

Sean Durbin, ““For Such a Time as This”: Reading (and Becoming) Esther with Christians United for Israel,” *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 2, no. 1 (2012): 65–90.



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[www.relegere.org](http://www.relegere.org)  
ISSN 1179-7231

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## “For Such a Time as This”

### Reading (and Becoming) Esther with Christians United for Israel

A great deal of work on contemporary Christian Zionism focuses on the apocalyptic eschatology of premillennial dispensationalism, critiquing it from an idealistic perspective that posits a direct line of causality from “belief” to action. Such critiques frequently assert that since Christian Zionists are biblical literalists, they read apocalyptic texts such as Revelation and Ezekiel with the goal of making the events they find predicted in these books come about in the world. This article takes a different approach. Although many Christian Zionists can be considered “literalists,” they read themselves into the text typologically. Special attention is paid to the book of Esther which is shown not to function primarily in a prophetic or apocalyptic role, but as a tool to help Christian Zionists understand political action, construct identity, and strengthen faith.

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*Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?*

ESTH 4:13–14

*And then look at verse fifteen, the first word in my scripture in verse fifteen is "Then." There's the question mark and then there's the "then." And there's that little space in between the question mark and the then. And I would submit to you this morning that we are seated at this moment in time in that little space between God's question mark to us, and our answer to him.* ROBERT STEARNS

THE SUBJECT of Christian Zionism has attracted a number of critical perspectives. As it has emerged as a more coherent and cohesive politically oriented movement, particularly since the 1970s in tandem with the American Christian Right, there has been a steady stream of books published on the subject. Although some of the most recent work on Christian Zionism<sup>1</sup> has sought to understand its much longer history as well its varying nuances and historical manifestations, among the work on post-1970 and contemporary Christian Zionism, a great deal of it remains highly critical.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Shalom Goldman, *Zeal for Zion: Christians, Jews, and the Idea of the Promised Land* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Donald M. Lewis, *The Origins of Christian Zionism: Lord Shaftesbury and Evangelical Support for a Jewish Homeland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Some of the more prominent critiques can be found in Grace Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics: Militant Evangelicals on the Road to Nuclear War* (Westport: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1986); Grace Halsell, *Forcing God's Hand: Why Millions Pray for a Quick Rapture—and Destruction of Planet Earth* (Maryland: Amana Publications, 1999); Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road Map to Armageddon?* (Leicester: IVP, 2004); Donald E. Wagner, *Anxious for Armageddon: A Call to Partnership for Middle Eastern and Western Christians* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1995); Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Victoria Clark, *Allies for Armageddon: The Rise of Christian Zionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). There remain some exceptions, for example: Stephen Spector, *Evangelicals and Israel: The Story of American Christian Zionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Faydra L. Shapiro, "To the Apple of God's Eye: Christian Zionist Travel to Israel," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23, no. 3 (2008): 307–20; Faydra L. Shapiro, "Taming Tehran: Evangelical Christians and the Iranian Threat to Israel," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 39, no. 3 (2010): 363–77.

As one might surmise from the titles of these works, a large part of these authors' various critiques is framed around the theology of premillennial dispensationalism and its apocalyptic emphases. While the nuances of this theology have been well documented,<sup>3</sup> briefly, one of its popular variants stipulates that within a generation of the reestablishment of Israel as a Jewish-controlled territory, it will be the victim of a violent attack from Iran, Russia, and other neighboring countries (Ezek 38–39). This attack is followed by a pre-tribulational rapture of the church and a seven-year period of tribulation. During the first three-and-a-half years of the tribulation, a benevolent leader who will later reveal himself as the Antichrist will broker a false peace between Israel and its neighbors. In the final three-and-a-half years, known as the Great Tribulation, the Antichrist reveals his true identity, declares himself God, and initiates a program aimed at the destruction of Israel and the Jewish people. At the culmination of the Great Tribulation, Christ returns to earth with the raptured church, defeats the Antichrist, judges the nations for their treatment of Israel, and establishes his kingdom on earth, where he will rule and reign from Jerusalem for 1000 years of uninterrupted peace.

In large part, it is this theological schema that has been attached to Christian Zionism since it has become a distinguished political presence in American politics. Accordingly, previous work on Christian Zionism has tended to treat it as a monolithic whole, and critiqued it along two distinct lines. Most pervasive is the argument that Christian Zionists' political work is based on the desire to "force God's hand," or "hasten God's timetable."<sup>4</sup>

A second line of criticism, often expressed in conjunction with the first, might be vaguely characterized as historical criticism, although it too has its own ideological and theological bias. This criticism generally comes from other evangelicals or mainline Protestants who find fault with dispensational theology. This critique stresses that dispensationalism is a "fiction," "invented less than two hundred years ago,"<sup>5</sup> and is often accompanied by another, normative approach to how the Bible *should* be read.<sup>6</sup> Even when a normative

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the best overview of the historical development of dispensationalism and its establishment in America can be found in Timothy P. Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Sizer, *Christian Zionism*; Wagner, *Anxious for Armageddon*; Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics*; Halsell, *Forcing God's Hand*; Rossing, *Rapture Exposed*; Stephen Sizer, *Zion's Christian Soldiers? The Bible, Israel and the Church* (Nottingham: IVP, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Rossing, *Rapture Exposed*, xvii.

<sup>6</sup> Sizer, *Zion's Christian Soldiers?*; Rossing, *Rapture Exposed*.

reading is not attached to the critique, there remains the implicit assumption that since dispensationalism is so new, it is an obvious aberration, irrespective of the fact that there has never been one particular way to read the Bible.

While it is well for critics to point out that the doctrine of the rapture and other dispensational hermeneutics are “fictional,” simply telling Christian Zionists that they are wrong does not achieve much. It does not help us understand Christian Zionism as a distinct cultural phenomenon, nor its religious appeal among self-identified Christian Zionists. To bring the analytical perspective back, then, from either overt or covert theological and political arguments, one should be reminded of certain aspects of historical criticism. Just as biblical critics stress the importance of understanding the situational nature of the biblical books and New Testament Epistles in an attempt to understand authorial intention, so too must we consider the situational nature of current history—as it is interpreted by Christian Zionists—to better understand their politics, whether they are understood as “politics” or not. In *Reinventing Paul*, John Gager writes of the situational nature of the Pauline Epistles and the worldview that underpinned them: “Of course, Paul was not alone in his conviction that the end was near. . . . To ignore this all-consuming orientation, or to downplay it, is to misread Paul at every turn.”<sup>7</sup> Just as Paul’s letters and other biblical texts need to be understood in relation to the social, cultural and political contexts of the authors, it is also worthwhile to closely consider the way that Christian Zionists interpret scripture and the contemporary political context in which they live, against their own apocalyptic outlook, irrespective of whether or not it is a “fiction.”

Needless to say, historical criticism would find the Christian Zionist approach to the Bible wanting. However literary critics such as Roland Barthes offer a more fruitful method that can help us understand the use of the text in this way. For Barthes, textual or verbal meaning is necessarily contextual. The significance of a text is derived more from the social and historical context in which it is read or heard as opposed to the original intention of the author/speaker.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, George Lindbeck argues, “It is the text which absorbs the world, rather than the world which absorbs the text.” By “world” Lindbeck means any “presuppositional and extra-linguistic contextual factors about states of affairs in the world” which can be brought to bear on

<sup>7</sup> John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 61.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 148. See also Hugh B. Urban, “The Torment of Secrecy: Ethical and Epistemological Problems in the Study of Esoteric Traditions,” *History of Religions* 37, no. 3 (1998): 234.

the text.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, for my purposes it is more important to consider the “situational nature” of contemporary Christian Zionists. That is to say, we need to understand the cultural and political context in which they live, and specifically for this article, how this context is brought to bear on the text.

## Christians United for Israel

At the forefront of contemporary American Christian Zionism is the lobby group Christians United for Israel (CUFI), which was founded in 2006 by the Texan televangelist, John Hagee. Since its inception, CUFI has had to contend with ongoing criticism regarding the relationship between the dispensational theology of its leadership and their support for Israel. While it is no secret that Hagee is a dispensationalist who believes that Israel has a very particular role in the end times,<sup>10</sup> he also maintains that CUFI’s support for Israel has nothing to do with hastening the end times. At CUFI’s annual Washington Summit in 2008, Hagee stated this categorically: “We don’t believe that we can speed up the end of days one second. Why? Because we believe that God is sovereign. That he has set the time. We are powerless to change God’s timetable. That’s what makes him God.”<sup>11</sup>

Although critics might cry foul and argue that the denial of any relationship between hastening Armageddon and Christian support for Israel is merely a point of necessary political expediency, it is also ostensibly true. For Christian Zionists, it is not about “hastening the end times,” chiefly because, as many understand it (particularly CUFI’s Christian leadership), those times are upon us. Hagee, I suggest, is not being disingenuous when he claims that Christian Zionists do not believe they can speed up God’s timetable. Christians don’t get God to act for them; God gets Christians to act for him.

<sup>9</sup> Lindbeck, quoted in Katherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 26.

<sup>10</sup> Hagee has published extensively on issues dealing with dispensationalism and the coming apocalypse. See: John Hagee, *Beginning of the End: The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and the Coming Antichrist* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996); John Hagee, *The Battle for Jerusalem* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001); John Hagee, *Jerusalem Countdown* (Lake Mary: FrontLine, 2006); John Hagee, *From Daniel to Doomsday: The Countdown Has Begun* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999); John Hagee, *Attack on America: New York, Jerusalem, and the Role of Terrorism in the Last Days* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001); John Hagee, *Can America Survive? 10 Prophetic Signs that We Are in the Terminal Generation* (New York: Howard Books, 2010); John Hagee, *Final Dawn Over Jerusalem* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Shapiro, “Taming Tehran,” 370.

Accordingly, as Christian Zionists find themselves at a critical juncture on that timetable, either they can side with God and submit to the plans he has for them, or they can remain silent and side with evil. It is on this point that some of the critics I noted above have fallen short.

The argument that particular beliefs elicit particular behaviors is an approach that can be found in various works on religion and politics, whereby idealistic theories of causal action are used to trace an immediate connection between belief and action.<sup>12</sup> That is, certain beliefs or doctrines are scrutinized and then used as evidence to “prove” that individuals are motivated by these beliefs, that they dictate their political action. Barbara Rossing’s work on dispensationalism makes this connection clear, with the synopsis on the back of her book informing potential readers explicitly: “This [dispensational] interpretation guides the daily acts of millions of people worldwide.” A similar approach is implied in Stephen Sizer’s work, where he suggests that Christian Zionists undertake the work they do based on an “ultra-literal” hermeneutic, which in turn makes them “anxious for Armageddon.”<sup>13</sup>

Yet this logic is troubled by its distinct similarity to that employed by others on the Christian Right, including CUFI, who are the primary targets of this criticism. The only difference is that the object of the Right’s critique is Islam rather than Christian Zionism. Violent passages in the Qur’ān are picked out of context, and highlighted as proof that “radical Islam” is bent on “killing us” (namely, the West). This line of argument is also troubled by the Protestant backgrounds from which these critics—explicitly or implicitly—emerge. Such an intellectual background arguably places emphasis on the interiority of practice. However, as Talal Asad argues in his critique of Clifford Geertz’s conception of religion, when studying “religion,” one cannot limit oneself to models that privilege interiority.<sup>14</sup> One must also recognize, as Durkheim did, that “religious subjects are also bound in their moral communities that enjoy their allegiance and serve as a base of their identity.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of this issue, see: Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 8–12.

<sup>13</sup> Sizer, *Christian Zionism*; Sizer, *Zion’s Christian Soldiers?*; “The Bible and Christian Zionism: Roadmap to Armageddon?” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 27, no. 2 (2010): 122, 130.

<sup>14</sup> Talal Asad, “Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz,” *Man* 18, no. 2 (1983): 237–59; *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27–54.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 5.

By not recognizing how Christian Zionists understand themselves as part of a moral community that helps them construct a particular identity, a greater understanding of their political work is obscured. In relation to work on Christian Zionism, the privileging of privatized practice creates a straw man that is easily knocked over by more adequate analysis. On the one hand, as the wealth of critical material suggests, it is tempting to argue that Christian Zionists are single-mindedly acting in pursuit of the millennium due to their “ultra-literal” hermeneutic. On the other, supporters of Christian Zionism can argue to the contrary using their own anecdotal evidence. This is something that CUFJ’s Jewish<sup>16</sup> executive director David Brog has done effectively, and which Stephen Spector has echoed in his own account of American Christian Zionism.<sup>17</sup> In *Standing with Israel*, Brog argues that while most Christian Zionists do believe that the birth of Israel will lead to the Second Coming, “It is a mistake to confuse this belief with a motive.”<sup>18</sup> In order to prove it, Brog comes up with what Spector describes as a “remarkable argument”: If evangelicals really wanted to speed up Christ’s return they would open up abortion clinics, brothels, and casinos to advance the social and moral decay that are preconditions for the Second Coming. They would also, so this line of argument goes, attempt to weaken Israel’s defenses in order to facilitate the prophesied invasion of the Jewish state by its enemies.<sup>19</sup> Arguments like these might be sufficient for some, yet they either willfully or unknowingly misunderstand certain conceptions of faith, agency, and identity that are prevalent among Christian Zionists, their professed relationship to God, and what they understand as Christianity’s role in the last days.

This is what makes thinking about the use of Esther as a template for particular action so fascinating. Esther is neither prophetic nor apocalyptic. It does not obviously prescribe or describe future events that Christian Zionists might look to in relation to current events, in contrast to the way prophetic books are read. Yet what it does do, is create a particular kind of narrative and interpretation that can be applied to a variety of events and situations that are read as prophetically mandated. It provides what Gregory Dawes describes as a “paradigmatic explanation.” As a paradigmatic text, Es-

<sup>16</sup> The only reason I feel it necessary to identify his cultural/religious identity is to point out the fact that he is not a Christian Zionist himself.

<sup>17</sup> Spector, *Evangelicals and Israel*.

<sup>18</sup> David Brog, *Standing With Israel: Why Christians Support the Jewish State* (Lake Mary: Frontline Press, 2006), 80.

<sup>19</sup> Spector, *Evangelicals and Israel*, 179. See also Brog, *Standing With Israel*, 80–87.



ther defines a pattern that can be applied to new contexts, however it does not specify the context of its application.<sup>20</sup> As we will see, the book of Esther shows how God uses ordinary people to do his will on earth. No overtly supernatural events occur in its narrative—God’s will and punishment are meted out entirely by human actors. However, this reading and the inspiration that Christian Zionists are able to derive from it does not occur in a vacuum; religiously motivated political action that is related to prophecy in this case, is not based on a simplistic or “literalist” reading of scripture that induces individuals to act *ex nihilo*. There is nothing about Esther that demands this particular application. Rather, its contextual application is underwritten by the current social and political moment that Christian Zionists find themselves in.

For CUFI members, that political moment is a particular preoccupation with Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, which they argue comprise a unified existential threat to modern Israel, and by extension to America. Iran in particular is key. Although Israel, the US, and members of the EU have all expressed political concern over the trajectory of Iran’s nuclear program, for Christian Zionists this predicament takes on an entirely greater cosmic meaning. Esther is set in ancient Persia, which CUFI members are constantly reminded is modern Iran. Just as the Jews of Persia are threatened with annihilation in the book of Esther, today Iran’s President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is charged with similar aspirations. Thus Esther provides a paradigmatic explanation for the current political situation in the Middle East, where God’s chosen people are threatened with annihilation.<sup>21</sup>

I deal with these issues in greater detail below, where I attend to a close reading of a sermon on “Becoming an Esther Church” by Robert Stearns.<sup>22</sup> I have chosen to focus specifically on this sermon because it is demonstrative of the paradigmatic themes that are drawn between the biblical text and CUFI’s

<sup>20</sup> Gregory W. Dawes, “Paradigmatic Explanations: Stauss’s Dangerous Idea,” *Louvain Studies* 32, nos. 1–2 (2008): 67–81.

<sup>21</sup> This is based on my attendance at various CUFI organized events in the USA between July 2010 and June 2012. One can also read about this in Robert Stearns, *The Cry of Mordecai* (Shippensburg: Destiny Image, 2009); Larry Christenson, *The Mantle of Esther: Discovering the Power of Intercession* (Grand Rapids: Chosen, 2008); Hagee, *Jerusalem Countdown*. For other academic treatment of the subject, see Shapiro, “Taming Tehran.”

<sup>22</sup> Robert Stearns, “Becoming an Esther Church” (sermon delivered at Faith Bible Chapel, Arvada, Colorado, October 18, 2009). Robert Stearns is a Christian Zionist and former regional director of CUFI. He is also the founder and executive director of another Christian Zionist organization, Eagles’ Wings.

representation of the current political climate. Before we can get to Esther, however, it is important to discuss one way that the larger biblical panorama is used to cultivate a sense of moral identity and community among Christian Zionists, and how this sense of identity within that community ascribes a particular meaning to political action.

### Cultivating a Moral Identity in the Last Days

When dealing with Christian Zionism and its apocalyptic impetus, in particular the violent imagery conjured up by the interpretations of texts such as Ezekiel and Revelation, it is often overlooked that for Christian Zionists these texts are also messages of hope.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the whole of the biblical panorama, as read or understood by Christian Zionists, is one of hope. In Stephen O’Leary’s words, it is “a mythic theodicy” that provides optimism for a persecuted church awash in a sea of evil.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, it engenders a sense of temporal urgency in “true” believers who, although destined to undergo persecution in their defense of truth, will ultimately triumph alongside God.<sup>25</sup> Yet it is not merely the “end” of the story in Revelation that Christian Zionists look to. For evangelicals, the Bible is not a disparate set of texts; it is a cohesive whole that reveals the nature of God, humanity, the unfolding of time, and the purpose of history.<sup>26</sup> For Christian Zionists specifically, this is the story of God’s experiment with Israel and humanity from Genesis to Revelation and everything in between. The text therefore presents Christian Zionists with two kinds of history: prophecy fulfilled—what outsiders might consider “secular” history; and prophecy to be fulfilled—the history of the future.

As a result of this reading, Christian Zionists are able to cultivate a moral identity that is modelled after their understanding of God and his work in history. This understanding of God is helpfully explained by Robert Alter, who argues that the implicit theology of the Hebrew Bible identifies a God whose purposes are always working through history, but remain dependent

<sup>23</sup> Rossing, *Rapture Exposed*. While Rossing finds hope in Revelation, she finds it in contradiction to her interpretation of dispensational hermeneutics, which she argues are escapism.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen D. O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 63.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> James S. Bielo, *Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 64.

on the acts of individuals for their continuing realization. These individuals, in Alter's reading, are God's "chosen medium for His experiment with Israel and history."<sup>27</sup> Reading the text in this way, we can see that although sovereign, there are times when God needs human instruments to help him carry out his will. A practical prayer manual distributed to CUFI members taking part in a 2012 tour of Israel describes this explicitly: "we bless you for choosing to obey the divine trumpet call to The Church in this hour, to be 'co-laborers with God' for His purposes and plans to manifest in this strategic place and people."<sup>28</sup> As Alter points out, biblical characters are not passive agents in history. God's purposes are always dependent on the acts of individuals. As I will show below, Esther is a paradigmatic example of one individual God chose to use to save his chosen people from destruction.

Just as biblical characters are not passive agents in history, neither are contemporary Christian Zionists passive readers of the text. Rather, their particular understanding of the Bible is formed out of what Stanley Fish describes as "interpretive communities," reading the way they do because of their participation in defined communities of practice.<sup>29</sup> Closely related to this is what, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, I want to describe as an "evangelical habitus" that helps define the relationship that Christian Zionists have with Israel. As Bourdieu describes it, the habitus is comprised of systems of certain dispositions, which "generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a *conscious* aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them."<sup>30</sup> That is to say, the idea of conscious aiming at ends is not a requisite aspect of an individual or groups' ascent toward a particular trajectory. For Bourdieu, the habitus predisposes individuals to act in particular ways or pursue certain goals, because individuals are the products of particular histories that endure within the habitus.<sup>31</sup> This is a particularly important point to consider with regard to the common argument that Christian Zionists are attempting to "hasten Armageddon."

<sup>27</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 12–13.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Stearns, *Watchmen on the Wall: A Practical Guide to Prayer for Jerusalem and her People* (Clarence: Kairos Publishing, 2005), viii.

<sup>29</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); Bielo, *Words upon the Word*, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 53.

<sup>31</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 16–17.

Whether or not CUFI members self-identify as dispensationalists, the movement has been shaped by a particular history which has been substantially influenced by dispensational hermeneutics,<sup>32</sup> and also a teleological view of history that does not necessarily require explicit recourse to these hermeneutics. The effect of the sedimentation of dispensationalism into the culture and worldview of so many churches, has meant that by the early 2000s, as Melani McAlister has persuasively argued, some of the central tenets of this worldview were not merely “tapping into the mainstream of American life, but indeed might be the mainstream of American life.”<sup>33</sup>

The habitus of Christian Zionists, then, is one that prompts them to act in certain ways and pursue certain goals, specifically those related to their own and America’s relationship to Israel. The habitus has been mapped out in part by dispensational hermeneutics and a history of interpreting current events through that lens. In turn, this has helped define communities of practice and contributed to the way readers approach a particular text, creating what James Bielo refers to as “textual ideologies.”<sup>34</sup> The historically constructed importance of Israel and the fact that it continues to be in conflict with its neighbors, often yielding a critical response from the world, allows Christian Zionists to reaffirm continually their moral standing toward Israel in a demonically inspired world that opposes it.

If we are to better understand the political work of CUFI and other Christian Zionists—the specifics of which are admittedly outside the scope of this article—we must first understand how Christian Zionists become reconstituted cultural subjects through the pulpit and evangelical pedagogy. While the apocalypse remains on the horizon, this habitus is beyond a conscious yearning for the rapture and Armageddon. It is also about matters of faith and a testament to the ongoing truth of God’s promises to the world *in light of* the impending apocalypse. In order to better understand some of the efficacy of CUFI’s political appeals, it is vital to understand the pedagogical work going on in the churches that are its constituent parts.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*; Goldman, *Zeal for Zion*; Yaakov Ariel, *On Behalf of Israel: American Fundamentalist Attitudes towards Jews, Judaism, and Zionism, 1865–1945* (New York: Carlson, 1991).

<sup>33</sup> Melani McAlister, “Prophecy, Politics, and the Popular: The Left Behind Series and Christian Fundamentalism’s New World Order,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, no. 4 (2003): 793.

<sup>34</sup> Bielo, *Words upon the Word*, 51.

## Having a Heart for Israel

Evangelical pedagogy, through sermons, literature, and other educational resources is littered with references to the “heart” and the use of one’s “heart knowledge” over and above one’s “head knowledge.” Evangelicals consistently appeal to the distinction between heart and head knowledge, and the need to “have a heart for Israel” is a phrase frequently invoked at CUFI events and its affiliated churches. In Bielo’s words, “It is through the heart that the comprehension of spiritual matters is possible.”<sup>35</sup> For many evangelicals, the true self is found in the heart, and accordingly, the heart reveals the core of moral identity. “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.”<sup>36</sup> In contrast with heart knowledge, head knowledge is associated with the flesh, and flesh is part of the fundamentally immoral self and therefore at odds with God’s will.<sup>37</sup>

For Christian Zionists and evangelicals in general, the immorality of the flesh is extrapolated out to the immorality of the world. The perception that “the world” is against Israel, combined with its cosmic significance in God’s plans for the redemption of the world, allows Christian Zionists to easily discern their place in this divine narrative. If they want to be on the side of God, they need to be on the side of Israel, no matter what “the world” or popular opinion tells them.

The habitus predisposes Christian Zionists to place Israel at the center of their hearts because they believe it is the center of God’s. Moreover, their knowledge of Israel’s future in God’s plans for the world means that they are privy to exclusive knowledge that the world is blind to because it sees the conflict as political rather than cosmic. As one pastor told the audience at CUFI’s 2010 Washington Summit: “We are the watchmen that God has placed on the walls, to call out for God, to move on behalf of the nation of Israel, in protecting it, in guiding it, in giving it its wisdom. *We who are Christians—not Jewish—but Christians, move not by emotions, but move by the word of God.*”<sup>38</sup> The reference to Isa 62:6 (“watchmen . . . on the walls”) is frequently cited by Christian Zionists and provides a way for them to locate

<sup>35</sup> James S. Bielo, “Walking in the Spirit of Blood: Moral Identity among Born-Again Christians,” *Ethnology* 43, no. 3 (2004): 274.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>38</sup> George Morrison, “Why We Stand with Israel” (speech delivered at Christians United for Israel 5th Annual Washington Summit, Washington, DC, July 20–22, 2010).

themselves in the biblical text as those whom God has called to protect Israel at this critical hour. By becoming watchmen, and taking part in the active protection of Israel (also aided by American financial backing and the Israel Defense Forces), Christian Zionists can see that God is still active in history, and that he will keep his word to Israel. In the process, it strengthens their faith that God will not forsake the promises he made them, either. To have a heart for Israel and the Jewish people, to contribute to the protection of Israel either through prayer, financial donations, or political lobbying, is to strengthen their moral identity. Such acts redefine individuals as “Watchmen on the Wall,” inserting them into biblical text as divinely inspired subjects whom God has chosen to help further his will at this juncture in history.

### **Writing the Self into Scripture: A Dialectic of Submission and Volition**

The figural association with characters from the Hebrew Bible is all the more compelling for Christian Zionists today because of that text’s focus on God’s will for the Nation of Israel. During a Sunday sermon at one of CUFI’s constituent churches the pastor clearly defined how biblical characters relate to Christians today, and therefore how Christians should relate to biblical characters:

Now, when we talk about any of these Bible characters, here’s what I do and here’s what you need to do, and it would be helpful in our understanding [of the role God has called us to]: we have to try and put ourselves in their place; where they find themselves when these stories are unfolding. *Because you see the advantage we have, is that we see the end of it...* Here we are thousands of years removed from the incident and we see how the whole picture, how beautifully it fits together for God getting his will done and his purposes, not only for Joseph and his family, but for all of Israel and then for all of the world in which we are benefactors of that blessing.

But do you think Joseph had any idea what was taking place in his life at that moment? No! It’s like you, and it’s like me, there are things happening in our life right now that sometimes we throw up our hands and we say “I can’t see any purpose in this whatsoever. I don’t understand why this is happening to me.”

Our reaction to it is negative, and we find ourselves stumbling through life trying to work it out. *But that's where we have to trust, and that's why we have these messages so that we can glean from the experiences of others that have gone through it with God and we can learn ourselves.*<sup>39</sup>

I have emphasized the two sentences in this section of the sermon because they are instructive if we are to gain a greater understanding of the disposition wrought by Christian Zionists' habitus. The advantage of seeing the end of the story is not just the end of the story of a particular character. Rather, it is the advantage of seeing the end of the story of all characters—one that culminates in the establishment of God's Kingdom. As a result, members of the congregation become characters in that story, too.

It is through the application of heart knowledge that men and women are called to submit to the will of God. If we think back to the position of Hagee that I quoted above regarding the inability of Christians to do anything to speed up God's timetable, and relate that to the reading of the Bible as the history of God using women and men to further his will on earth, then it is possible to reconcile what seems to be a particular paradox between "forcing God's hand" and submitting to God's will.

Alter describes the portrayal of human nature in the Bible as caught in a "powerful interplay" between a "double dialectic of design and disorder, providence and freedom," whereby biblical narratives can be seen as "forming a spectrum between opposing extremes of disorder and design."<sup>40</sup> This dialectic is prevalent in the futurism that informs Christian Zionism. On the one hand, the future is known, however the Bible is silent about the present. Thus all that can be known about the present is related to the known future. Christian Zionists are therefore caught in what I want to call a "dialectic of submission and volition." This dialectic is facilitated partially by heart knowledge and the willingness of individuals to surrender to what they understand as God's will for them, based on their understanding of his design for the world. On the one hand, Christians are called to submit to God's plans that he has for them, and this helps typify the political action that they engage in. Yet on the other, there is also an element of volition in terms of the path individuals choose to take. The trajectory of this volition is historically deter-

<sup>39</sup> George Morrison, "Truth Matters... About the End Times" (sermon delivered at Faith Bible Chapel, Arvada, Colorado, May 23, 2010).

<sup>40</sup> Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 12–13, 38.

mined through the habitus, yet it is also continually shaped by current events as they occur. While an outsider might render a flattened interpretation of Christian Zionists' political action that stipulates a direct line of causality from belief to action, to the evangelical ear, it is based on what Max Weber might have described as a "calling"<sup>41</sup> and a submission to God's plans for the church in the end days. For Christian Zionists, the fact that we are living in the liminal space between the passing away of current history and the establishment of Christ's Kingdom, stimulates a search for signs and ways to actively participate in (and submit to) God's plans.

Reading the rhetoric of Christian Zionists on their own terms in relation to their understanding of our place on God's prophetic timeline yields a more dynamic, multi-dimensional (albeit still limited) understanding of Christian Zionists' interest in prophecy and the political activity that it relates to. The prophetic timetable acts, in a sense, as a backdrop against which faith is strengthened, a moral identity is cultivated, and God's will for individuals is discerned and continuously revealed. The evangelical habitus is at once receptive to these ideas, yet it also becomes shaped, and further defined as a result of them and the products of history that it absorbs. Moreover, the typological enactment of scripture is conducive to exercising one's heart knowledge and moral identity, the construction of which paradoxically helps define how the stories are recreated. With this understanding in mind, we can now turn to the book of Esther and see how all of these themes become manifest through the narration of that book to an audience that is receptive to them. As we will see, these stories become models of divine action undertaken by human instruments, and to follow them is to walk out the will of God.

### **You are Esther, Esther is You**

As noted above, the book of Esther has a particularly relevant paradigmatic application for Christian Zionists today. When members attend CUFI's annual meeting in Washington D.C., they are greeted by banners that juxtapose the scriptural reference of Isa 62:6: "I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem," with Esth 4:14: "For such a time as this." CUFI officials have at times asserted that the creation of the organization in 2006 was itself an act of God; while CUFI has existed since the beginning of time, it has been

<sup>41</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (London: Penguin Books, 2002).



loosed specifically to act as God's instrument in the world at this point in time due to Israel's current crisis. Similarly, before CUFI members lobby their congressional representatives, they describe themselves as "walking in the mantle of Esther." All of this is a way of attaching their political work to the much larger picture of God's plan for the world, and further articulating their moral identity.<sup>42</sup> My focus here is not on the political work that stems from CUFI's lobbying efforts, but rather what occurs before members arrive in Washington and why a banner with one small quote from the book of Esther might inspire a particular understanding in members taking part in political lobbying.

While biblical narrators of the past and present make connections between one story and another, whether both are biblical texts or one is the open testament of the present, one should not immediately claim that the texts are being used subversively, or that they are tendentiously using the Bible to "make it say what they want it to say." Rather, when pastors engage in this kind of oratory, they are tying together "tissues, sinews of divine purpose, design and will that join concrete events across millennia."<sup>43</sup> Thus when CUFI's Robert Stearns told members of Faith Bible Chapel<sup>44</sup> that "God sent me to Denver ... to tell you there's a new breed of Christian that is rising up in the earth ... and they are strong with the Lord and in the power of his might,"<sup>45</sup> and to share the story of Esther with them, it wasn't merely to share a parable that might relate to their lives in some way. Rather, it was to tell a historical story that typifies the modern church—one that the church needs to reenact if they are to submit to God and be faithful to the purposes he has for them and, ultimately, the world. Stearns's language was performative. It was a prediction that, on the one hand, made a claim about things as they "naturally are," and on the other, brought about its utterance through the act of speaking it.<sup>46</sup> Stearns's words placed him in the role of a modern prophet,

<sup>42</sup> For other examples of the use of Esther in this way see Stearns, *Cry of Mordecai*; Christenson, *Mantle of Esther*. While I am using Robert Stearns's sermon on Esther here as the indicative example, one can also hear Esther used in the same manner throughout CUFI's constituent churches.

<sup>43</sup> Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 110.

<sup>44</sup> Faith Bible Chapel is a non-denominational megachurch in Arvada, Colorado. Its Pastors, George and Cheryl Morrison, serve on the executive board of CUFI.

<sup>45</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations which follow are all taken from Stearns, "Becoming an Esther Church."

<sup>46</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 127–28.

an anointed speaker, whom God was using to translate into practical terms what he had in mind for the American church, as the antitypical Esther who must take up her mantle to ensure God's plans proceed unimpeded.

The story of Esther tells of an ordinary Jewish woman who poses as a Gentile in order to replace the dethroned queen of Persia. Shortly after taking the throne, Esther's uncle Mordecai tells her of a plot devised by a government official named Haman to destroy all of the Jews in Persia because of their devotion to God and unwillingness to abide by all the king's laws. Although Mordecai was persistent in warning Esther of the threats facing her people, she was initially unreceptive to his warnings fearing that her own life might be compromised if she attempted to stop Haman by warning the king of the plot. Finally, after numerous pleas from Mordecai, Esther accepts his challenge, noting that it might result in her own death ("If I perish, I perish." Esth 4:16). As a result, Esther saves the Jews of Persia from their impending annihilation and, out of retribution, the king ensures that the plot Haman hatched against the Jews is brought back on his own head. In turn, he and his sons die identical deaths to the ones they prepared for the Jews (Esth 9:25). The Jewish holiday of Purim was established to celebrate the deliverance of the Jews from their impending death at the hands of Haman.

Yet as it is narrated by Christian Zionists, the story of Esther is more complex.<sup>47</sup> It is not solely about celebrating this historical event and the deliverance of God's chosen people; it is about human instrumentality, spiritual warfare, and the belief that any ordinary individual can become a pivotal actor in God's plans. At a greater cosmic level, this is a plot to eradicate the lineage of the future Messiah, Jesus and therefore the possibility of the world's redemption. Moreover, it is another historical confirmation of the promise of blessing to Gentiles who favour Israel (according to the Christian Zionist interpretation of Gen 12:3),<sup>48</sup> evidenced by Haman's gruesome death at the exact place where he had plotted Mordecai's demise.

<sup>47</sup> As it certainly is for other stripes of Christians, and Jews, too. Naturally, however, my interest is in the emphasis placed on the story by Christian Zionists.

<sup>48</sup> John Hagee and other Christian Zionists frequently assert the historical truth of Genesis 12:3 and its applicability to nations through historical/biblical (they are one in the same in this context) references that show how whatever any nation has plotted to do against Israel, God will inevitably bring down on them. See, for example, Hagee, *Can America Survive?* 105–51; John Hagee, *In Defense of Israel* (Lake Mary: FrontLine, 2007), 111–19. This kind of thinking is not limited to historical events, however. For contemporary examples of this belief, one can look, for example, to William Koenig, *Eye to Eye: Facing the Consequences of Dividing Israel* (McLean: About Him, 2008).

This interpretation of the story is far more than a simple “literal reading.” While it is certainly taken literally—that these events are historically accurate and happened as they were recorded—there is an additional, and more important message about God and Christian Zionists’ relationship with God that is derived from the text. As Coleman argues:

The application of so-called literalism and doctrines of inerrancy in relation to the Bible is as much about embodying and “living out” the text in a self-reinforcing process of spiritual authentication as it is about the verbalized assertion that everything the Bible says is unproblematically “true.”<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, the effective deployment of performative utterances in relation to the reenactment of scripture occurs “at the crucial junctures in the lives of heroes,” and is a “means of attaching that moment to a larger pattern of historical and theological meaning.”<sup>50</sup> It is therefore worth considering how Stearns narrated the story—not only to his audience, but also how he narrated his audience *into* the story.

“Esther’s life and Esther’s example has never been more pertinent or applicable for the people of God than it is in this moment in time. And we need to learn, and hear and receive from the life of Esther today.” After announcing the importance of Esther as a moral exemplar, the first thing Stearns established in his sermon was his audience’s close relationship to her, allowing him, in Harding’s words, to “enlist the listener”<sup>51</sup> and demarcate both his role and authority, as well his relationship to those listening. By enlisting the listener, it helps bring them into the story; it invites participation and binds the audience to the speaker in a relationship of dependence.<sup>52</sup> Again, appealing to his audience’s close relationship to Esther, Stearns told us that:

[She] understood what it felt like to be on the outside. Unpopular, unwanted, not accepted.... Chances are there are some people here this morning who ... would have written things a little differently than it seems like God has written for you.

<sup>49</sup> Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion 12 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 118.

<sup>50</sup> Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 60, 72.

<sup>51</sup> Susan Friend Harding, “Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion,” *American Ethnologist* 14, no. 1 (1987): 172.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

There was nothing in Esther's life . . . that would say "most likely to succeed." There was nothing about her that would say: "Here's someone that would be written into the pages of history. Here's someone whose life is going to make a great difference." . . . She was an average, ordinary, everyday person who life had not dealt a good hand to.

But God—aren't you glad this morning that we serve a God that says: "Your past does not equal your future." Aren't you glad that we serve a God this morning who says: "My plans for you are greater than the plans that others may have spoken over your life." And God had a plan for Esther—she didn't fully understand it, she didn't fully see it—you may not fully see this morning, the story that God is writing over the challenges of your life, but I promise you this morning if you're here . . . God has a plan, a purpose, a destiny for your life.

Although Stearns emphasized Esther's ordinary identity, and related it to the congregation's concerns about money, status, and family issues, his emphasis on their shared identity performed a greater feat: it told the congregants that they were extraordinary. Despite any feelings of failure or lack that they might hold, God wanted to use them for a greater purpose, just as he had used Esther; all they had to do was allow him. Moreover, Christian Zionists' understanding of themselves as persecuted in a world of secular humanism, moral relativism, and radical Islam was reinforced, in turn reinforcing their identity as a moral community:

Beloved, we are living in a moment in time where it is not popular to believe in the God of the Bible. We are living in a moment in time when it seems that all Hell itself is arrayed against those who believe in this book. And the twin forces of secular humanism on one hand, and radical Islam on the other, are assaulting the very foundations of our faith.

However, this perception of persecution did not matter for Esther, and it therefore should not matter for Christians today. More importantly, Stearns emphasized the fact that Esther did not know *how* she would be used, just as individual Christians today do not necessarily know how God will use them; this does not matter because God knows how he will use them, and so long

as they submit to God, and privilege their heart knowledge over their head knowledge, then God will guide them in the right direction:

And so Esther is transported into opulence and splendor, and this little orphan girl so alone and so insecure and her future has been so uncertain, now she has everything she could dream for.... She's enjoying the blessings ... of the king.

While out here ... Mordecai is off in a place called Susa. And Mordecai is aware that there is trouble brewing in Susa ... that threatens all of the Jewish people. Haman has hatched his deadly plot. And over here in Susa, or *Gaza*, or *Tehran*, over here off in the distance of the land of the king's blessings Mordecai begins to try and get a message across to Esther: "Esther, there's danger for your people! Esther, I need your attention, there's problems here you really need to listen, Esther!" But Esther is here and she's just so happy. She's just so blessed. And she can't hear Mordecai's message. Oh, she hears it; but she doesn't *hear* it. Church, there is a huge difference between hearing God's voice, and *hearing* God's voice.

And she says: "Mordecai I really can't get involved ... and I'm sorry for what's happening over there in the Middle East ... but I'm really doing fine and things are secure, the economy's good, the military is strong and I'm protected, and I'm doing well, I just can't get involved." ... WHY couldn't Esther *hear* the voice of Mordecai, why do we sometimes not *hear* the voice of the Holy Spirit warning us as we enjoy the blessings of the king?

[There are] two things that I suggest block our hearing that blocked Esther's hearing. Number one, I think Esther was distracted.... Esther was enjoying all the *stuff*; she was enjoying all the blessings.... *Esther didn't realize that she had been blessed unto a greater purpose.* The blessings were not simply there for her to enjoy. While God has blessed the American church ... we can get distracted by the stuff. *And we can fail to realize, that there's a greater purpose that God is writing us into.* And we've been blessed, and with blessing comes responsibility—to whom much has been given, much is required.

The second reason I believe Esther couldn't hear the message of Mordecai, the message of the Spirit, was denial. I think Esther simply refused to believe that things could possibly be that bad. She simply refused to believe that it possibly could be so bad. Why? Because she worked all her life to just feel good. And she finally was feeling good and she didn't want to have to deal with the fact that there was a real threat that was finding her in the palace.... In other words she says to Mordecai: "Mordecai, I am sorry about what's happening over there with the Jewish people, but I can't get involved. If I get involved my life could be in danger." What did Esther not realize? Her life was already in danger. Precious American Church brothers and sisters, we had better wake up to the fact that our perceived security in America is a thin veneer. We had better wake up to the fact that Israel's battle is our battle in this moment. We had better stop being in denial and just thinking that everything's gonna continue to go on as it always has been and that we don't need to be vigilant about maintaining liberty in our nation. It is time for the Church to arise and to awaken.

So Esther is there in distraction and Esther is there in denial and Mordecai sends back this message, as I believe the Mordecai voice of the Holy Spirit is sending to us today: "Esther, do not think that because you're in the king's house—don't think because you're in America—that you alone will escape, for if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come from another place. But you and your father's family will perish. And who knows, but that you, yes Esther, you—poorly educated, unconnected, orphaned, not qualified, average ordinary you and me, who somehow say yes to God and God somehow decides to take our yes seriously—who knows Esther, but that you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

And now I want to show you what has become one of my all-time favorite places in all of scripture ... look at it please, the end of verse fourteen, do you see the word "this" and the question mark—"who knows that you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Do you see that question mark? And then look at verse fifteen, the first word in my scripture in verse fifteen

is “Then.” There’s the question mark and then there’s the “then.” And there’s that little space in between the question mark and the then. And I would submit to you this morning that we are seated at this moment in time in that little space between God’s question mark to us, and our answer to Him. And Esther finally allowed the voice of Mordecai to penetrate her reality and she finally understood that it was not all about her; it was about a bigger plan, a bigger purpose, a bigger destiny. Beloved, I’m here to tell you this morning, my prayer for you is that you will never be a nice local church. America does not need another nice, local church. What we need is an embassy for the Kingdom of God, to move and advance God’s purposes and God’s Kingdom in this hour because we are in a moment of extraordinary battle.

Through this narration, the American church becomes Esther, and Esther becomes the American Church. Ordinary Esther is transported into luxury, just as American Christians, while ordinary on the one hand, are also aware of their material and spiritual blessings. Yet because of these blessings, the church has become lazy. Thus when Stearns caricatured Esther (“Mordecai I really can’t get involved ... and I’m sorry for what’s happening over there in the Middle East ... but I’m really doing fine and things are secure, the economy’s good, the military is strong and I’m protected, and I’m doing well, I just can’t get involved”), he was also speaking about the American Church and the contemporary political moment, employing language which was ambiguous enough to refer to both. He placed contemporary concerns about the economy, military strength, and the Middle East into Esther’s mouth, before returning explicitly to the church: “Precious American Church brothers and sisters, we had better wake up to the fact that our perceived security in America is a thin veneer.” Importantly, Susa, the setting of the biblical story, is now “Gaza, or Tehran,” thus attaching the current political moment to the book of Esther, and vice-versa. Those unwilling to recognize the reality of the Middle East—that Islam is a religion not only bent on killing “us,” but also on the cusp of succeeding—are therefore, like Esther prior to her transformation: in denial.

In this way, Stearns’s sermon contributes to Christian Zionists’ understanding about their role in the world, their instrumentality, and their need to submit to the plans God is writing them into. The necessity of submission

to God's plans, then, is crucial—how do Christian Zionists know what God's plans are for them? In a way, like Esther, they don't. However, because they do know "the end of the story," they can become imparted with knowledge through people like Stearns who engender what Bourdieu calls "symbolic capital,"<sup>53</sup> as men anointed by God. Such symbolic capital, or the recognition of anointing, is not a result of charisma in the Weberian sense. It is not a form of divine favour inhered in a particular individual; rather it is what is attributed to them from their audience. Preachers achieve this by situating their message as coming directly from the Word of God, and also by situating their listeners directly within that Word. For their listeners, preachers like Stearns do not interpret the Bible, they merely convey what the author of a given biblical text—and by extension God—is telling them.<sup>54</sup> The use of typology does not bind authors to the historical time period in which they were writing; their words, as God's words, are timeless. Accordingly, Stearns did not interpret Esther; he merely conveyed what God was trying to tell the church through the Mordecai voice of the Holy Spirit: that at this point in history, this crucial juncture in their lives as heroes, *in between the question mark and the then*, they were to be his instruments.

By invoking speech that is considered to be taken directly from the Word of God, the speaker—in this case Stearns, although it could be any of thousands of pastors who share this oratory—ostensibly erases himself, and humbles himself, in turn evoking a similar sense of submission from the audience. What this does, then, is create a paradox, which allows the speaker to invert the terms of the relationship to their listeners, and reproach those who speak for themselves. According to Bourdieu, "The right of reprimanding other people and making them feel guilty is one of the advantages enjoyed by the militant."<sup>55</sup> Therefore to not submit to God's Word, whether it is here, as presented by Stearns, or in any other setting with a speaker who commands biblical authority, no matter how difficult it might seem, would be to place human reasoning (head knowledge) over a divine calling (heart knowledge),

<sup>53</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 171.

<sup>54</sup> Hagee, for example, in his sermon of "fishers and hunters" which used Jeremiah to show how God sent Hitler as a "hunter" to force the Jews back to Israel and caused John McCain to distance himself from Hagee's endorsement, said this: "And that will be offensive to some people. Well, dear heart, be offended. I didn't write it Jeremiah wrote it. It was the truth and it is the truth." In this way, he takes himself out of the scripture and merely portrays what God is apparently saying through Jeremiah.

<sup>55</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 211.



and therefore commit arrogance in the face of God. Stearns sums this up succinctly in the book that this sermon is based on: “Life isn’t always about what you choose; more often than not, it’s about what chooses you.”<sup>56</sup>

It would be remiss, however, to see this merely as a form of manipulation on Stearns’s part, galvanizing political support by “manipulating” religious symbols. As Asad argues, the process of determining what counts as orthodoxy amidst change and disruption (in this case the real or perceived threat of Iran, Islam, and secular humanism) requires the representation of the present “within an authoritative narrative that includes positive evaluations of past events and persons.” Importantly, this authority is not merely created by the speaker filling those listening with ideas, as though they were empty vessels willing to accept all that they hear. Rather, it is a “collaborative achievement between the narrator and audience.”<sup>57</sup> The narrator has to stick within certain parameters of her discourse if it is to be accepted. Yet the audience must be open to it if they are to accept it—and this is part of the evangelical habitus I described above.

Similarly, as Harding puts it, this rhetoric and the narration of biblical stories to contemporary audiences are just as much about their characters as they are about the listeners. The speakers locate the listener and themselves between God and the biblical figures.<sup>58</sup> Just as Stearns listened to God and went to Denver to share the message of Esther, the same way Esther had listened to God and fulfilled the role that she had been written into, Stearns’s story was also about his listeners. They too, were characters in the story, and it was just as much about Esther as it was about them. It is this rhetoric, Harding argues, that gives this kind of preaching its efficacy. It is “not just a monologue that constitutes its speaker as a culturally specific person; it is also a dialogue that reconstitutes its listeners.”<sup>59</sup> Although Harding’s concern is with conversion, and the transformation of unsaved listeners who appropriate the language of the speaker and become invested with a specific mode of organizing and interpreting experience, the effect here, on predominantly saved listeners, is the same. Stearns invested in his listeners a particular identity: they became sacred actors in the biblical narrative, whom God was calling to act on his behalf at an important historical moment.

<sup>56</sup> Stearns, *Cry of Mordecai*, 204.

<sup>57</sup> Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 210.

<sup>58</sup> Harding, “Convicted by the Holy Spirit,” 173.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

Stearns did not tell his audience what to do, but rather who they are and have to be: instrumental agents of God who are called to fulfill his purposes here on earth at this critical hour. Again, Alter's point that I discussed previously is illuminated through Stearns's performative speech. Through his sermon, Stearns situated Christians, as the heroes, at a critical juncture in history, and used the story of Esther to attach Esther's actions as a type that fits into a larger pattern of historical and typological agency that has to be enacted in the present to ensure God's will is done in the world.

Thinking about Robert Stearns's reception and delivery of the book of Esther provides an interesting way of thinking about the politics of Christian Zionism beyond the usual emphasis on Armageddon. I have tried to show that it is not an uncritical reflection of dispensational theology, or the texts of Revelation and Ezekiel that Christian Zionists believe predict future events, that compels Christian Zionists to "force God's hand." By avoiding texts such as Esther, and many others, observers miss how this political work is as much about strengthening members' faith, imagining oneself as having a special part in God's plans, and binding individuals into a larger moral community.

By engaging with Christian Zionists on their own terms we can appreciate how the interpretation of a given text is dependent on a number of social, political, and cultural factors. Stearns brought the world into the text of Esther, and at the same time used Esther as a device to frame the current social and political moment that Christian Zionists find themselves in. On the one hand this is achieved through an authoritative narration that makes the text relevant to the present. On the other, its reception is not based on a *sui generis*, psychological impulse, nor a process of manipulation, but rather an historically constructed disposition to accept certain modes of knowing as divine truth.

While I have offered a critique of previous work on Christian Zionism in particular the emphasis on "forcing God's hand," it has not been my intent to deny the influence of dispensational theology. Dispensational theology has been foundational in galvanizing Christian support for contemporary Israel as the restored Israel of the Hebrew Bible. What I have taken issue with is what has often been an express focus on the end times scenario of dispensationalism, without considering the broader interpretation of the Bible as one cohesive narrative. Esther remains neither prophetic nor apocalyptic, however what Stearns has done with the book of Esther relies specifically on the apocalyptic outlook that has been and remains embedded in CUF's articulation of American Christian Zionism. Interestingly, by not focusing

on these apocalyptic texts, and instead on Esther, a clearer picture of how those apocalyptic texts work is illuminated. By looking at the broader, biblical panorama, we can see how these texts become a part of the story that Christian Zionists tell about themselves. Although the distinction between what counts as “forcing God’s hand” and submitting to God’s plans is often a fine one, it is a worthwhile one to consider if a better understanding of the politics of Christian Zionism is to be gleaned. It is also, perhaps, a reminder for those so inclined, that telling Christian Zionists that they are wrong about their reading of the Bible is a task that will yield limited results.