

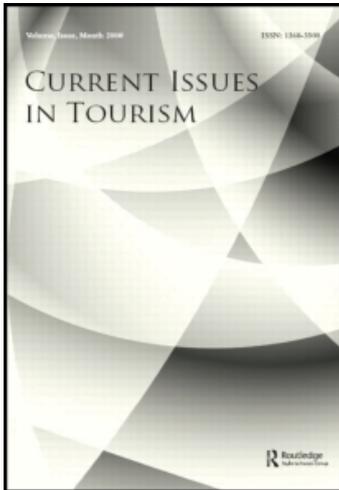
This article was downloaded by: [Belhassen, Yaniv]

On: 28 June 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 912421055]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



### Current Issues in Tourism

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t901682222>

### Tourism, faith and politics in the Holy Land: an ideological analysis of evangelical pilgrimage

Yaniv Belhassen <sup>a</sup>; Jonathan Ebel <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Hotel & Tourism Management, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel <sup>b</sup> Department of Religion, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

Online Publication Date: 01 July 2009

**To cite this Article** Belhassen, Yaniv and Ebel, Jonathan(2009)'Tourism, faith and politics in the Holy Land: an ideological analysis of evangelical pilgrimage',*Current Issues in Tourism*,12:4,359 — 378

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/13683500802469342

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13683500802469342>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## Tourism, faith and politics in the Holy Land: an ideological analysis of evangelical pilgrimage

Yaniv Belhassen<sup>a\*</sup> and Jonathan Ebel<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Hotel & Tourism Management, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel;*

<sup>b</sup>*Department of Religion, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA*

*(Received 3 January 2008; final version received 22 August 2008)*

This article aims to enhance the discussion of the role of ideology in the development of tourism practices through a closer examination of the case of Christian pilgrimage. The analysis focuses on the theo-political ideology of Christian Zionism and its roles and manifestations in the context of evangelical pilgrimages to Israel. Findings suggest that ideological dynamics within the development of these tours can be discussed by distinguishing between four tourism actors, namely, ideological organizations, tour organizers, Israeli officials, and the tourists. We suggest that these actors can be differentiated from each other in accordance with their ideological roles and orientations. Additionally, by demonstrating the similar utilization of pilgrimage by theo-political opponents of Christian Zionism, such as Sabeel and FOSNA, this article illustrates how pilgrimage to the Holy Land has become an arena for competition between these two rival ideologies within the Evangelical movement. The article concludes with a discussion on the role of pilgrimages to Israel as a platform through which theo-political ideologies are manifested, distributed, utilized, and consumed.

**Keywords:** Ideology; religion; politics; Israel

### Introduction

There is considerable scholarly literature concerning the role of ideologies in shaping the field of tourism as a practice, industry, and as the subject of scholarly inquiry. This research literature can be further divided into three sub-groups. The first includes those studies written within the postcolonial framework, which usually seek to illustrate how dominant ideologies shape the construction of the tourism discourses, images, and representations which work to legitimate certain socio-cultural power relations (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2002; Buzinde & Santos, 2007; Caton & Santos, 2008; Morgan & Pritchard, 1999; Pritchard & Morgan, 2001). A second line of research asks to uncover the relationship between socio-economic ideologies and tourism development (Hobson & Ko, 1994), policies (Hall, 1994), and scholarship (Belhassen, 2007; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006; Tribe, 2006). A third group of research focuses on the role of political ideologies on the development of tourism (Cohen-Hattab, 2004; Hall, 1990; Kim, Timothy, & Han,

---

\*Corresponding author. Email: yanivbel@bgu.ac.il

2007; Richter, 1980). To a large extent, the underlying premise of this large body of literature is that tourism systems and practices reflect circumstances of social, cultural, or economic inequalities. Accordingly, tourism practices, policies, and services are all viewed as social mechanisms that serve to maintain and protect the conditions that correspond with an ideology that a tourism actor seeks to promote. This large body of literature provides the research on the role of ideology in tourism with insightful perspectives on the importance of understanding how ideologies shape tourism developments. There is a void in the literature, however, regarding the dynamics involving the promotion, distribution, and consumption of an ideology in a particular ideologically driven tourism context. As shall be apparent below, a close examination of a particular ideological travel practice illuminates not only the complexity of the relationship between tourism and ideology but also the need to understand how tourism actors interact with the examined ideology. This article thus seeks to enrich the literature by examining the dynamics between the ideology of Christian Zionism and tourism. The article aims to show how tourism to the Holy Land has become a site in which this theo-political ideology is manifested, promoted, utilized, and consumed. Additionally, the article demonstrates how tourism to the Holy Land has become an arena for competition between two rival theo-political ideologies. In the process we also offer a close examination of the emerging role of tourism as both expressive and formative of American evangelical Christians' attitudes toward Israel.

Christian Zionism is defined here as an ideology, held mostly by conservative evangelical Protestants, that supports the notion of a state for the Jewish people in the geographical area referred to in the scriptures as the land of Israel. Christian Zionists believe that the return of the Jews to the Holy Land constitutes the fulfillment of biblical prophecies (e.g., Ezekiel 36, Daniel 9, Deuteronomy 30, Isaiah 43, Jeremiah 23, Amos 9, Zechariah 8), and that it is a prerequisite for the second coming of Christ, which is the consummation of history (for an extended discussion, see Marsden, 1980). Thus, Christian Zionists view the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 as a signifier of the imminent return of Christ. Their affinity with the state of Israel and with the Jewish people more generally flows from this particular Christian reading of scripture and history. This article relates this theo-political ideology to contemporary evangelical pilgrimage to Israel and examines the way this ideology plays in what we refer to as Christian Zionist pilgrimage to Israel. In short, the findings show that the Christian Zionist framing of these pilgrimages is clear and constant, but the travelers often have a less focused sense of the relationship between the theo-politics of Christian Zionism and their experiences of "the Holy Land." Our conclusions are generally in harmony with those of Smith (2000) when we suggest that attention to the beliefs of lay evangelical Christians provides a more complicated picture of their theologies and political leanings than the rhetoric of conservative evangelical leaders conveys.

Though evangelical travelers are engaged in an overtly theo-political pilgrimage, our findings show that they have a wide range of experiences as well as sometimes divergent understandings of those experiences. After a brief examination of the roots of Christian Zionism and the development of Christian Zionist pilgrimage, we present our fieldwork from East-Central Illinois, where an evangelical couple – Mr. and Mrs. B – have organized such tours for the last eight years. We then present the dynamics within the ideology of Christian Zionism by pointing out four tourism actors involved in this practice, namely, ideological organizations, tour organizers, Israeli officials, and the tourists. The findings show that the actors can be differentiated in terms of their roles in the formation of Christian Zionist tours and their endorsement of the ideology.

## Literature review

### *The roots of Christian Zionism*

For most of the first 15 centuries of Christian history, Christians interpreted the biblical prophecies regarding the return of the Jews to their homeland through a supersessionist lens, also known as Replacement Theology. According to this theology, Jews had ceased to be God's chosen people when they failed to accept Jesus as the Messiah and were subsequently dispersed as punishment. Scriptural passages referring to "Israel" were believed to refer allegorically (and most importantly) to "the Church," and only historically (and superficially) to the pre-Christian, biblical Israel. Carroll (2002) suggests that supersessionism emerged at the time that Christianity was a sect during the Second Temple era and, therefore, sought to fundamentally distinguish itself from Judaism and to establish a strong theological credibility. During the Protestant Reformation, greater access to the Bible allowed some Christians to read the biblical history of the Jewish people for themselves. Using a new and somewhat flattened literalist approach to the interpretation of scripture, some Christians and Christian theologians concluded that God's covenant with the Israelites was eternal, and that the prophecies regarding the restoration of Israel actually referred to the Jewish nation (Ariel, 1991; Bar-Yosef, 2003; Pragai, 1985; Sharif, 1983; Weber, 2004). The combination of interpretive protocols that favored a literal reading of the Bible and the assumption of the Bible's inerrancy generated the idea that God's covenant with the Jews was, in fact, still valid.

The sixteenth through nineteenth centuries saw a handful of Protestant clergymen challenge supersessionist doctrine. Some, including Anglican clergyman Lewis Way (1722–1804), even sought the restoration of the Jews to the "Holy Land." None, however, achieved the status and influence of John Nelson Darby. At the end of the nineteenth century, Darby (1800–1882) developed a millennial doctrine that, while related exegetically to the proto-Zionist thought of sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestants, also exhibited several innovations. Like most Plymouth Brethren of his day, Darby read Biblical prophecy through a futurist lens. He also argued, like fellow Englishmen Thomas Brightman (1562–1607), Henry Finch (1558–1623), and Lewis Way (1722–1804), that the Jews would play a crucial role in the coming end-times (Jacobs & Neumann, 1958; Sharif, 1976). Darby's most significant departure from these rather common exegetical trends was to divide history into seven ages or "dispensations." He believed that his world was part of the sixth dispensation and that the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy would signal the approach of the seventh dispensation in which Christ would return and reign for 1000 years. Darby also insisted that the word "Israel" in scripture referred only to the Israelites and their Jewish descendants, and that mentions of "the Church" referred to the Gentile Christians.

Darby placed the Jews and Israel at the center of his end-times theology. His dispensationalist outline of the past and the future suggested that after the restoration of the Jews in Israel, the Antichrist – a figure from the apocalyptic visions in the Book of Revelation – would come to power and lead the world into a war between Christ's believers and non-believers. This war is known as the battle of Armageddon. Before this battle, during the second arrival of Christ, only a small number of Jews (144,000) would be able to recognize Christ as the Messiah. This minority would be harshly rejected by the vast majority of the Jewish people. Later on, a short period of judgments and punishments known as the Great Tribulation, or the Time of Jacob's Trouble, would begin, and all those who were not true believers in Jesus would remain on earth to suffer (the term Great Tribulation derives from the prophecy in Mathew 24:21). The true believers (i.e., the Church) would be "raptured"

(lifted into the air/heaven to meet Christ) and would not suffer this ordeal. Only about a third of the Jews would survive the Great Tribulation and, realizing that the rejected 144,000 Jews who accepted Jesus at the beginning of the Great Tribulation were actually right, would join the church (for an overview on dispensationalism in America, see Marsden, 1980; Sandeen, 1970; Weber, 1979).

Darby advanced his doctrine in seven visits to the United States between 1862 and 1878, during which time many mainstream theologians adopted his eschatology. Among Darby's followers in America were C.I. Scofield, D.L. Moody, W.E. Blackstone, and A.C. Gaebelien. In 1909, Scofield published a reference Bible in which dispensationalist eschatology (a theory of the end of history based on the opening and closing of religiously meaningful eras) played a crucial role. The popularity of Scofield's reference Bible facilitated the development of dispensationalism as a prominent eschatology among American evangelicals. In addition, the American dispensationalists became an important force during the late nineteenth century in the Niagara Bible Conference, one of the most important theological conferences in the development of Protestant evangelicalism, as well as more broadly in the early fundamentalist movement in the 1910s.

Darby's teachings proved attractive to many American churchgoers in his day and remain popular today. Best-selling books such as Lindsey and Carlson's *The late great Planet Earth* (1970) and Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's *Left behind* (1995) series have further popularized dispensationalist eschatology while keeping readers attentive to the role of Israel and the broader Middle East in the end-times. The Canadian film production company Cloud Ten Pictures produced three films based on the series, which also popularized the pretribulationist view in contemporary America. Dispensationalism is now the most significant millennialist school in conservative evangelical thought and constitutes the theological lens through which many conservative and fundamentalist Protestant pastors and believers construct Christian Zionist attitudes (for further categorization and explanation of the theological differences among premillennialists, see Weber, 1979).

### ***Christian Zionist pilgrimage to Israel***

Tourism is an especially valuable economic and religious tool with which individual tour organizers, the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem (ICEJ), and other Christian Zionist organizations choose to express their religious and political support for Israel. In the past three decades, many evangelical leaders have become tour leaders to Israel and many evangelical institutions and churches have started organizing such tours (Belhassen, in press; Bowman, 2000; Weber, 2004, p. 213). An exact count of evangelical Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land is hard to achieve, but we estimate that 100,000 such pilgrims visited Israel in 2006; this accounts for just over 20% of all U.S. tourists to Israel for that year. This calculation is based on the Israeli Annual Tourism Report for 2006, which reported 123,500 U.S. tourists classified as "pilgrims." Evangelical Protestants were certainly not the only U.S. "pilgrims" to Israel, but we estimate that they make up the overwhelming majority of that number for two reasons. First, American Jews, who make up the majority of American tourists to Israel (217,300) generally do not define their visits to Israel as pilgrimages, but rather as visits to friends and family or as heritage visits. Second, members of the other primary religious group in the United States inclined to designate themselves as "pilgrims" – American Catholics – do not travel to Israel in significant numbers (Israel Ministry of Tourism Annual Report, 2007).

Since the early 1970s, tourism and pilgrimage have been increasingly attractive both to Christian Zionists in America and to Israelis as a means for celebrating and supporting the

Israeli nation-state (for a historical overview of the early connection between political Zionism and Protestantism in the late nineteenth century until the establishment of the state of Israel, see Merkley, 1998, 2001). As political developments in both countries helped strengthen ties between Christian Zionists and conservative Israeli politicians, both groups turned to tourism as a way to broaden and deepen their relationship. In his book *On the road to Armageddon: How evangelicals became Israel's best friend*, Timothy Weber suggests that the relationship between conservative evangelicals and Israelis gained momentum at the Jerusalem Conference on Biblical Prophecies held from June 15 to 18, 1971, and was further spurred by the Likud Party victory in 1977 (Weber, 2004, pp. 213–214). After his election in 1977, Prime Minister Menachem Begin established a right-wing coalition that enthusiastically embraced (Jewish) messianic religious tendencies to view the territories that were occupied during the Six Day War as the biblical “Judea and Samaria.” The results of this election led to the encouragement of Jewish messianic settlers, who propounded religious justifications for their settlement of these areas. The American Christian Right was fond of this new theological discourse and supported the new Israeli policy.

The emergence of the Religious Right as a prominent political force in the United States gave both energy and more discernible political tones to Christian Zionism and the evangelical tourism industry (Martin, 1996). The Religious Right was never focused only on Israel, but the movement hid neither its pro-Israeli attitude nor its dispensationalist leanings. Jerry Falwell’s notes from the early days of the Moral Majority show that, although not a central issue, the United States’ policy toward Israel was a topic that should be addressed by the new organization: “[W]e announced that Moral Majority was a political organization, not a religious one, and that we welcomed Jews and Catholics and Protestants and Mormons and even non-religious people who shared our view on the family and abortion, strong national defense, and Israel.” Thus, it is reasonable to argue that the establishment of the Moral Majority was an important junction in the evolution of the Religious Right, and pro-Israel ideology was an integral component in this movement from its outset.

Prime Minister Begin cultivated this relationship by developing a special bond with evangelical leaders such as Jerry Falwell. Both sides recognized that tourism was a potentially compelling way in which to express and develop these relations. Weber notes that the Israeli Tourism Ministry began to acknowledge the importance of this alliance in the early 1980s by starting to “actively recruit evangelical religious leaders for ‘familiarization’ tours at no cost to them” (Weber, 2004, p. 214). He suggests further that these promotional tours aimed to allow people “of even limited influence to experience Israel for themselves and be shown how they might bring their own tour group to Israel” (Weber, 2004, p. 214).

The place of tourism in the relationship between Christian Zionists and the State of Israel developed further with the election in 1996 of Likud party leader Binyamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister. Donald Wagner (1998) reports that following his election, the Israel Christian Advocacy Council (KCAC), which operates through the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, made a concerted – and official – effort to celebrate relations between Christian Zionists and the state of Israel. Similarly, Weber suggests that bringing evangelical pilgrims to Israel was a part of an Israeli strategy that derived from “the potential power of the evangelical subculture,” which they “began to mobilize... as a base of support that could influence American foreign policy.” Weber (2004, pp. 220–222) calls the tours “tour bus diplomacy” implying that these tours are used as a political tool by the Israeli government.

Christian Zionism – or the belief that God calls Christians to support the state of Israel and that Israel and the Jews will play a central role in the end-times – is the current coin of the realm among America’s public evangelical pastorate, and it exerts some influence

(vast by some accounts, minor by others) on perceptions of United States foreign policy, if not on actual policies and policy makers (e.g., Davidson, 2005; Northcott, 2004). Vocal Christian Zionists such as Pat Robertson have attributed various ills that have befallen Israeli politicians to their willingness to cede lands to Palestinians or, more to the point, their unwillingness to run their country according to the dictates of a Protestant Christian reading of biblical prophecy. Christian Zionism is not, however, only the currency of Robertson and other prominent televangelists. To a great extent, academic interest in the roots of Christian Zionism has emanated from the central role evangelicalism plays in American politics. Given the pivotal role of the Jews in dispensationalism and the popularity of dispensationalism among modern evangelicals, scholars who focus on Christian Zionism in the context of American evangelicalism see this doctrine as a determining factor in evangelicals' attitudes toward political Zionism and Israel.

Grace Halsell's fieldwork (1986) is a rare example of an attempt to study the travel experience of Americans who participate in "Christian Zionist" tours to Israel. Halsell, who joined two of Jerry Falwell's evangelical tours to Israel in 1983 and 1985, criticized the tours for being political and not religious, as well as for completely ignoring the Palestinian people – specifically the Christian Arabs who lived in tour destination cities such as Bethlehem and Nazareth. Yet little research has focused on tours organized by less prominent evangelical leaders and communities in the United States. As opposed to previous attempts to write about Christian Zionist tours, this study shows that Christian Zionism is not a standardized ideology to which all of its followers uniformly adhere; rather its contours and demands are understood in various ways. Though "support for Israel" is certainly a unifying concept, there is no consensus among Christian Zionists themselves regarding a single "best way" to express that support. The organizers of the tours described here are uncomfortable, indeed "annoy[ed]" when they are grouped together with Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, but they, like Robertson and Falwell, choose pilgrimage as one way to support Israel and Jewish Israelis (personal communication through email with Mrs. B, January 11, 2006). Moreover, Christian Zionist thinking provides the motive for and shapes the itinerary of their pilgrimages (Feldman, 2007).

The importance of defining and understanding both this kind of travel and the thoughts and actions of those engaged in it is political as well as academic. Both Christian Zionists and their opponents use tourism to inculcate a theo-politics, while also using characterizations of opposing tours to substantiate their theo-political claims and to argue for the value of their own tours over and against those led by others. For instance, Reverend Stephen Sizer (1999), a political and theological opponent of Christian Zionism, divides Protestant pilgrims to the Holy Land into three groups: Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, and the Living Stones. He suggests that "Evangelicals" visit places with biblical significance to enrich their knowledge, suggesting that these tours are educational rather than religious in their essence. He also claims that these tours do not address "either the present Middle East conflict or necessarily [engage] in theological praxis." He claims further that "the presence of an ancient and oriental Christianity is either ignored, misunderstood or . . . criticized for desecrating the archaeological sites with what are often regarded as pagan shrines." The "Fundamentalists," Sizer goes on to argue, are driven by the same motives "but with the added eschatological dimension, believing themselves to be witnessing and indeed participating in the purposes of God, at work within Israel in these "Last days." Sizer states further that contrary to "the ignorance of many Evangelicals and the harm caused by Fundamentalists," the "Living Stones" pilgrimages that he organizes incorporate meeting and worship with "indigenous Christians." (Sizer, 1999, pp. 86–88).

## Methods

As a way of exploring the dynamics of Christian Zionist tourism in Israel, we inductively examine a concrete example of such tourism: pilgrimages to Israel organized by Mr. and Mrs. B, an evangelical couple based in Central Illinois. Mr. and Mrs. B have organized 19 tours over the last eight years. Since organizing their first tour in February 2000, they have kept up a pace of two to three trips per year, one of which is primarily humanitarian in nature. Their tours usually last 10 to 12 days and involve as few as 12 or as many as 72 pilgrims. There are many pilgrims who have traveled with the couple more than once; some have joined up to eight trips so far. Prior to traveling, pilgrims meet at least once to learn the details of the trip and the humanitarian work in which, in most cases, they will engage. Pre-trip meetings also include a time for questions, sometimes with past pilgrims, and a worship service. Some pilgrims pay the \$2800 for their travel entirely out of their own funds, but trip organizers encourage “delegates to build [a] support team to hold them up in prayer, to hear their stories upon their return, and assist them financially.” Prospective pilgrims also benefit from donations provided by those who listen to the radio station managed by Mr. and Mrs. B. It is important to note that the radio station is affiliated with the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago – an inter-denominational higher-education organization that has had evangelical characteristics from its inception.

Mr. and Mrs. B. organize two basic types of self-defined trips: “spiritual” and “humanitarian.” In case of regular, or what the couple call “spiritual pilgrimage,” the payment is not tax-deductible. The humanitarian trips are considered to be “part mission, part pilgrimage” and the “mission part” (\$1400) is tax-deductible (the quotes from the brochures and promotional pamphlets). The “spiritual” trips take place in the summer months and most closely resemble “secular” sight-seeing tours. These trips do not usually involve pre-planned volunteer work, but organizers stress that simply traveling in Israel lends vital economic support to the nation and its people. The humanitarian trips involve significant volunteer work, much of it framed by the Christian Zionist tenet that offering service and comfort to Israelis in the Holy Land is a central demand of the Christian faith. The observations recorded here were collected from a group that traveled to Israel on a “humanitarian” trip in November 2005; their trip was titled “Cargo of Care & Bucket Brigade: The 2005 Painting Pilgrims.” As is the practice before each humanitarian trip, the prospective pilgrims collected various items to donate while visiting Israel including in this case, 347 teddy bears, 750 Beanie Babies, and hundreds of other toys, clothes, and housekeeping articles.

The November 2005 trip was “part mission, part pilgrimage” and focused only on sites in Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The “pilgrimage” portion of the trip included visits to Jerusalem, the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River (where baptism/re-dedication was conducted), Eilat and the Red Sea, and the Dead Sea. As described in one of the tours’ pamphlet, the “mission” portion included volunteer work in “care centers and neighborhoods of the poor, sick elderly, and perhaps even terror victims to serve them through fellowship, light tasks, yard work, painting, and repairs.” Each pilgrim was part of a team that worked in one of several social service centers in Tiberias.<sup>1</sup> The whole group then went to visit HaEmek Medical Center located in the city of Afula, “in the valley of Armageddon” as the pamphlet pronounced; Magen David Adom (the Israeli equivalent of the Red Cross) in Jerusalem where some of the pilgrims donated blood; Shevet Achim, a Christian group that brings Palestinian children with heart problems to Israeli hospitals for free surgery and care; and to a chess club in the city of Arad, the membership of which consists largely of Christian Russian immigrants. In addition, the pilgrims were given the opportunity to plant trees and, thus, to participate directly in the Zionist project of making the desert

bloom. The trip concluded in a Lebanese Restaurant in Abu-Gosh, a Muslim-Christian Arab village near Jerusalem.

The process of data collection for this study started in December 2004 and continued throughout July 2007. In December 2004, Mrs. B, the main source, described how she and her husband started organizing trips to Israel after traveling with Kay Arthur's evangelical group. She also shared the schedules and locations of meetings planned before and after the trip with the pilgrims; this information later became an important source of data for this study. In addition, the first author joined a group of pilgrims who traveled to Israel in June 2005 and conducted several informal interviews with pilgrims before and after their trips. The primary and secondary data about the November 2005 trip was collected between September 2005 and July 2006. Initial data came from a transcript of participant observation of a preparation meeting with seven key pilgrims who were assigned as "team captains." The captains were very excited about the opportunity and openly discussed their motivations for the opportunity to volunteer in Israel. At a post-trip meeting, the pilgrims shared experiences and photographs and discussed the significance of the trip to them; six of the pilgrims in attendance sat for informal interviews. After the trip, pilgrims received a list of written questions to answer and return via mail or email (the pilgrims were provided with stamped envelopes and informed consent letters). From a list of 38 participants in the November trip, 26 replied (response rate 68%). To contextualize the pilgrims' motivations and reactions, we have also drawn on additional material provided by the couple including booklets, brochures and pamphlets, and original materials created for the pilgrims and their hosts during the last five years.

To a great extent, the interpretive approach that guides the data analysis is symbolic interactionism. Patton (1990, p. 75) suggests that symbolic interactionism "is a perspective that places great emphasis on the importance of meaning and interpretation as essential human processes" and is based on the premise that "people create shared meanings through their interactions, and those meanings become their reality". Accordingly, we interpret the pilgrims' activities in Israel as symbolic actions that reflect the theo-political meanings of the tours more generally. Thus, the analysis of the activities of those who participated in the tours is based on the premise that humans behavior is guided by the meanings people ascribe to their activities. Symbolic interactionist analysis also assumes that meanings are shaped by, and derived from, social interactions with others. An application of a symbolic interactionist analysis to the examination of these activities reveals how the ideological meanings embedded in the tours to Israel are negotiated between the organizers and the pilgrims. As Blumer (1969) suggests, meanings are not static and can be negotiated and modified through interactions with others.

### **Study results**

The findings of this study shed light on four generic actors that are involved in the inspiration, distribution, utilization, and consumption of Christian Zionist ideology in contemporary evangelical pilgrimage. The first actor includes Christian Zionist organizations, such as ICEJ and Moody Bible Institute. These organizations usually tie visits to Israel to the broader ideology of Christian Zionism. At this level, Christian Zionist ideology is usually well articulated in its most precise manner in terms of its theological clarity and context, as introduced in the aforementioned section. The second, as shall be discussed shortly, are the grassroots organizers of the tours. At this local level, the ideology is distributed and materialized into organized tours, in which it is transformed into symbolic touristic activities and itineraries that correspond with the Christian Zionist ideology. Arguably, the most important actors in the examined tours are the

tour organizers who both promote the tours and produce the texts for them and thus have a relatively strong influence on the ideological meanings embedded in the tours. The third actors are the Israeli officials who utilize the ideology by Israeli officials and choose to promote this inbound tourism segment due to its Zionist orientation and economical value. The fourth generic actor is the pilgrim who chooses to consume the Christian Zionist ideology by joining the tours. The findings demonstrate that though evangelical pilgrims find their trips to the Holy Land both religiously significant and, in some cases, life-changing, their experiences and attitudes diverge significantly from those of the tour organizers and from popular portrayals of Christian Zionist activism.

### ***Ideological dynamics: inspiration, distribution, utilization, and consumption***

#### *(i) Christian Zionist institutions*

Today, there are numerous advocates of a strong relationship between the state of Israel and evangelicals “on the ground in Israel” working to assist evangelical pilgrims. Institutions such as the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (IFCJ) and the ICEJ offer Israel political and financial support by encouraging Jewish immigration to Israel and by organizing and funding charitable projects for underprivileged Israelis. Others include the International Christian Zionist Center (ICZC), Bridges for Peace, Christian Friends of Israel (CFI), and The Institute of Holy Land Study (formally known as the Israel-American Institute of Biblical Studies). The ICEJ, founded in 1980, is one of several Israel-based organizations espousing Christian Zionist ideology and offering support to organized tours. The ideology of Christian Zionism is articulated most clearly and systematically by these various organizations, which can be viewed as the ideological inspiration of such tours. ICZC encourages travel to Israel using the prophecies of Zechariah 9:22: “Thousands of years ago, Israel’s prophets foretold that people from around the world would one day come up to the land: ‘Yes, many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the LORD.’” (ICZC, 2007). ICEJ, a self-described Christian Zionist organization, sees itself as “an evangelical Christian response to the need to comfort Zion according to the command of scripture” (ICEJ, 2006). Though its official website declares, “[w]e are not trying to fulfill an end-time agenda,” the website also makes clear that ICEJ views Israel as far more than a nice place to visit.

We proclaim a message to Zion that her modern day restoration is not a historical accident, but the fulfillment of God’s word (Ezekiel 36:24–26; Luke 21:24). A time of great glory awaits Israel even though dark times may precede the break of day. Vision will not fail and from a Jewish Jerusalem, the Lord’s law will go out and the “nations shall not learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:1–4). (ICEJ, 2006)

ICEJ believes the role of the Jews in the end-times to be significant and, perhaps, sufficient to warrant Christian support for Israel. ICEJ stresses further the extent of Christianity’s historical and theological “debt” to Judaism: “Paul affirms that everything we hold dear as Christians has come from the Jewish people,” and emphasizes the need for Christians to repay this debt with “support, prayers, and [a] ministry of comfort” (ICEJ, 2006). The organization reminds all comers that Jesus proclaimed, “Salvation is of the Jews;” in other words, the biblical “Israel” remains covenanted and no evangelism is necessary. Indeed, the ICEJ has been criticized by both evangelists and Messianic Jews (i.e., Jews who follow Jesus without abandoning their religious heritage) for not proselytizing among Jews (Fruchtenbaum, 1990; Ross, 1990). The pilgrimages organized by the Bs,

like many others, include visits to ICEJ or other Christian Zionist Institutions. In these meetings, pilgrims are encouraged to write letters to American congressmen and newspapers in support of Israel, and to offer their prayers on Israel's behalf.

(ii) *Grassroots pilgrimage organizers*

Mr. and Mrs. B embrace the politics and the expression of faith embraced by the above-mentioned Christian Zionist organizations. They identify themselves as "right wingers" in American politics; they are well aware of the potential political implications of their tours to Israel; and they are well versed in the dispensationalist pre-millennialism that has been an important dimension of the Christian Zionist movement. One goal of the pilgrimages, then, though arguably not the primary goal, is to encourage others to conceive of Israel and of history in similar ways. In this endeavor, their results are mixed.

Mr. B explained during a July 2006 interview that he wants the pilgrims he leads to grow in their understanding of how God uses "'geo-political' means to raise up people and events to accomplish His will." Mrs. B also revealed her political orientation in an interview, explaining at length her motives for bringing Americans to Israel:

Well, I want people to know where the history of the future is going to take place. Everything that is happening in the world now – the key is Israel. . . . I want to get them over there to meet the people and to start understanding . . . the complexity of the relationship.

Mrs. B's words deserve careful attention. Her response begins with two statements directly related to dispensationalist eschatology (i.e., "the history of the future," "the key is Israel") and then, except for a late reference to "evil" teachings, uses a vocabulary that is entirely political in its orientation. She speaks of national leaders and lands, votes, and wars. She notes that "some" Palestinians are "sweet, nice people." And she states unequivocally that "our heart is with the Jewish people." When speaking of the pilgrims, Mrs. B describes a desire to help them understand "the complexity of the relationship" between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. Though there can be no doubt about her desire to educate the pilgrims, one can ask in fairness whether the "complexity" to which she refers is more closely related to her view of regional politics, which is admittedly biased (Mrs. B's words indicate that her understanding of the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians begins and ends with her heart favoring "the Jewish people"), or to her complex eschatology, the "key" to which is Israel. In either case, Mr. and Mrs. B are perfectly comfortable speaking openly and in no uncertain terms about political matters.

Mr. and Mrs. B shared their reading of the connection between Christian Zionism and contemporary politics with pilgrims both before and during the tours. In a promotional sermon for the Cargo of Care trip, delivered in a small-town evangelical church in Central Illinois, Mrs. B spoke about sites in Israel, showed slides of those sites, and tied them to biblical stories. During the sermon, she made regular, though less than overt references to the ideology of Christian Zionism. At the outset she stated:

The state of Israel is isolated from Western states and we can learn from it in the way the international media covers the Middle Eastern news. . . . "We", on the other hand, "love God's people" and want to show the Israelis that they are not alone.

By using terms like "state," "international media," and "Middle Eastern news," Mrs. B established a framework in which global politics and political actors figured prominently. She then spoke normatively of how "we" are to act, i.e., to "love God's people" and

“show them that they are not alone,” attempting, it seems, to inculcate or draw forth a political ethic. It is, it seems, in the movement from a political framework to an ethical one that Mrs. B and Mr. B lose the hold they may have had on their pilgrims’ senses of the political, for while most are acutely aware of the macro-politics of the Middle East and Israel, most refused to see their expressions of “love [for] God’s people” as political acts. Thus, even if those “ethical” acts do indeed have political implications, the laypeople don’t see them as such and therefore they understand their tourism in differently ideological terms.

The literature that Mr. and Mrs. B. provide to prospective pilgrims exhibits a self-conscious fusion of religion and politics. During a promotional meeting held at a Midwestern evangelical church, attendees received Jack Hayford’s article “Why stand with Israel today?”<sup>2</sup> Hayford (n.d.), an evangelical pastor based in California, describes Israel’s current situation and lists five ways that Christians can “stand up for Israel:”

- 1) Equip yourself with reliable information, avoiding bigotry and disallowing “blind spots.” Recognize the disposition of popular press . . .
- 2) Accept with continuing faithfulness the Bible’s call to “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (Psalm 122:6), and pray that our Nation will govern in the light of Genesis 12:1–3 . . . “I will bless those who bless you . . .”
- 3) Prayerfully consider visiting Israel as a point of practical support.
- 4) Show friendship toward Jewish friends. Affirm that you, as a believer, stand with Israel as a point of your Bible-based commitment to God.
- 5) While acknowledging the terrorist habits of radical Muslims, be gracious to others.

Hayford (n.d.) presents religion and politics as tightly interwoven, though not coterminous, and appeals to “true” Christians to express their faith by supporting Israel politically. Among the five ways of standing with Israel – one of two over which readers are asked to pray – is “visiting Israel.”

In terms of ideology, it seems that the organizers of the tours are very familiar with the theological component of Christian Zionism. In response to a question about her eschatological beliefs, Mrs. B. wrote:

We align ourselves with many of the dispensationalist doctrines, but not fully . . . I believe that the rapture will come first (i.e., that Yeshua will meet those who love Him in the air), that the antichrist will call himself G~d (and I never have read in the Bible or anywhere else that he’d be Jewish) and set himself up in the Temple, that will have been built there. (By the way, this is the time period when I believe that the Jewish people in Israel will flee to Petra, to escape what’s to come, i.e., the time of Jacob’s trouble, two periods of 3.5 years.) Then Yeshua, King of Kings and Lord of Lords returns to earth to set up His kingdom. He returns with all the saints before, including Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Isaiah, etc, etc, etc, as well as those who believe in Yeshua and who came after Yeshua’s birth, death and resurrection (like me).

According to Mrs. B, the pilgrimages serve the important purpose of showing the Christian faithful the lands in which “the history of the future” will take place. But contrary to some portrayals of Christian Zionists as apocalyptic zealots intent on bringing about these events in history, Mr. and Mrs. B insist that human hands will not initiate this chain of events. Mrs. B wrote further:

. . . the bottom line for us concerning Eschatology is that G~d is in control (not man), and that things will unfold in G~d’s timing and in G~d’s way. We get to watch and see Him work. When we read the Bible and see that the Jewish people will return to Israel, we rejoice, we believe it,

and we see that G~d is faithful to His Word. We want to help in any way we can, motivated by love, not by hastening Yeshua's return. When His Word says that Temple will be rebuilt on the Temple Mount (it's in Ezekiel, the Hebrew scriptures) we believe this as well, though we haven't a clue as to how G~d will orchestrate the events to have this done, since there are indeed two gigantic mosques up there. (email communication, January 12, 2006)

Mrs. B's insistence – stated at least five times in different ways – that God alone knows when the end-times will come and that human actions will not hasten God, has a deeper meaning within the Christian Zionist community. She is making it clear that she is not among the radicals who would resort to violent acts against the “two gigantic mosques up there” in order to force modern events into alignment with prophecy. That kind of action is, according to her, only for God to initiate.

One of the characteristics of evangelical pilgrimages to Israel is the humanitarian activities offered by the pilgrims to the host community. One way to see how the ideology is transformed from ideas into a travel practice is by analyzing these activities. A contextualization of these activities within the ideology of Christian Zionism helps to decipher the meanings of these activities as the organizers view them. Accordingly, it can be argued that the planned humanitarian activities in Israel are not coincidental; they are planned by the organizers of the tours and, therefore, reflect the ideology promoted by the tours' organizers. For example, by visiting an immigration center, the pilgrims can view the apparent realization of biblical prophecies about the return of Jews to their homeland, or as one trip organizer put it, “to view the work of God.” Similarly, all other volunteering activities in Israel are “biblically” framed as an effort to comfort God's people during the pre-Messianic phase, and in line with the dispensationalist worldview of the organizers (see Belhassen, in press).

### *(iii) Israeli officials*

The establishment of the Israel Christian Allies Caucus signifies a concerted effort to officially celebrate relations between Christian Zionists and the state of Israel. Their first Press Release stated:

Knesset Members created the “Christian Allies Caucus” today, in recognition of the importance to Israel's security of the international pro-Israel Christian community. The caucus is the first of its kind in Knesset history. Its purpose is to streamline communications and coordinate activities between the Knesset and Israel's Christian allies. The caucus is also intended to increase awareness, both in Israel and the international community, of Israel's appreciation for the many and varied contributions that its Christian supporters have made to the well being of the people of Israel in their day-to-day lives. (Christian Allies Caucus Press release, January 5, 2004)

Over the last decade, Israeli tourism ministers have suggested a more practical and less ideological way to look at the cooperation between evangelical leaders and the Israeli government. For example, when former tourism minister Abraham Hirschson was asked about the far-reaching consequences of the theological roots of evangelical tourism, he stated, “I'm not a theologian, I'm the minister of tourism, and I'm not interested in the politics of our tourists as long as they come here. They come here as tourists, and they're friends of Israel” (Urquhart, 2006). Similar attitudes were manifested in a recent Press Release by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism when Isaac Herzog, the Minister of Tourism, visited the National Religious Broadcasters conference held in February 2007. Like Hirschson, Herzog explained:

The [American] evangelical market is highly influenced by Christian broadcasting. . . . The [Israeli] Ministry of Tourism reorganizes its [marketing] efforts because it acknowledges the

potential of this segment to contribute to tourism to Israel. I believe that the National Religious Broadcasting conference will enable a significant exposure to Israel. (Israeli Tourism Ministry Press Release, 2007)

In other words, it can be argued that Israeli officials generally believe that since evangelical tourists represent an important and stable segment of its visitors, it is the role of the state of Israel to develop its relationship with those who can organize such tours. The political connotations and ramifications of this relationship should, therefore, be understood in this context.

*(iv) The pilgrims*

The Cargo of Care pilgrims, though much less aware than their tour organizers of the contours of dispensationalist pre-millennialism, held beliefs that either derived from dispensationalist pre-millennialism or were shared by less eschatologically focused versions of conservative Protestantism (for example, that a “proper” reading of the Bible included seeing contemporary Jews as the biblical Israelites; a belief in the imminent arrival of Jesus; the Great Tribulation). No pilgrim described the doctrine of dispensationalism in its Darbyite entirety or even in the detail provided by Mrs. B, but some did make reference to the eschatological outline suggested by dispensationalism and to some specific markers on that outline, such as the rebuilding of the Third Temple before the arrival of Christ. Ariel (2001) suggests that one of the important concerns in this context is whether the belief in the rebuilding of the Third Temple will lead some adherents to look for ways to hasten the arrival of Christ by destroying the two mosques that are currently located on the Temple Mount. Ariel provides examples in which Christian premillennialists have tried to speed up the rebuilding of the Third Temple by financially supporting Messianic Jewish groups involved in searching for the Lost Ark, or breeding red cows whose ashes are required to enable Jews to enter the Temple Mount. Ariel also refers to rare isolated cases where Christian radicals have attempted to burn or blow up the mosques on the Temple Mount. Such activities, we believe, represent only the very most extreme among those who can be considered Christian Zionists. In any case, the Cargo of Care pilgrims did not embrace Darbyite dispensationalism and its elaborate eschatology uniformly and completely. And while many expressed a sense of the importance of Israel in the end-times, they, like the tour organizers, were not inclined to personal acts of apocalyptic radicalism.

The Cargo of Care pilgrims explicitly eschewed any connection between their experiences in Israel and politics. Their travel, they believed, was an expression of religious belief and duty, not of politics. In response to the question “What are the political aspects of the humanitarian tour to Israel?” one pilgrim answered: “There is no political connotation to this trip. Israel is truly God’s chosen people and I feel closer to them as a people. My opinion remains supportive.” Another pilgrim wrote:

There are no connections between these trips and politics. I feel that the state of Israel is a God given gift to the Jewish people. As to my feelings about Israeli people or Jewish people, I don’t think I differ with either, I know that the Bible says that God gave the Jewish people the land.

Though there is a clear difference in the ways tour organizers and pilgrims talk about the politics of pilgrimage, accounting for that difference can lead one down to quickly diverging paths. Christian Zionism is a faith with a vested interest in regional and global politics. The religiousness of those politics might be so deep and so pervasive as to make the term “politics” seem an inadequate, indeed a profane descriptor. In the eyes of such believers, it would not be a political statement to profess unequivocal support of Israel’s right to exist, or the belief that

God's promise to the Israelites is sufficient justification for the contemporary nation-state of Israel. Such statements would be, rather, statements of faith. By the same token, given the humanitarian dimension of these trips and a common tendency to equate politics with the words and actions of elected officials, a denial of the trip's political dimension could also be an effort to separate religiously motivated care for fellow human beings from the perhaps distant realm of national or global politics.

Something like this last reading would seem apt in the case of a pilgrim couple deeply moved by encounters with Palestinian children. Though the "Christian comfort" offered during the Cargo of Care trip was overwhelmingly directed toward Jewish Israelis, the pilgrims were aware of the plight of the Palestinians during their trips, and the organizers arranged for a presentation about Shevet Achim, a Christian organization that "helps bring Arab children to Israeli hospitals for life saving heart surgeries" (SHEVET, 2006). At a post-trip meeting, one of the pilgrims noted that she and her husband had decided to donate money to the organization after returning home. Her husband also mentioned this organization in a letter describing the trip.

I support the concept of an Israeli homeland. God loves the Palestinian people also. I deplore the dreadful violence that both groups feel they must use and pray for a peaceful solution to their disagreements. My wife and I made a significant gift to Shevet Achim which helps to improve relations between individual Jews and individual Palestinian families. I do not believe I feel any closer to the Israelis or to the Palestinians as a result of the trip nor do I feel that my political opinion about either side changed because of the trip. But my hope for the future took a leap forward because of the work of Shevet Achim. I only wish that there were many, many more activities similar to Shevet Achim.

His affection and hope, felt equally for Israelis and Palestinians, are hardly harmonious with depictions of the Christian Zionist as blind to the humanity and the struggles of Palestinians; his apparent appreciation for the daunting complexity of interpersonal, intercultural, and inter-religious relations in Israel and Palestine is a significant development on the analysis offered by the tour organizers.

As noted earlier, the pilgrims found it difficult to separate theology from politics. None of the participants who answered the questionnaire saw any political dimension in the tour. Nevertheless, and somewhat surprisingly, some of them described political consequences of these tours. For example, in his written answer to the question, "Do you think that your political opinion regarding Israel was changed due to the experiences of this trip?" one pilgrim in his fifties revealed one way in which the ideology of Christian Zionism is reproduced as a result of the tours:

I believe the copy of the letter I sent to our president and his administration would reflect best what my political opinion is regarding the current political crisis. This letter was suggested by a Christian organization that has offices in Israel, and provides several tons of food weekly to a segment of the Israeli population.

Dear Sir or Madam:

I am writing to you today as a concerned citizen and devoted Christian. The overwhelming Hamas victory in the recent Palestinian elections demonstrates that despite our best efforts to seek peace in the Middle East, we only serve to empower those who would see harm come upon us. Every concession that the world forces Israel to make in the name of peace is just another victory for their extremist enemies.

In carrying out the disengagement from Gaza and northern Samaria, Israel took a bold step in the pursuit of peace with their Palestinian neighbors. In response to the step, the Palestinian people have elected Hamas, a fundamentalist Islamic terror group that seeks the destruction of the state of Israel, to lead them . . .

Israel has indicated that it is willing to take additional bold steps towards achieving peace in accordance with the Road Map, whereas Hamas leader Muhammad Zahar has said, “There is no peace process. Negotiations for us are not a goal in themselves, but a means to an end” (AP, Jan. 27, 2006). Hamas’s endgame has always been the destruction of Israel, and now more than ever, it is the time to hold them accountable for what they say and do . . . . It is time to recognize that Hamas, funded and supported by Iran and Syria, is a threat not only to the State of Israel but also to the peace and stability of the entire region. Just as with the Taliban in Afghanistan, the terrorist government of the PA must not be immune from the global war on terror, its removal no less just or necessary.

I call on you now to stand strong with Israel, an ally and freedom-loving democracy . . . . and most of all, I call on you to join me in praying for the peace of Jerusalem . . . .

Immediately after quoting his own letter the same pilgrim answered the question “Do you think that there are connections between these trips and politics?” as follows: “I am not aware of any connections. I just wanted to be a blessing to the people of the land, and to make a spiritual journey.” The contradiction between the obvious political tenor of such a letter and the inability to see the political aspects of the tours is an interesting anecdote that deserves exploration. For the current research, however, this letter illustrates not only how the ideology of Christian Zionism is negotiated between one Christian Zionist institution and the pilgrims, but also the role tourism as a practice plays in the celebration of a theo-political ideology (see Table 1).

**Alternative tours: Holy Land Living Stones pilgrimage**

The theo-political relationship of conservative evangelical Christians to the nation-state of Israel has led many to criticize the former for being uncritical in their support of the latter, particularly where the Palestinian question is concerned. While this is certainly the case for many Christian Zionists, and tour organizers and pilgrims generally see events in the region through a lens that is politically pro-Israel and eschatologically pre-millennialist, some pilgrims were uncomfortable describing their trip as political and returned from their trip having learned something of, to borrow Mrs B.’s words, “the complexity of the situation.” Based on our study, Christian Zionist tours are not the brainwashing tours described by Halsell in *Prophecies and politics: Militant evangelists on the road to nuclear war* (1986). Despite what sociologists might see as structural constraints dictating the experience of these pilgrims in Israel, some pilgrims constructed their experiences and interpreted their tours in their own ways. While it is true that we cannot ignore the important role of the organizers who guide the gazes of their pilgrims before, during, and after the tours, we also cannot assume that the pilgrims are passive vessels for the theo-politics of Christian Zionism.

The opponents of Christian Zionism point to the particular and peculiar origins of Christian Zionism in Protestantism while working within previously defined theological, political, and ideological roles (Sizer, 1999). Those who disagree with Christian Zionist

Table 1. The ideological dynamics between Christian Zionism and tourism actors.

Ideological actors	Ideological role	Ideological endorsement	Examples
Christian Zionist institutions	Inspiration	High	ICEJ, ICZC, CFI, Bridges for Peace
Grassroots pilgrimage organizers	Distribution	High	Kay Arthur, Jack Hayford
Israeli officials	Utilization	Intermediate	KCAC, Israel Tourism Ministry
Pilgrims	Consumption	Varies	‘Cargo of care’ participants

ideology also understand the political ramifications – potential and actual – of tourism in the Holy Land, and labor to counteract the itineraries and the ideologies developed by Christian Zionists. The Palestinian Christian organization Sabeel believes that exegetical clarity and alternative theological developments will help dissolve Christian Zionism as an obstacle to peace in the Middle East (for more information about the organization, its agenda, and its activities in North America, see <http://www.fosna.org>). Sabeel, a self-defined “ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians,” and a harsh critic of Christian Zionism, was established in 1989 by the Anglican priest and Israeli citizen Reverend Naim Ateek. Through its North American branch – FOSNA – Sabeel offers tours to the Holy Land for American church-goers similar to the Christian Zionist trips examined in this study. These tours, also known as “International Witness for Justice and Peace Visit[s],” focus on Palestinian cities such as Bethlehem, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, and Tulkarem and include meetings with Sabeel’s representatives (FOSNA, 2006). It is important to note that we have no data regarding the popularity of these tours among American travelers. It is safe to assume, however, that they are not nearly as popular as the Christian Zionist trips. Such tours demonstrate that theo-political pilgrimage is not solely the province of Christian Zionists. Further research would be required to determine the extent to which the participants in these trips are exposed to Sabeel’s political agenda, but some of the literature published by Sabeel demonstrate how a liberationist reading of scripture and of history generates a depiction of Israel that diverges sharply from the Christian Zionist view. In a special Lenten message published on April 6, 2001, Naim Ateek wrote:

Here in Palestine Jesus is again walking the *via dolorosa* [sic] . . . He is with them when their homes are shelled by tanks and helicopter gunships . . . In this season of Lent, it seems to many of us that Jesus is on the cross again with thousands of crucified Palestinians around him. It only takes people of insight to see the hundreds of thousands of crosses throughout the land, Palestinian men, women, and children being crucified. Palestine has become one huge *golgotha* [sic]. The Israeli government crucifixion system is operating daily. Palestine has become the place of the skull. (Ateek, 2006)

The theo-political picture being painted here is, to say the least, quite different than the one developed for and by “Cargo of Care” pilgrims. Their religious call – their Christian duty – would not be to comfort Israel, but to comfort victims of what they see as the “Israeli government crucifixion system.”

Like Christian Zionist mega-events such as the Feast of Tabernacles, organized by the ICEJ, Sabeel also offers counter theo-political conferences. Between April 14 and 18, 2004, Sabeel held a conference in Jerusalem’s Notre Dame Center entitled “Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics, and the Palestine–Israel Conflict.” Sister Elaine Kelley reported that over “600 people from 32 countries, half from the U.S., reflecting the ecumenical diversity within Sabeel” attended the conference. During the conference, Donald Wagner, the director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Chicago’s North Park University and a prominent opponent of Christian Zionism, argued that Christian Zionists “embrace a war theology” and function as a deterrent for peace in the Middle East.

## Conclusion

This article has developed four inter-related points that shed light on the role of Christian Zionist ideology in American evangelical pilgrimages to Israel. To begin with, Christian Zionist tours involve the activities and behaviors of four generic actors. Although Christian Zionism generally supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state on religious grounds, the study shows

that each actor is involved with this ideology in different ways. Nevertheless, the activities and attitudes of each one of the actors toward this ideology and its travel implications illustrate that tourism has become an important vehicle through which this ideology is developed and maintained.

Second, as noted by previous scholars (e.g., Wagner, 2003; Weber, 2004), dispensationalism plays a significant role in shaping Christian Zionist ideology, as demonstrated by the presence of dispensationalist elements in discourses surrounding the examined tours. Our findings show, however, that the intensity and clarity of dispensationalism as expressed in these discourses varied by actors and their roles in the creation of this ideological travel practice. Although the institutions affiliated with Christian Zionism (e.g., ICEJ) and the organizers of the Cargo of Care tour do not accept one version of dispensationalism as the entire doctrine that guides their worldview, we found various dispensationalist components in their justification of tourism to Israel. Thus, we would like to suggest that dispensationalism can still be regarded as the general theological guideline through which one can decipher itineraries and narratives related to such tours.

Third, research about Christian Zionism has assumed a direct correlation between the views of leaders and the views of pilgrims. Though this correlation exists in some instances, it is quite common to find pilgrims who understand their travel in different terms than those used by tour organizers. This divergence is especially clear on the question of the politics of pilgrimage (Belhassen & Santos, 2006). Thus, tourism, at least in the examined case, does not seem to be an efficient way to indoctrinate tourists, as suggested by Halsell (1986). Instead, the occasional disagreement between the organizers and the pilgrims illustrates the difficulty in using tourism itineraries and practices as a tool to promote an ideology. Thus, although it can be safely argued that the trips that we examine aim to promote dispensationalist understandings of the Jewish State, the particular way in which tour organizers express their eschatology and the pilgrims' less than complete embrace of that eschatology complicate previous attempts to characterize Christian Zionist pilgrimage (Halsell, 1986; Sizer, 1999; Weber, 2004). These discontinuities between organizer and pilgrim shed new light on the manner in which the theo-politics of Christian Zionism are expressed among evangelicals in the United States (Smith, 2000, pp. 3–6).

Finally, the case of tours organized by Sabeel illustrates how the Holy Land becomes a contested site for two opposing theo-political ideologies within the same religious movement (i.e., evangelicalism). Interestingly, both opponents utilize tourism as a vehicle to promote their ideologies. Thus, it can be argued that the unmediated experiences that pilgrimages invite are viewed by religious leadership as a timely practice for teaching theology and spreading their values. Protestant pilgrimage to the Holy Land is no longer just a travel practice in which individuals come to visit the holy land (Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2000) and to expand their relationship with Jesus (Bowman, 2000) in the place where Jesus walked and taught.

### Acknowledgment

The authors wish to thank Kellee Caton for her insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

### Notes

1. Beit Talia, a boarding home for at-risk children aged 7–12; Kinneret Project Infant and Pre-School Center for Endangered Children aged newborn to seven; and Beit-Zas: a senior citizen center for Russian immigrants.

2. Jack Hayford is a pastor who leads and manages the Living Way Ministries in California, the Living Way radio station, The King's College and Seminary, The Jack W. Hayford School of Pastoral Nurture, and The Hayford Bible Institute. Hayford was the keynote speaker in 2007 at the Feast of Tabernacles organized by the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem.

### Notes on contributors

Yaniv Belhassen is a member of the Department of Hotel & Tourism Management and Eilat Campus of Ben-Gurion University. His research interests include critical and theoretical inquiries into tourism and leisure.

Jonathan Ebel is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religion in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where he teaches courses on the religious history of the United States. He received his Ph.D. in 2004 from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago.

### References

- Ariel, Y. (1991). *On behalf of Israel: American fundamentalist attitudes towards Jews, Judaism, and Zionism, 1865–1945*. Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publication.
- Ariel, Y. (2001). Doomsday in Jerusalem? Christian messianic groups and the rebuilding of the temple. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 13(1), 1–14.
- Ateek, N. (2006). An Easter message from Sabeel. Retrieved August 23, 2006, from <http://www.sabeel.org/old/reports/easter01.htm>
- Ateljevic, I., & Doorne, S. (2002). Representing New Zealand: Tourism imagery and ideology. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 29(3), 648–667.
- Bar-Yosef, E. (2003). Christian Zionism and Victorian culture. *Israel Studies*, 8(2), 18–44.
- Belhassen, Y. (2007). Inciting the sociological imagination. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 34(4), 1078–1081.
- Belhassen, Y. (in press). Fundamentalist Christian pilgrimages as a political and cultural force. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*.
- Belhassen, Y., & Santos, C. (2006). An American evangelical pilgrimage to Israel: A case study on politics and triangulation. *Journal of Travel Research*, 44(4), 431–441.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bowman, G. (2000). Christian ideology and the image of a Holy Land: The place of Jerusalem pilgrimage in the various Christianities. In J. Eade & M.J. Sallnow (Eds.), *Contesting the sacred: The anthropology of Christian pilgrimage* (pp. 98–121). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Buzinde, C., & Santos, C.A. (2007). Representations of slavery. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 35(2), 469–488.
- Christian Allies Caucus Press release (January 5, 2004). Knesset members create “Christian Allies Caucus” to coordinate activities with Christian supporters of Israel around the world. Retrieved January 2, 2007, from [http://www.cac.org.il/press\\_release.htm](http://www.cac.org.il/press_release.htm)
- Carroll, J. (2002). *Constantine's sword: The Church and the Jews*. New York: Mariner Books.
- Caton, K., & Santos, C.A. (2008). Closing the hermeneutic circle: Photographic encounters with the Other. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 35(1), 7–26.
- Cohen-Hattab, K. (2004). Zionism, tourism, and the battle for Palestine: Tourism as a political-propaganda tool. *Israeli Studies*, 9(1), 61–85.
- Collins-Kreiner, N., & Klot, N. (2000). Pilgrimage tourism in the Holy Land: The behavioral characteristics of Christian pilgrims. *GeoJournal*, 50(1), 55–67.
- Davidson, L. (2005). Christian Zionism as a representation of American manifest destiny. *Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 14(2), 157–169.
- Feldman, J. (2007). Constructing a shared Bible land: Jewish Israeli guiding performances for Protestant pilgrims. *American Ethnologist*, 34(2), 351–374.
- FOSNA (2006). Friends of Sabeel in North America. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from [http://www.fosna.org/about\\_fosna/theological\\_education.html](http://www.fosna.org/about_fosna/theological_education.html)
- Fruchtenbaum, A.G. (1990). The International Christian Embassy – A response. *Mishkan*, 12(1), 30–33.
- Hall, C.M. (1994). *Tourism and politics: Policy, power and place*. Chichester: Wiley.

- Hall, D.R. (1990). Stalinism and tourism: A study of Albania and North Korea. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 17(1), 36–54.
- Halsell, G. (1986). *Prophecies and politics: Militant evangelists on the road to nuclear war*. Westport, Conn: Lawrence Hill.
- Hayford, W.J. (n.d). Why stand with Israel today? Retrieved February 4, 2006, from <http://daytopray.com/uploads/3343.pdf>
- Higgins-Desbiolles, F. (2006). More than an “industry”: The forgotten power of tourism as a social force. *Tourism Management*, 27(6), 1192–1208.
- Hobson, J., & Ko, G. (1994). Tourism and politics: The implications of the change in sovereignty on the future development of Hong Kong’s tourism industry. *Journal of Travel Research*, 32(4), 2–8.
- ICEJ. (2006). The International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from <http://www.icej.org>
- ICZC. (2007). Israel my beloved – International Center of Christian Zionism. Retrieved November 1, 2007, from [http://www.israelmybeloved.com/channel/tour\\_israel](http://www.israelmybeloved.com/channel/tour_israel)
- Israel Ministry of Tourism Annual Report (2007). *Tourism to Israel 2006: Statistical report*. Jerusalem: Israeli Ministry of Tourism.
- Israeli Tourism Ministry Press Release. (2007). Minster Herzog to be the head of the Israeli delegation to the NRB annual conference, February 15, Hebrew. Retrieved March 1, 2007, from <http://www.tourism.gov.il/NR/rdonlyres/F96D8767-83AC-40FE-A767-20345AB0B369/3314/O2007000598.doc>
- Jacobs, J., & Neumann, E. (1958). Way Lewis. In C. Roth (Ed.), *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (pp. 477–478). Tel-Aviv: Massadah.
- Kim, S.S., Timothy, D.J., & Han, H.C. (2007). Tourism and political ideologies: A case of tourism in North Korea. *Tourism Management*, 28(4), 1031–1043.
- LaHaye, T., & Jenkins, B.J. (1995). *Left behind: A novel of the Earth’s last days*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale.
- Lindsey, H., & Carlson, C.C. (1970). *The late great Planet Earth*. Grand Rapid, MI: Zondervan.
- Marsden, G.M. (1980). *Fundamentalism and American culture: The shaping of twentieth-century evangelicalism 1870–1925*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Martin, W. (1996). *With God on our side: The rise of the religious right in America*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Merkley, P.C. (1998). *The politics of Christian Zionism 1891–1948*. London: Frank Cass Publishers.
- Merkley, P.C. (2001). *Christian attitudes toward the state of Israel*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press.
- Morgan, N.J., & Pritchard, A. (1999). *Power and politics at the seaside: The development of Devon’s resorts in the twentieth century*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- Northcott, M. (2004). *An angel directs the storm: Apocalyptic religion and American empire*. London: Taurus.
- Patton, M.Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Pragai, M.J. (1985). *Faith and fulfillment: Christian and the return to the Promised Land*. London: Valentine Mitchell.
- Pritchard, A., & Morgan, N.J. (2001). Culture, identity and tourism representation: Marketing Cymru or Wales? *Tourism Management*, 22(2), 167–179.
- Richter, L.K. (1980). The political use of tourism: a Philippine case study. *Journal of Developing Areas*, 14(2), 237–257.
- Ross, J.S. (1990). Beyond Zionism: Evangelical responsibly to Israel. *Mishkan*, 12(1), 8–27.
- Sandeen, E. (1970). *The roots of fundamentalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sharif, R. (1976). Christian for Zion, 1600–1919. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 5(3/4), 123–141.
- Sharif, R. (1983). *Non Jewish Zionism: Its roots in Western history*. London: Zen Press.
- SHEVET, Shevet Achim. (2006). Who we are. Retrieved January 1, 2006, from <http://www.shevet.org/whoweare.html>
- Sizer, S. (1999). The ethical challenges of managing pilgrimages to the Holy Land. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 11(2/3), 85–92.
- Smith, C. (2000). *Christian America? What evangelicals really want*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tribe, J. (2006). The truth about tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 33(2), 360–381.

- Urquhart, C. (2006). Plans for Holy Land theme park on Galilee shore where Jesus fed the 5,000. *Guardian*, January 4. Retrieved February 10, 2006, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/israel/Story/0,2763,1677557,00.html>
- Wagner, D. (1998). Regan and Begin, Bibi and Jerry: The Theopolitical alliance of the Likud Party with the American Christian 'Right'. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 20(4), 33–51.
- Wagner, D. (2003). Marching to Zion: The evangelical-Jewish alliance. *Christian Century*, June 28. Retrieved February 27, 2007, from [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1058/is\\_13\\_120/ai\\_104681907](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_13_120/ai_104681907)
- Weber, T.P. (1979). *Living in the shadow of the second coming: American premillennialism, 1875–1925*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Weber, T.P. (2004). *On the road to Armageddon: How evangelicals became Israel's best friend*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.