own words. All of my formal interviews were pre-planned and conducted in an environment chosen by the research participants in order to avoid potential discomfort. These interviews were also transcribed so that they could be quoted in the final results of the research period.

Additionally, Perry Stone Ministries provides several publications of Perry Stone's teachings and prophecies, both on print and digitally. I have used several of these publications to complement my primary observations, specifically *Voice of Evangelism* magazine, a periodical released by PSM and self-described as "the written voice of Perry Stone."

Finally, the identities of all participants in my research will remain entirely anonymous to ensure full confidentiality. Thus, I will use pseudonyms when directly referring to specific participants throughout the paper. Despite the low-risk nature of my research, I feel it is necessary to protect all participants from any potential social repercussions in accordance with the American Anthropological Association's Code of Ethics.

Review of Literature

In his essay, "Anti-Semitism and its Transformations," Žižek (2014) claims that American Christian fundamentalism, unsurpassed in its adoration of modern Israel, is "by nature anti-Semitic" (3), citing John Hagee's statements concerning the Holocaust and God's plan for the Jews, as well as the off-handed anti-Semitism of Fox News' Glenn Beck. Žižek views Christian Zionism as less of a religious, theological phenomenon and more of an "ideologico-political" construct, a paradox where historically and currently anti-Semitic Christian fundamentalists can be radical supporters of Zionism and the Jewish state (3). Sturm (2017), however, argues that despite the historical ties between Christian Zionism and anti-Semitic eschatology, American evangelicals no longer view the Jewish state as simply a means to their apocalyptic end (8). Christian Zionism in the U.S., Sturm articulates, has evolved into a "religious nationalism" which unites evangelicals and Israeli Jews as allies "in the cosmological fight between good and evil," creating a distinctive Judeo-Evangelical group identity (8). This idea of a "religious nation" shared by Christian Zionists and Israelis takes precedence even over

Americans' own national identity, Sturm argues, thus motivating them to push for pro-Israel policies within their own government (18-9).

In her ethnographic study of a large evangelical congregation in Colorado, Phillips (2014) also differs from Žižek by emphasizing the importance of the end times within the Christian Zionist worldview. She holds that the core of the congregation's Zionist theology (and the political implications thereof) is fundamentally eschatological, allowing them to justify violence against Israel's enemies while also praying for peace in the Holy Land (30). For Phillips, the political ideology and action of Christian Zionists are ultimately subject to their eschatological beliefs, as opposed to the other way around. However, in his book *Evangelicals and Israel: The Story of American Christian Zionism*, Stephen Spector (2009) stresses that American Christian Zionists hold widely differing eschatological views, with many even disregarding the importance of the end times in their support for Israel (176-8). Citing notable Christian Zionist leaders such as John Hagee and Gary Bauer, Spector notes that many American evangelicals support Israel for purely political or "covenantal" reasons, or as well as for the simple belief in the obligation to bless Israel as God's chosen nation.

According to Stockton (1987), Christian Zionism and American nationalism are intrinsically linked in the public mind, and Americans who view Israel as divinely special will also be more likely to view the U.S. in a similar light. He states that Christian Zionism "is an important aspect of American thinking, closely integrated into a unique view which Americans have of their origins and of their ultimate national destiny" (234). In a study conducted among almost 750 Michigan residents, Stockton found that respondents who expressed Christian Zionist beliefs were significantly more likely to also view America as a nation with "unique destiny" (250). Similarly, in his ethnography of Christians United for Israel (CUFI), Sean Durbin (2019)

attributes American evangelicals' support for Israel to their conception of it as the ideal nation-state, an example which the U.S. has failed to live up to. He states:

In a way, this discourse that many American Christian Zionists and their supporters use to define and understand Israel is a discourse of national idealization. And through this idealization, this version of Israel both reflects and contributes to the production and sanctification of a variety of social, economic, and military values that are praised by Christian Zionists and their supporters—values which many in this broad category argue that the US is failing to uphold. As a consequence, American support for and protection of Israel is rhetorically equated with the protection and flourishing of America. (174)

According to Durbin, Israel stands as a model of militarism and economic success for American Christian Zionists, giving them a sense of shared identity with Israeli Jews as well as a political standard to strive towards. Concerning militarism, he states:

Through the admiration and support of Israeli military campaigns, Christian Zionists are able to attach themselves, through a form of emulation, to something reminiscent of Émile Durkheim's 'moral community.' While Christian Zionists may not be able to engage in physical battle alongside the IDF, support for them and their military campaigns has the effect of producing a greater sense of unity between Christians and Jews. (187)

Durbin (2019) also argues that for Christian Zionists, the State of Israel and the Jewish people have become a fetish in the anthropological sense. In the American evangelical understanding, he states, Israel and the Jews are "fetishized signifiers of stability" (214) due to their role in eschatology and Christian identity. Durbin connects this idea of the fetish to the popular Christian Zionist concept of blessing Israel; through blessing Israel, one receives a reciprocal blessing, perhaps in monetary form, an exchange he compares to Frazer's "sympathetic magic" attached to the fetish (240). This practice of blessing Israel, whether

prayerfully, financially, or otherwise, also acts as a unifying factor, bringing together a moral community of pro-Israel Christians through obedience to God's covenants (233).

In his article "The Pentecostalization of Christian Zionism," Joseph Williams (2015) explores this relationship by analyzing the considerable impact which the American Pentecostal movement has had on global Christian Zionism. "The international appeal of adherents' experience-oriented, Jewish-themed practices and identities," he states, "underscores U.S. pentecostals' and charismatics' contributions to the growth of Christian Zionism worldwide" (161). He discusses how many American (and international) Pentecostals have adopted markedly Jewish rituals and symbolism and integrated them into their religious practice, evoking a return to the "Hebraic roots of Christianity" (183) and expressing a supportive identification with Israel. Blowing shofars, wearing prayer shawls, waving Israeli flags, and observing Jewish feasts are all popular traditions in the Pentecostal movement, Williams points out, and go hand in hand with the more political applications of Christian Zionism. He states that this synthesis of Jewish ritual into Pentecostal practice is a discourse of "identity-formation" (189), creating a shared distinctiveness between Christian Zionists and Israelis. Williams also mentions the intimate ties between Christian Zionist leaders and the charismatic movement, including Pat Robertson and John Hagee (189).

In addition, Williams (2015) holds that, despite the importance of eschatology within charismatic support for Israel, the appropriation of Jewish ritual and symbolism in the American Pentecostal movement has had an especially significant role in cultivating a unified Christian Zionist movement across denominational and theological divides. He states:

Caught up in shared ritual expressions of support for Israel, believers could set aside, at least temporarily, debates over proselytization efforts among Jews, the relevance of

specific premillennial frameworks for understanding Israel's import, or the role of the United States during the end-times. (190)

Sandmel (2010) echoes these observations, discussing the recent movement among American evangelicals to "reclaim" Jewish ritual and apply it to Christian practice. He attributes this surge to several causes, including Christian Zionism. He states that "Christian Zionists express their belief by celebrating, visiting, and praying for Israel, by mobilizing political support for Israel, and in some instances by promoting the adaptation of Jewish forms of worship" (415).

While most contemporary theory highlights the function of end-times prophecy in American Christian Zionist beliefs, my research demonstrates how congregants of OCI link their eschatological support for Israel with "Hebraic roots" theology and Jewish ritual, blending the temporalities of Biblical past and apocalyptic future. Members of OCI also believe that the United States holds a divine distinctiveness in the eyes of God, giving rise to a fundamentalist American exceptionalism parallel to Israel's spiritual uniqueness. I have found that the appropriation of Jewish ritual at OCI serves as a holistic expression of this prophetic connection between America and Israel, creating the perception of a shared spiritual identity while also displaying political affirmation of Israeli manifest destiny.

Analysis and Discussion

At first glance, OCI's Christian Zionist beliefs are most clearly manifested in the material sense. Miniature Israeli flags can be found around both the lobby and the main sanctuary, even lining the walls of the sound booth. Congregants regularly show their support for the state of Israel with apparel and other items, wearing ball caps embroidered with Israeli flags or the acronym for "Israeli Defense Force" in Hebrew. Additionally, OCI has hosted several events with Christians United for Israel, with John Hagee as the keynote speaker for their most recent

“Night to Honor Israel.” Perry Stone also sells hundreds of DVDs and books containing his various prophecies and teachings, many of which concern the modern state of Israel and Middle Eastern geopolitics. In addition to these various resources, Stone makes relatively frequent trips to Jerusalem to film sections of MannaFest, his well-known television program which premieres on the Trinity Broadcasting Network. Stone often invites groups of his followers to join him on these trips, giving them a tour of the Holy Land to contextualize his teachings.

Along with my own observations, several members of the congregation also expressed pro-Israel sentiments during interviews. Joshua, one of my research participants, stated that Israel is “spoken of very highly” among the members of OCI, who consider Israel as a Jewish nation to be “God’s chosen people,” a common trope amongst evangelical Christian Zionists. Micah, an employee of Perry Stone Ministries and a long-time follower of Stone, expanded upon these views: “I do think that the Jewish people have come back into the land because God has so desired it, just like they were in the land from the beginning and God so desired it. They will not, according to the prophetic literature, be removed from the land.” He went on to postulate that Christian Zionism was a fundamental aspect of OCI’s theological identity, with many congregants simply taking for granted Israel’s significance.

Just as evident as OCI’s belief in Christian Zionist, however, are its expressions of American nationalism. Most members of OCI fall into the bracket of neoconservative Republicans; American flags and patriotic imagery are ubiquitous, and I didn’t attend a single service without noticing some sort of Donald Trump paraphernalia. In addition to these more material indications, many of Perry Stone’s sermons focus on or express a need to combat progressivism in American politics, holding the Democratic party and the “liberal media” responsible for various national tribulations. Anti-immigrant rhetoric is also frequently

expressed in Stone's messages, although perhaps more subtly. Unsurprisingly, this nationalism seems to be directly connected to OCI's support for Israel, and one of the congregation's highest praises of President Trump is his pro-Israel foreign policy. In a recent *Voice of Evangelism* article concerning anticipation of the Messiah in Israel, Stone (2018) compares Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel to the Persian monarch Cyrus, who liberated the Jews from Babylonian captivity and assisted in the reconstruction of the Temple according to the Hebrew scriptures (18).

The congregation's nationalistic sentiments are also deeply informed by their religious fundamentalist ideals, motivated by a desire for America to return to God's commands. One particularly salient example of this was their response to the introduction of new liquor licensing laws which were being voted upon in the local county during my research period. Perry Stone and most members of OCI are fervently anti-alcohol and regularly expressed their outrage at the prospect of liquor stores in Cleveland. One Tuesday night, after offering a few announcements for upcoming events, Stone began to passionately denounce the liquor ballot, warning that the presence of liquor stores in Cleveland would endanger the community through potential acts of violence and irresponsibility. Continuing, he started to take a slightly more nationalistic tone by mentioning that one of the current license candidates was a convenience store owner "from another country." With gusto, he appealed to the attendees to get out and "vote down that demon-possessed law," implying an aspect of spiritual warfare in the upcoming election. Stone then widened the scope of his political admonitions, asking the congregation "What kind of America do you want?" He began preaching about how liberals are destroying America with hate and must be countered, even comparing himself to Martin Luther King Jr. for "telling it how it is in church."

After further analysis, however, I found that OCI's nationalistic tendencies go beyond the stereotypical caricatures of American evangelical conservatives. For example, one Tuesday night service which I attended happened to fall on the same day as the 2018 midterm elections. After asking for prayer over an upcoming trip to Israel, Perry Stone started off the night's sermon by tracing what he saw as the evolution of educational institutions in the United States since its founding. He claimed that the "secular media" of Hollywood and cable news networks had appropriated the task of national education from parents, the Church, and schools, holding them culpable for the normalization of homosexuality and abortion. Indoctrination, not information, was the new media standard, he argued, decrying the secularization of the America.

Stone then began giving examples of this "indoctrination" in the liberal media, citing its criticism of Donald Trump. He praised Trump for being the first American president to call Jerusalem the capital of Israel and for moving the US Embassy there, a remark which was met with loud cheers and applause from the congregation. Stone went on to criticize the Democrats as "pro-Globalists" working towards a one world government and religion. This is why, he explained, when Trump described himself as a nationalist, progressives were so concerned. Backtracking, Stone admitted that perhaps Trump could have used a better word than "nationalist," but stated that what Trump meant was putting "America First." He said that Trump had overturned the progressive agenda of establishing a "New World Order" through the United Nations, securing an independent future for America. According to Stone, the only god which liberals had was money.

Eventually, Stone reached the central theme of the night's sermon, a prophecy which he had based on the writings of the antebellum columnist John L. O'Sullivan. The prophecy, focused entirely on the future of the United States, predicted the occurrence of several distinct

events. Firstly, the prophecy was marked by earthquakes and rising oceans, families being divided, and farmers leaving their lands to fallow. Alongside this, it predicted that small civil wars would start in cities and towns, with mobs roaming the streets looking for food and money, which Stone compared to the antifascist riots in Berkeley and other cities. After this, according to the prophecy, “the Indians” (people south of the border, Stone explained) would rise up and challenge the United States. Stone paralleled this with the migrant caravan at the southern border, but attempted to qualify his statement as “not attacking any ethnic group.” Finally, he said, the federal government would violate the Constitution and shortly collapse after being met with resistance from the people. The people would then restore the Constitution and demand good leaders, forming a “Constitution Party” to return the nation back to its foundations. According to Stone, we were already living through fulfillments of this prophecy, referring again to his comparisons with post-2016 political divisions and the migrant crisis.

Stone then claimed that America was going through an “Age of Apostacy,” and that as a consequence, God had released a “Spirit of Lawlessness” upon the nation (referencing 2 Thessalonians 2:3). He passionately urged the congregation to take action, declaring that their votes in the election were a tool to restrain this spirit. “There’s still hope,” he said, “as long as we’re here, the body of believers.” Stone continued on this note of optimism, alleging that Donald Trump’s family carried a heritage of revival and that he had been sworn into office with his grandmother’s Bible. In closing, Stone asked the congregation to gather together in small groups to pray for the midterm election results, as well as for the county liquor ballot. As people began to cluster together and pray, the worship band started playing the song “Yes, Lord, Amen” as the tech crew streamed the live election results on the LED screen behind the stage.

Interestingly, the same John L. O'Sullivan from whom Stone gleaned his prophecy is credited with coining the term "manifest destiny" in 1845, drawing a parallel between the roles of both America and Israel in the OCI worldview. Like their Christian Zionist beliefs, their nationalism is predicated on prophecy, motivated by the idea that the United States holds a special, eschatological role in God's geopolitical master plan. This considered, perhaps the members of OCI are not quite "nationalists" in the traditional sense, believing more in a unique blend of Christian fundamentalist politics and divine American exceptionalism. Micah confirmed these observations in our interview as well, stating that "[OCI] and Perry Stone operate under an assumption about the nature of the United States and the nature of Israel, that there is some kind of a 'simpatico' thing going on... There is certainly a belief in a form of American exceptionalism." He also made it clear that America's eschatological role is certainly interrelated with its support for the Jewish people, further indicating a prophetic relationship between the two nations. This spiritual connection in teachings of OCI seem to correlate with Stockton's (1985) observations about the ideological link between Christian Zionism and American exceptionalism, again suggesting that OCI's beliefs about both Israel and the United States are codependent. As many of the theorists mentioned in the previous section assert, end times prophecy plays an important role in the Christian Zionist perspective, and I would certainly say that this also applies to that of OCI. Yet, in the same way that eschatology guides OCI's support for Israel, it also serves as the basis of America's supposed distinctiveness.

One of Perry Stone's more specific teachings is the concept of "prophetic cycles," or identifiable patterns that repeat themselves prophetically throughout history. In his article "The Second Shaking of the Earth," Perry Stone (2016) states that "the history of the world runs through cycles. There are war cycles, peace cycles, and economic cycles... Oddly, historical

patterns often reemerge on anniversaries of previous events” (9). Stone often combines this concept with the practice of numerology, using Biblically significant numbers to unearth hidden truths from historical patterns important dates in the Jewish calendar. This teaching is essential to understanding OCI’s conception of the United States and Israel within their eschatology.

For example, at OCI’s “Main Event” conference (one of the first functions which I attended during my research period), Perry Stone gave a sermon about finding the numerological meaning of the Jewish New Year. To demonstrate the function of numbers in prophecy, he gave several examples of important numbers and their connections to meaningful dates and year cycles. He stated that one significant cycled number was 1948: from Adam to Abraham is 1948 years, as is from Abraham to Jesus and Jesus to the “Restoration of Israel.” Another example he gave was the Six Day War: the IDF and combined Arab forces fought for six days, and Israel came out victorious on the seventh, just like the Battle of Jericho in the Book of Joshua. He also discussed the number 50, connecting 1917 (the year of the Balfour Declaration and the capture of Jerusalem from the Ottomans by Edmund Allenby) with 1967 (the year of the Six Day War and the subsequent recapture of East Jerusalem from Jordan by the Israeli military), as well as the First Zionist Congress in 1898 with the declaration of Israel’s statehood in 1948.

Perry Stone (2016) also uses prophetic cycles to delineate the divine connection between the United States and Israel. “On May 14th, 1607,” he writes, “the first pilgrims arrived on land in America at what would be called Jamestown, Virginia. On May 14th, 1948, the nation of Israel was reborn—on the same calendar date as when America was birthed” (10). This clearly demonstrates the parallel destinies of both nations within the OCI worldview. Not only do the congregants of OCI believe that America and Israel share a similar, God-ordained future, but they also hold that the countries’ origins are in some way inextricably tethered together through

repeating prophetic cycles. Through this perspective, the prophecies of past, present, and future, both fulfilled and unfulfilled, intermingle into a self-referential discourse of shared national exceptionalism fueled by elusive spiritual forces.

Perhaps the best material expression of OCI's Zionist and nationalist beliefs can be found in their appropriation of Jewish ritual and symbolism. Perry Stone often emphasizes the importance of integrating Jewish religious ritual into Christian practice, highlighting the spiritual value of adhering to the Jewish calendar, utilizing Jewish religious artifacts, and reintegrating the "Hebraic roots" of Christianity back into Pentecostal tradition. Many members of the congregation regularly wear prayer shawls (known as *tallit*) during services, while still others carry *shofars* or wear jewelry featuring menorahs or the Star of David. Some even go as far as considering themselves Messianic Jews, abstaining from pork and observing Jewish festivals and holy days. While browsing some of the vendors' booths at the Main Event conferences, I asked one of the women selling *tallit* what their function was, to which she answered that they were used to enhance one's private prayer life. Micah also expressed similar experiences with his own *tallit*, claiming that his mind felt clearer and more focused when he wore it during prayer. Joshua, however, differed somewhat from these accounts of spiritual enhancement, stating that artifacts like *shofars* are often touted as "badges of honor" by congregants. Thus, it seems that Jewish ritual at OCI is practiced in a dual fashion, acting as a spiritual catalyst while also exhibiting political advocacy for the state of Israel.

It is here where I find William's (2015) observations of Jewish ritual among American Pentecostals be particularly accurate. While members of OCI certainly utilize objects such as *tallit* and *shofars* to augment their spiritual lives, these objects also serve to create a symbolic connection between the congregants and the nation Israel. By participating in Jewish ritual and

using Jewish symbols and artifacts, congregants of OCI can display their perceived shared distinctiveness with Jews both spiritually and politically, reflecting William's (2015) discourse of "identity-formation" (189). In addition to Israeli flags and Zionist eschatology, members of OCI use Jewish ritual to demonstrate their support for Israel. In a sense, the appropriation of Jewish ritual and symbolism resembles the ultimate manifestation of OCI's belief system, simultaneously declaring political advocacy for the modern state of Israel and affirming America's prophetic sisterhood with the more abstract Israel of past, present, and future.

Conclusions

While eschatology certainly plays a significant role in OCI's support for Israel, their emphasis on returning to the "Hebraic roots" of Christianity is equally important, particularly as an active expression. For the congregants of OCI, Zionism is just as much about looking back as it is about looking forward. Not only does the appropriation of Jewish ritual and symbolism at OCI clearly demonstrate a discourse of "identity-formation" (Williams 2015, 189), but it also intermingles the temporalities of past, present, and future, fetishizing Israel as a "signifier of stability" (Durbin 2019, 214), bridging the gap between the Old Testament and end-times prophecy. As Perry Stone once stated so aptly in one of his sermons, the foundation of Israel in 1948 indicated that "the Bible days are here again."

Similar to what Durbin (2019) observes with CUFI, Christian Zionism and American exceptionalism are fundamentally interdependent for OCI. Within their eschatological vision, the destinies of the United States and Israel are deeply intertwined, both sharing a spiritual distinctiveness mandated by God. As Stone (2015) writes in *Voice of Evangelism* magazine, "From the beginning, America was birthed by Divine providence and assigned a God given mission. We have been a light of freedom to the nations, a leader of proclaiming the Gospel to

the world, a nation supporting Israel and the Jews, and a people to help the poor, needy, and those during disasters” (10). For the congregation of OCI, Israel’s uniqueness as God’s chosen nation is directly paralleled with a prophetic American exceptionalism, a connection which is manifested through divinely repeating historical cycles and the practice of Jewish ritual.

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