"We Are the Homeowners": Sacred Textuality and the Social Structure of Jewish Religious Nationalism in Israel and the West Bank

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Abstract: This article offers an anthropological look at sacred textuality by exploring the social and theological structure of Jewish religious nationalism in Israel and the West Bank. It argues that the study of sacred texts serves as a medium through which Jewish religious Zionists articulate what it means to return to an ancestral homeland. It demonstrates how the study of these sacred texts is implicated in the cultivation of two different structural modes through which religious Zionists relate to ideas of homecoming. On one side, homecoming rests in a revolutionary force of intellectual insight; on the other, it is expressed through the mystical and mysterious force of prophecy. In a broader sense, this article critiques the reticence of anthropologists to engage seriously with the broader theological ideas that are expressed through a textual medium that can be so much a part of the everyday experiences of individuals living in text-based societies.

Keywords: sacred texts; Bible study; Israel; West Bank

1. Introduction: “We Are the Homeowners”!

The anthropology of religious textuality has been influenced by two interrelated methodological factors. For one, as Robert Redfield argued in 1955, anthropologists tend to view ‘tradition’ at distinct local levels and are generally “not very well prepared to conceive and study the structure of tradition . . . into which the life of the village enters and on which the life of the village in part depends (Redfield 1955, p. 15). In Judaism (as well as Islam and other religions), this structure is often deeply rooted in textual forms (Goldberg 1990). Secondly, Redfield’s well-known focus on village life goes a long way toward highlighting how anthropologists have tended to use distinct spatial categories to classify the broader elements of religious tradition, particularly those that highlight projects of national authenticity and homecoming (Gomes 2013, p. 8; Maybury-Lewis 2002, p. 54). In this way, political geography has often served as the medium through which an experience of nationalism and national homecoming takes place, and which then invariably leads to various forms of inequality and exclusion (Merlan 2009, p. 305). This article builds upon these methodological factors by exploring the social and theological structure of Jewish religious nationalism in Israel and the West Bank. It demonstrates how understandings of authenticity, landedness, and imagined homecoming become not only spatial categories of reference but are also inscribed upon distinct textual canvases.

In November of 2022, Israelis went to the polls for the fifth time in almost two years. As election day ended, it became clear that the voting populace had elected the country’s most religious and right-wing parliament in the nation’s history (Berg 2022). Fourteen of its one hundred and twenty parliamentary seats (nearly 11% of the participating electorate) went to the Religious Zionist party—a confluence of political interests broadly representing Israel’s right-wing settlement blocs. In this election, the RZP allied itself with the Jewish Power Party (Otzma Yehudit) led by Itihamar ben Gvir, a right-wing activist, criminal defense attorney, and former student of Rabbi Meir Kahane.
Ithamar Ben Gvir, who has since become the current National Security Minister, is well known in Israeli society for publicly agitating in support of right-wing nationalist causes. At many campaign events, Ben Gvir could often be observed repeating one of his more well-known mantras. “We are the Homeowners!” (“Anachnu Ba’alei Habayit!”—Hebrew) he would intone forcefully to crowds of supporters. Ben Gvir has tended to repeat that phrase towards local Palestinians and, of course, towards the press, who were often looking on and recording (Goldittschi 2022). For Ben Gvir and his supporters, forcefully highlighting Jewish ownership and sovereignty is meant to denote a certain kind of inherent and direct connection to the Jewish homeland.

To be sure, references to sovereignty over a homeland are nothing new in Religious Zionist discourse (Inbari 2007; Yadgar and Hadad 2022). Yet the rightward demographic shift in Israeli society has only heightened the stakes of that discourse. What are the social and cultural boundaries of this brand of natural or inherent ownership over land, and what are the cultural, theological, or pedagogical metaphors through which these religious Zionists mediate their connection to the land?

This article relates these questions to some of the ‘sacred textual’ modes through which key religious Zionist rabbinic figures currently articulate a notion of homecoming within their Israeli communities. By focusing on the competing modes through which distinctly Biblical narratives are taught, read, and studied, this article offers a culturally grounded yet theologically attuned image of how national religious imaginations work to mold notions of homeland, sovereignty, and religious authenticity.

I argue that the study of sacred Biblical texts serves as a medium through which Jewish religious Zionists articulate what it means to return to a distinct homeland. In this way, the anthropological canon has misunderstood religious Zionist claims to what they term the Land of Israel, the West Bank, or Judea and Samaria, precisely because they have elided the ways in which certain ideas of mystical homecoming resonate through the distinct study and reading of sacred texts. I will demonstrate how the study of sacred and canonical texts is implicated in the cultivation of two different structural ways in which religious Zionists relate to ideas of landed homecoming. On one side of the debate, homecoming rests in a certain revolutionary force of intellectual insight. On the other, however, it is expressed through the mystical and mysterious force of prophecy. In a broader sense, this article critiques the reticence of anthropologists to engage seriously with the broader theological ideas that are expressed through a textual medium that can be so much a part of the everyday experiences of individuals living in text-based societies.

2. Homecoming and Other Anthropological Concerns

Michael Feige (2013) has noted how, for Israeli religious Zionists, a metaphor of “home has become the core component of their identity” (Feige 2013, p. 110), and they mobilize that concept to serve their own public and political agendas. Religious Zionists see the re-emergence of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel as one step towards an ultimate universal redemption (Stern 2012; Ravitzky 1996). In this context, State institutions and even personal structures—such as the home—“have been endowed with sanctity” (Feige 2013, p. 113). For these religious Zionists, dreams of Land coalesce into visions of home to truly a commonly accepted understanding of ‘homeland’.

There exists robust anthropological literature on the topic of diaspora and mass migration (Horevitz 2009). Anthropologists, for example, have noted the relationship between exile, diaspora, and homeland (Levy and Weingrod 2004) and have observed migrants cultivating strong ties with their ‘homelands’ (Levitt et al. 2003). At the same time, anthropologists have been somewhat reticent to engage with the idea of a ‘homeland’ as an analytical category, preferring instead to focus on the ruptures and social disjunctures that the act of homecoming can have for both native and returning populations (Markowitz and Stefansson 2004, p. 4).

This is particularly so when as Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport (2001, p. 2) have argued the ‘homeland’ is actually an ancient collective memory, one that has been clothed in
mythic potentialities. Moreover, as Alyssa Howe observed in her ethnography of San Francisco as a queer pilgrimage site, “anthropologists have, for decades, noted how places are made mythical through the telling of stories and the singing of songs” (Howe 2001, p. 35). This article follows this line of reasoning by demonstrating not only how for Jewish religious Zionists in Israel a sacred homeland is imagined, mediated, and articulated through the study of specific sacred texts, but more importantly, how these texts themselves signal certain ruptures and disjunctures within social settings. In this way, I borrow from Arjun Appadurai and relate the study of sacred texts to a kind of ‘object in motion’ that functions to “precipitate various kinds of problems and frictions in different local situations” (Appadurai 2000, p. 5). For Appadurai, objects mediate between the individual and what it might mean to experience both diaspora and homecoming.

Towards the end of the first Palestinian Intifada, Gurewitz and Aran (1991) made a similar anthropological observation as they began to interrogate—what they perceived as—the imagined relationship between the Jewish citizens of Israel and the Land of Israel. Writing against a religious Zionist outlook that saw an existential connection between the Jewish People and the Land of Israel, they noted how “Within the Israeli experience, there is no whole identification—one that goes without saying—between Israel and its land” (Gurewitz and Aran 1991, p. 9). For them, ideas of land and homecoming never appear in isolation within the broader Jewish tradition but are always mediated by the textual object. That is to say, “the return to the Land of Israel, is nothing more than a . . . return to the text of the place” (ibid., p. 13). In this way, when placed within contemporary social settings, Jewish texts operate as a way to mediate between an imagined community known as the People of Israel and the Land of Israel.

Critical to Gurewitz and Aran, however, is that these sacred texts function to both connect as well as to distance the Jewish People from the Land of Israel. This understanding offers cultural space “to free Israel from the necessity of transforming the land into [something] that is entirely ours and transforming us into [something that belongs] entirely to the land” (Ibid., p. 44). For them, this duality between connection and distance from a mystical homeland also opened a political activist space for negotiations over land and ultimately for a larger reconciliation with the Palestinian other.

This scholarship certainly presents a developed—though albeit politicized—architecture for a better understanding of how visions of collectivity and homecoming coalesce through texts in the social sphere. It falls short, however, of developing the cultural specificity necessary to describe how exactly that happens. What are the pedagogical, theological, and political modes through which texts (as objects) are read and understood that allow for such a complex mediation between a diasporic people and a mystical homeland? This article mobilizes anthropological insights that see objects (or texts) as mediating between a people and a land to better understand how religious Zionists experience their return to a sacred homeland. It centers on the social and theological disjunctures that emerge as rabbinic settlers and religious Zionists find meaning in the sacred texts that both separate and connect them to the land and to each other.

To approach this phenomenon, this article presents a discourse analysis of various forms of popular and sometimes contentious religious Zionist media, all concerning the pedagogical nature of engaging with classical Biblical texts. These include popular texts authored by prominent and influential rabbinic figures, blogs, and news articles authored by rabbinic figures and featured in religious Zionist media outlets, and recordings of lectures and debates between rabbinic figures taken during Biblical seminars.

Discourse analysis is a uniquely useful method in exploring how religiously motivated literate societies interpret and grapple with the sacred texts that structure their social lives. Religious Zionists not only read sacred texts but also respond to them through a textual medium. Texts then become a hermeneutic medium through which culture is both created and reproduced and can also become a field site unto itself in which the praxis of culture is studied and explored in-situ by anthropologists. This discursive data is supplemented by ethnographic accounts of public lectures and interviews conducted with religious Zionist
educational figures who are employed in Israeli high schools as well as post-high school religious Zionist seminaries.

3. A Tale of Two Biblical Seminars

Every year around the month of July, and during the traditional three weeks of mourning leading up to the Jewish fast day of Tisha B’Av, two separate and very much opposed Bible study seminars are held in Israel and the West Bank. The conferences themselves are geared towards Israel’s national religious (otherwise known as religious Zionist) public. For the National Religious, the return of Jewish sovereignty to the Land of Israel is imbued with both political as well as spiritual meaning. In this context, Jewish political statehood is, at the same time, a realization of Jewish political destiny as well as a mystical fulfillment of Biblical prophecy (Stern 2012; Kravel-Tovi 2017; Ravitzky 1996). For them, intellectual and spiritual engagements with sacred texts also entail mystical notions of attachments to land and cultural homecoming. Each Bible conference lasts about three days and includes a variety of classes, roundtables, and pedagogical workshops for a variety of age groups.

The similarities between the two seminars, however, end here. One Bible seminar is hosted by Herzog College and is associated with the national religious sector as well as the Har Etzion premilitary rabbinic seminary. Herzog College is located within the settlement of Alon Shvut and is physically adjacent to the premilitary seminary itself. Alon Shvut is known to be a “religiously tolerant” settlement, populated by mostly upper-middle-class college-educated individuals (Harel 2015, pp. 66, 126). Gush Etzion itself (including Alon Shvut) is also the home to a large and well-established English-speaking immigrant community, although Herzog College and the adjacent seminary do not necessarily gear themselves toward this population (Hirschhorn 2017).

The Bible seminar hosted by Herzog College is known to offer a more academic and scholarly critical approach to the sacred scriptures that highlights a specific method of Biblical study known as “*tanach b’govah ha’einayim*”—the Bible at Eye-Level. This approach can be characterized by two pedagogical techniques. For one, in this perspective, the popular Biblical protagonists are primarily viewed as fallible individuals with the same emotions, passions, and common foibles as contemporary individuals. Secondly, this approach relies on a hermeneutic technique that is known as a ‘simple reading’ of the Biblical narratives (*peshuto shel hamikra*). Here, readers employ a kind of interpretive independence by engaging directly with the varied meanings of Biblical texts in ways that sidestep or downplay the importance of the traditional medieval commentaries that—as will be discussed—is so much a focus of more classical rabbinic seminaries (Angel 2007, p. 7; Stern 2018, p. 182). Finally, the ‘Bible at Eye-Level’ technique borrows heavily from modern modes of critical Biblical scholarship. Rabbis, in this vein, tend to use more structural, literary, and digital techniques in reading and analyzing Biblical texts, and they are more open to referencing non-Jewish and academic Biblical scholarship.

The second and alternative Bible seminar is held in the upper-middle-class central Israeli city of Givat Shmuel. The seminar is sponsored by some of the most well-known and religiously zealous religious Zionist seminaries in the West Bank and Israel proper. Following the 2005 disengagement from the Gaza Strip, many religious Zionists felt that while they were successful in settling the Hilltops of the West Bank (and the Gaza Strip), they had failed to convince the majority of Israelis of the utility and righteousness of their cause. In that sense, the seemingly bourgeois location of this alternative Biblical seminar hearkens back to the call by these religious Zionists to focus less on settling the Land of Israel and more on settling into “the hearts” of Israeli society (Feige 2009).

This Bible seminar rests on a technique that is popularly referred to as “*Tanach b’govah shamayim*”—the Bible at the level of Heaven (Filber 2019). In sharp opposition to the ‘eye-level’ approach, this technique highlights the infallibility of the classical Biblical protagonists. While it may also focus on the ‘simple meaning’ of the scriptures, it does so primarily through the lens of Jewish religious tradition and the classical, medieval Biblical
commentaries. Finally, this approach is known to be highly critical of academic Biblical scholarship. The Rabbis who follow this method are popularly called Rabbanei HaKav—“Rabbis of the line”. These are individuals affiliated with rabbinic institutions that see themselves as ‘guarding’ what they see as the authentic interpretation of Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook’s mystical ideology of redemptive nationalism. As the Biblical text is infallible, so too are the teachings of Rabbi Kook, which stress the spiritual unity of all creation and, in doing so, highlight the hidden sanctity inherent within a secular Jewish State (Stern 2014; Mirsky 2014).

Israeli religious Zionists themselves often discuss the differences between these two approaches. As Rabbi Bazak—one of the main proponents of eye-level Biblical study—pointed out in a recent interview, they tend to focus on both the legitimacy of studying the simple meaning of a text without being tied to rabbinic tradition and the position of contemporary academic studies within the spiritual milieu of classical rabbinic studies (Aviner and Bazak 2012). Yet, the periodic regularity in which this conflict tends to reemerge within the religious Zionist public belies much deeper tensions at stake in the matter.

4. The Bible in Israeli Religious Zionism

Over the past decade, anthropologists have begun to take note of how key Biblical texts are often “publicly manipulated, pushed, and pulled” by different political interest groups (Weiss 2014, p. 21). In both Christian and Islamic contexts, anthropologists have demonstrated how the interpretation of sacred and canonical texts have become central sites for the formation and contestation of political experience (Bielo 2008; Bielo 2009; Hirschkind 2001). Within Israeli society specifically, Leah Taragin-Zeller (2014) has observed how ultra-orthodox young women actively reinterpret Biblical verses in ways that allow them to develop their own views of modesty in patriarchal contexts. Likewise, Weiss has shown how the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) has served as a repeating motif for Israeli national sacrifice (Weiss 2014). In these instances, ideological and political motifs are mediated through the telling and retelling of Biblical narratives. At the same time, the specific pedagogical structure through which those texts are read and interpreted have eluded scholarly attention.

Historically, the Bible and Biblical study have taken only a secondary position within rabbinic culture and pedagogy. The Rabbinic study has generally been focused on the late antiquity works of the Mishna, the Talmud, and their many medieval and early modern commentaries (Helmreich 2000, pp. 60–61; Heilman 2001, pp. 6–8). Traditionally, Talmudic discourse was the true hallmark of rabbinic scholarship, and Biblical study served as only an ancillary component of that goal. Indeed, in many contemporary rabbinic seminaries in Israel and abroad, students have little experience engaging directly with Biblical texts, and when the Bible is studied, it is only conducted through the sole prism of the many medieval Biblical commentaries.

For Jewish religious Zionists, however, the establishment of the State of Israel, and more specifically, Israel’s victory in the 1967 six-day war, transformed the role that religious texts play in Jewish intellectual life. For religious Zionists, as the Jewish People reclaimed their natural rights to the greater Land of Israel in the West Bank, they were also in a position to reexamine and “reclaim” their relationship to the prophetic Biblical texts (Halevi 2013, p. 154). If Diaspora rabbinic culture focused almost exclusively on “Talmudic study”, religious Zionists in the Land of Israel would place a renewed emphasis on elucidating and analyzing the sacred Biblical scriptures. Currently, Biblical studies are a central component of a religious Zionist post-high school education. It is a major element of most premilitary rabbinic seminaries, and it is especially highlighted in the many teachers’ colleges that are specifically geared towards religious Zionist students. As a result, the different pedagogical methods through which Biblical study is approached within the religious Zionist public also mark very different philosophical worldviews regarding the imagined relationship between a people and a land.
5. Two Forms of Biblical Study

5.1. Revolutionary and Intellectual

The turn towards the sacred scriptures is accompanied by an internal dual logic that is both intellectual, revolutionary, and deeply mystical. On one side of the equation rests an understanding that a return to national sovereignty in the Land of Israel can allow adherents to reinvigorate and reimage scriptural interpretations. As Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun—an erstwhile leader of the religious Zionist settlement movement and a proponent of Biblical studies within a rabbinic pedagogical framework—explained,

The flowering of Torah and faith in the Land of Israel is conditioned on the ability to vanquish fear . . . . In the study house there exists a fear of “new readings”, and other dangers, a fear that silences every new and fresh thought. (Bin Nun 2013, pp. 162–63)

For Bin-Nun, one of the original proponents of the “Bible at Eye-Level” methodology, this fear of new interpretations is nullified (perhaps can only be nullified) through the Jewish national renewal in the Land of Israel. As he further notes.

We found ourselves with the renewed ‘Torah of the Land of Israel’. With what the creator of the world graced us with his wisdom, foresight, grace and knowledge, and . . . in the wondrous miracle of our resurrection as a people, and so we were able to discover great and hidden insights and innovations that could not be imagined by previous generations that were much stronger than us. It is not that we are greater than they were—god forbid we should think that—but rather they lived “amidst the exile” (Ezekiel 1:1), and their whole world was subject to the whims of evil nations . . . and for us, in the merit of those persecuted generations, our feet stand in the land of Biblical prophecy and we see before our eyes the wondrous works of God in the ingathering of the exiles . . . (Bin Nun 2013, p. 164)

Here, a metaphysical relationship exists between homecoming (“our feet stand in the and of prophecy”) and the sacred scriptures. The argument here is not that the return to the Land of Israel gives adherents access to prophetic insight. Rather, for Bin-Nun, a return to the land of Biblical prophecy creates the conditions for an intellectual revolution in Biblical studies. The study of the sacred scriptures can take on new horizons and can become more authoritative only within the Land of Israel.

Bin Nun’s thought on the issue also goes beyond an argument from authority. For him, a physical Jewish homecoming in the Land of Israel can not only reinvigorate the Jewish People but can revolutionize Jewish interpretations of their sacred scriptures to include more academic, structural, and critical stances towards the sacred and canonical texts. Thus, for example, while Bin Nun was firmly opposed to allowing academic works of Biblical criticism into the study hall of his own premilitary rabbinic seminary—Yeshivat Hakibbutz HaDati in Ein Tzurim—he did allow those works into the seminary’s library. A physical return to one’s homeland can sanctify, or at least neutralize, spiritual dangers inherent in academic critical Biblical scholarship.

5.2. Mystical and Prophetic

On the other side of the equation, however, rests a different understanding of biblical narratives and heroes that revolves around the mystical, mysterious, and prophetic nature of those texts. This perspective can best be seen ethnographically at the 2022 Tanach b’govah shamayim seminar in Givat Shmuel. One of the first lectures was a structuralist understanding of the Book of Leviticus by Rabbi David Matoki, the dean of a southern West Bank Seminary named Netivot Dror.

Rabbi Matoki explained how the biblical canon tends to follow a similar spiritual path, wherein the text presents the reader with a vision of an ‘ideal’ world, which is then broken, though ultimately repaired. Rabbi Matoki noted how the original sin of Adam presents the literary archetype for this theme. The first chapters of Genesis paint a picture of an unmitigated experience of spirituality in Eden. With the fall of Adam and Eve, the
entire rest of the Bible (and perhaps implied here is the history of religion in general) is an attempt to restore that spiritual world. For Rabbi Matoki, the major conflict expressed within the Biblical text is between a world where “divine inspiration is ever present” and the rote ritualism of organized religion. Likewise, the proper return to that world of primal spirituality stands as the ultimate challenge posed by the sacred scriptures. That day in the seminar signaled another form of mystical homecoming wherein Biblical study points to a return to a direct connection with divinity. This connection plays itself out on the pages of history just as it does within the heavy tomes of sacred texts.

This message is more elaborately drawn out by Rabbi Matoki’s spiritual teacher, Rabbi Tzvi Yisrael Tau, the president of Yeshivat Har Hamor in Jerusalem. In the late 1990s, Rabbi Tau broke away from Yeshivat Mercaz Harav, Religious Zionism’s flagship seminary, over the latter’s decision to include an academic Teacher’s College within the yeshiva (Gordon and Ohana 2020, p. 737; Harel 2017, p. 140). Graduates of Har Hamor and students of Rabbi Tau have been instrumental in founding religious Zionist educational institutions throughout Israel and the West Bank, including a number of premilitary rabbinic academies.

In 2006 Rabbi Tau published a book titled _Tzaddik B’Emunato Yihye: Al Ha’Gisha L’limmud Torah_ (A Righteous Man Lives Through his Faith: On the Approach to the Study of Torah). In this text, Tau attacks the recent trend of academic-styled Biblical studies in religious colleges and, most pertinently, within rabbinic seminaries. Similar to Bin-Nun, Rabbi Tau’s insistence on delineating between academic and rabbinic studies within the seminary walls is directly related to his mystical understanding of the Jewish return to the Land of Israel. For Rabbi Tau, however, “one is not capable of approaching sanctity [the biblical texts] through a dry secular perspective, but only through faith” (Tau 2006, p. IX).

Rabbi Tau’s opposition to academic Biblical studies revolves around the relationship he constructs between the categories of ‘faith’, ‘land’, and ‘prophecy’. In this worldview, the ideal and most natural prophetic moment began during the Biblical era and ended sometime after the destruction of the First Temple. In this paradigm, it is crucial that Biblical prophecy occurred during an era of idolatry, the period roughly preceding the destruction of the first Temple when Israel’s monotheistic faith was vying with the polytheism of the Canaanite and Philistine inhabitants of the Land of Israel. For Tau, both idolatry and prophecy signal—quite paradoxically—the natural and instinctive flow of divine energy and power within the Land of Israel.

The desire for idol worship with all its dark results operates on the same instinct as faith. At the moment when she is shining forth in all her naturalness and power, she also loses the ability to train for wisdom and justice and all of the feelings of life both in morals and in actions. In such a state, this instinct devolves and turns into ugly idol worship. But that same instinct of the soul when it lands on a ground of purity and sanctity . . . can reach prophecy, which is a hidden sanctity. (Tau 2006, p. 5)

For Tau, idol worship, and perhaps polytheism in general, emerges out of what he sees as a pure desire for an unmediated relationship with the divine. Notably, the same is true for monotheism. Idol worship then served as the context through which prophetic monotheism emerged within the Bible and ancient Israel. Then, the study of these sacred texts becomes not just an intellectual pursuit but also a mystical push towards uncovering that “hidden” and instinctive state of prophecy that was lost after the destruction of the First Temple (Shai 2003, p. 106). Yet, this effort is always impartial and incomplete. An adherent —no matter how pious—cannot truly and fully experience prophecy, and thus is barred from truly understanding the sacred texts.

We can just take a general understanding from the Torah and prophecy, just what is possible to understand at our level of wisdom. We nevertheless study and explicate for ourselves, but truly one who is not a prophet, cannot grasp prophecy . . . one who is lacking that supernal light, cannot reveal the true light of prophecy. (Tau 2006, p. 7)
Rabbi Tau goes on to highlight the mysterious, hidden, and irrational aspects of Jewish sacred texts that cannot easily be divorced from biblical study. “There are those”, he continues,

Who believe that it is possible to approach the study of the Bible with human rationality, with a mind that is devoid of all faith and sanctity, with a dry secular academic perspective, where the researcher stand above the matter . . . This is a mistake [such a researcher] will not gain anything from this. (Tau 2006, p. 10)

Tau’s strong injunction against rationalist approaches to biblical study echoes Ludwig Wittgenstein’s well-known refutation of the anthropological and evolutionary theories of religion by the likes of Frazer and Tylor. For Wittgenstein, offering scientific models that work to ‘explain’ religion’s hold on a society often elides the very real emotive impact of religion itself. As he notes, “But for someone broken up by love an explanatory hypothesis won’t help much.—It will not bring peace” (Wittgenstein 2002, p. 87).

For Rabbi Tau, prophecy in the Bible works along similar lines. Modern literary or critical explanations of the biblical texts and their major protagonists elide the mystical and spiritual impetus of the biblical message itself. What can be done, however, to retain that spiritualism is to study the biblical texts through the prism of rabbinic and Jewish tradition. As he wrote further,

Even though we are not prophets, we have merited the rabbinic sages who were close to prophecy . . . the knowledge that through the rabbinic sages one sees the depth [of the Bible], is an essential understanding. (Tau 2006, p. 11)

This rabbinic tradition is the closest one can arrive to that hidden prophecy which is a marker of a mystical and instinctive Jewish return to the Land of Israel.

On the one side of this argument stands a rationalistic mode of textual study that bears within it a revolutionary impulse to reclaim the Bible along with the land. On the other, however, rests a mystical impulse that sees biblical study through the prism of tradition as an opportunity to reclaim a naturalistic and indigenous form of spirituality. That natural and instinctive experience of prophecy in the Land of Israel is precisely what is at stake for these religious Zionist rabbinic figures who must grapple with teaching the prophetic texts. Both of these perspectives (the rationalistic/intellectual and the mystical/prophetic) identify in Biblical study a force that mediates an imagined return to a primal homeland.

It is interesting to note how this rationalistic/intellectual approach is also rooted in a religious Zionist historical context. As Liran Gordon and David Ohana have noted, there existed some sympathetic feelings between Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda at the Mercaz Harav seminary and the nascent, historically secular, Hebrew Canaanite movement that saw in the Jewish reclamation of Zion, an opportunity to return to the nascent roots of the Jewish People (Gordon and Ohana 2020, p. 729). The Hebrew Canaanites tried to forge a strict separation between the Jewish religion found in the diaspora and a supposed Hebrew culture found only in the Land of Israel (Rabin 1999). For some of the religious Zionist students around Rabbis Kook, a straightforward unmitigated reading of the Bible that was bereft of the rabbinic (diaspora) commentary could recreate a kind of primal and instinctive Hebraism on religious terms.

Currently, these two forms of Biblical engagement are viscerally felt within the communities, seminaries, and town halls within the West Bank and Israel Proper. There is little love lost between adherents of these two approaches. This can be clearly seen within the religious Zionist media. As one religious Zionist Rabbi wrote in response to an online query concerning the proper outlook one must have in relation to ‘eye-level’ Bible study,

In our generation, one that disguises a knowledge of torah with searches on internet databases, allow themselves to embarrass the great and wise elders of the nation, requires a sharp response. Whoever thinks there is a place for the ‘Bible at Eye-Level’ signals about himself that he has eyes, but cannot see. A [kind of] spiritual bat and shows that he has no height. (Zeini 2011)
The author here is making a play on the Hebrew word Govah—literally height. He is claiming that someone who follows the Bible at Eye Level approach is little more than a mental midget. On the other side, those who teach the Biblical texts using an ‘eye-level’ approach tend to look askance at the ways in which some contemporary rabbincic figures can be so uncritical, not just of the ancient sages but of the current rabbinic power structures within Israeli religious Zionism itself. As one Bible teacher said in a recent interview,

This is especially present in Rabbi Tzvi Tau and his students, that they are the only legitimate way of reading Rav Kook and [his son] Rav Tzvi Yehuda and anyone else is just not authoritative, therefore don’t learn them. It’s sort of a cult as far as I can see, the inner circle is sort of a cult and act like a cult.

Here, tensions around textual interpretation can also be mirrored in social life. Rabbi Tau, for example, has recently been accused by several religious Zionist women of sexual misconduct. The publisher of Tau’s Tsaddik B’Emunato Yihye uploaded a Facebook post calling for an open and honest investigation of the accusations. Another religious Zionist rabbinic Bible scholar responded by castigating him for publishing what he viewed as Tau’s hateful treatise against fellow rabbinic educational institutions. Here, one issue at stake—a widely publicized case of sexual misconduct—is a somewhat obscure argument revolving around Biblical pedagogy.

More broadly, adherents of both approaches tend to live in like-minded communities, send their children to like-minded schools, and marry like-minded partners. At the same time, both groups identity as ‘religious Zionists’ and intuit a kind of redemptive and mystical homecoming in the strong importance they both place on Biblical study. As such, one should also not be too quick to overestimate the tension between these two groups. There is still a good deal of respect and regard between individuals representing those groups. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner—one of the leading, prominent, and most forceful figures opposing eye-level Biblical analysis—attested to this in a response he wrote to an online question “what is the proper relationship to rabbis who teach the Bible at eye level?”.

They aren’t [just] called “rabbi”, but rather wise sages [talmidei chachamim]. By the way, apparently, they are wise sages without beards. And it’s not permissible to disgrace them God Forbid just because we think they are mistaken about biblical study. That is also an error. Rather, Rabbis sometimes say things which are incorrect. (Aviner 2018)

Interestingly, by focusing on their lack of beards, Rabbi Aviner even implicitly defends their more “modern” philosophical outlook along with their more modern appearance.

6. Sacred-Textual Interpretation as Homecoming

These two forms of sacred-textual interpretation also inform how a sense of homecoming can become inscribed onto a pietistic imagination. In another reasoned response to eye-level analysis, Rabbi Aviner was asked, “I listened to a Bible lecture that utilized archaeology, it was a wonderful experience, is there any downside to this?”.

Rabbi Aviner takes a moderated approach to the issue as well. “I’m not opposed to archaeology, or to [religious] experiences. But experience is not the goal of the Bible but rather fear of heaven, faith and upholding the commandments” (Aviner 2018). At stake in this issue was Aviner’s belief that while Biblical archaeology might be an interesting pursuit, it ought to remain separate and distanced from religious studies. Yet, implied in this argument was also an understanding that fear of heaven, faith, and the commandments are experiences that are mediated through textual study. Through these text-based attributes, one cultivates a sense of national pride through spiritual piety. In this perspective, academic analysis, or an ‘eye-level’ approach to Biblical study, is seen as removing the possibility of spiritual and ethical improvement. Or, as Aviner wrote in the weekend edition of the popular religious Zionist newspaper Makor Rishon,

Perceiving the Bible at eye-level belies the possibility of rising above [eye-level] and to cleave to the sanctity of our national heroes. In order to criticize them,
one must be pure, sacred, and without blemish . . . It is not a coincidence that the master of the universe decreed in his wisdom that they were the first to constitute the nation, that is to say that our history begins with worldly giants . . . (Aviner and Bazak 2012)

For Aviner, the Bible and its heroes represent the pietistic kernel of the Jewish national consciousness. As he goes on to describe these heroes, “Their sublime character is embedded within us, it is a national, psychological, spiritual, [and] hereditary treasure for our people” (Aviner and Bazak 2012). In this way, reading the Biblical texts through the lens of the rabbinic tradition of interpretation works to safeguard that inherent, mystical kernel of national consciousness.

For his part, Rabbi Tzvi Tau came out forcefully against utilizing archaeological insights in advancing Bible study. For example, regarding the Mesha Stele in Biblical studies, Rabbi Tau inveighs,

They [academic scholars] bring a corrupt and drunk goy [Mesha the Moabite King], who glorifies himself with some writing that describes how he killed Jews . . . that’s considered an extremely important historical source?! That’s what we have to bring to study the scriptures?! . . . Even if these kinds of archaeological findings were to coincide with what is written in the Bible, so what? Arafat said something, is that supposed to interest us? Maybe in another thousand years they will bring his words as an important historical source . . . they will say with wonder, “here was an important man, one of the leaders of the area . . . “ What do we have with them?! This is just going off the path, a disgrace and a humiliation. (Tau 2006, p. 120)

Here, Rabbi Tau is referring to how some religious Zionist Teacher’s colleges make use of archaeological data—in this case, the Mesha Stela’s references to ancient Israel—in their readings of biblical texts. For him, such evidence, even if it were to strengthen the biblical narrative, is simply irrelevant. In his view, it is disgraceful to use immoral and hateful individuals (like Mesha, King of Moab, or Arafat, for that matter) to cultivate spiritual and pietistic experiences.

At the same time, adherents to ‘eye-level’ biblical analysis turn to a different kind of moralistic piety in defense of their method of study. For them, viewing the biblical heroes as entirely otherworldly figures only works to separate them from the everyday experiences of students. That is to say, the biblical heroes cannot serve as legitimate role models for students. Secondly, as Rabbi Yuval Cherlow—the Rabbinic head of a well-known moderate religious Zionist premilitary seminary—noted in a recorded lecture (Cherlow n.d.),

Not just that, what is even worse however is that it [the style of study] habituates the individual to whitewash, to deceive, to cut corners, to do anything else, just so our forefathers will come out unblemished [in our study]. And your obligation to the truth, to honesty, to fairness, to [one’s ability to] cleaving [to God] to all those things are impaired. And your sensitivity to your other relations, to a man and his friend, which are [also] problematic are [also] impaired. It’s not good to study Torah like this.

For Cherlow, there is a moral price to pay for a style of learning that places Biblical heroes on pietistic pedestals. In this way, the propensity to whitewash the character flaws of Biblical figures has the capacity to teach individuals to whitewash other ethical aspects of their lives. From this perspective, the rational ability to revolutionize Biblical study in the Land of Israel through eye-level textual analysis bears its own kind of pietistic impetus.

Piety and morality were also an issue at stake in a lecture recorded at one of the recent ‘eye-level’ Bible seminars at Herzog College in Gush Etzion. The seminar invited Eliezer Kashtiel, a rabbinic educator from the premilitary seminary in the West Bank town of Eli, and Amnon Bazak, a rabbi from the Har Etzion premilitary seminary in the West Bank town of Alon Shvut, to debate their differing hermeneutic approaches towards Biblical study. Representing the position of the Yeshivot HaKav and of Rabbi Tau, Rabbi Kashtiel,
explained his approach to understanding the tale of the prophet Elisha and the woman from Shunem (2 Kings 4). “I don’t think we have the ability to understand what a prophet is”, Rabbi Kashtiel explained,

And certainly not to consider how a prophet erred . . . secondly when I study bible and when I teach the bible the center of the weight that I think is important, is what happens to us, what happens to me. I don’t like and don’t think that I can talk about Elisha, but what can I learn. I want to learn from the Shunamite woman her innocence, and her fear of heaven. I want to learn, from Elisha that he has a great desire to give, but one always has to remember the source [of that desire] to give. (Bazak and Eliezer 2017)

For Rabbi Kashtiel, the Bible, in a very practical sense, is supposed to impart to students’ lessons of piety and morality. Perhaps echoing Maimonidean negative theology—as well as his teacher Rabbi Tau—Kashtiel argued that while one cannot fully experience prophecy, the contemporary reader can understand piety and morality (Benor 1995; Seeman 2008, p. 205). It is on the level of piety that adherents can garner a taste of the mystery of biblical prophecy. A return to that direct, unmitigated, and pure era of biblical prophecy is the ultimate goal of this kind of pietistic homecoming. Rabbi Bazak, in his response, departed from this trajectory, however,

This is the main point. When we approach an article of the Bible, what are we doing? Do we ask, like Rabbi Kashtiel says, How can I improve myself? What can I learn from Elisha? Or, do I approach the Bible without any preconceived notions about what I’ll find there, and I approach the article and read it and learn it and try to ask not what I want—that’s a problematic word—but what the bible wants to tell me. (Bazak and Eliezer 2017)

Here, Bazak argues for an interpretive approach that places the meanings implicit in the biblical text itself at the center of analysis. In a recent interview, Rabbi Bazak described himself as the ‘second generation of [rabbinic] Bible scholars, for whom a distinct focus on the centrality of the ‘Land of Israel’ is less important than a faithful and straightforward reading of the scriptures. Yet, resting behind this almost academic outlook is the near revolutionary capacity to approach the biblical text free from the pietistic burden of rabbinic stricture. It is not that Rabbi Bazak is especially opposed to piety; rather, it is that piety must emerge out of an unmitigated intellectual engagement with the text itself. For him and his colleagues, pietistic homecoming emerges out of a straightforward, rational, and intellectual experience with the Biblical texts, one that is unburdened by traditional diasporic rabbinic interpretation.

7. Conclusions

In his 1983 essay The State of Being Jewish, Stanley Diamond explored the troubled relationship that exists between Jews, notions of landedness, and the study of sacred texts (Stern 2022).

What is a Jew? Who am I? The answer: A people without a culture (a text is not a culture), without a society, haunted by archaic references, trying to live in abstractions. (Diamond 1983, p. 1)

For Diamond, the Jewish engagement with texts was a mark of a lack of cultural ‘holism’. Jewish experiences were a series of theological abstractions which lacked a real-world material quality. The implication here is that—in Diamond’s analysis—Jewishness escapes anthropological investigation precisely because Jewish texts cannot properly stand in for material culture. It follows that if texts cannot serve as the basis of “culture” (and thus a basis of anthropological interest), then text-based societies (like Judaism, though not exclusively so) can never be fully represented within the anthropological cannon. By contrast, this article sees notions of homecoming, authenticity, and landedness as a sacred textual category, one that is albeit linked to geography (in this instance, Israel and the West Bank) but not reduced to it.
In a certain sense, for Jewish religious Zionists in Israel, Biblical interpretation becomes a discursive commodity that has the capacity to mediate between different mystical visions of homecoming. In a lengthy discussion on the impact of new technologies on globalization, Arjun Appadurai discussed the way in which communication can highlight the disjunctures between disparate peoples. It will always have some discontinuities, some heterogeneities, which is what always underlies the need for mediation and communication of any type. If we understood each other perfectly face-to-face, presumably we would cease to speak: in the end we would just look understandingly at each other . . . But the question of how these things shape real life worlds is, I think, still critical. (Appadurai and Morley 2011, p. 40)

In this way, Appadurai stresses the importance of engaging with the local cultural minutiae, which are so influential to new digital forms of communication. This article has looked at how Jewish religious Zionists in Israel and the West Bank use sacred Biblical texts to define what it means to return to an ancient, mystical, and mythical homeland. Following Appadurai, I argue that to view sacred texts as operating to mediate between visions of national homecoming, means structurally delving into the specific minutiae of how those texts are actually interpreted within social contexts.

Biblical study offers one overarching means through which religious Zionists in the West Bank and beyond categorize themselves and interpret broader moral and political imperatives in the world around them. For some, the Land of Israel allows for a direct intellectual engagement with the Biblical texts alongside a more revolutionary mode of interpreting them. For others, a return to the Land of Israel allows for a broader return to a primal form of pious spiritualism, one that paves the way for a closer and unmitigated experience of the divine.

In both instances, encounters with sacred texts become a model for a much larger moral, philosophical, and political engagements with the world. In this sense, sacred texts ought to be taken seriously not only because they are cultural in the anthropological sense but also because they create the very precondition for cultural engagement. Indeed, they create the context through which Ben-Gvir and his associates in the current right-wing Israeli government proclaim themselves to be the rightful ‘homeowners’ of the land. Yet as Zali Gurewitz and Gidon Aran remind us, “One cannot apprehend it [the Land] as if it were a virgin land . . . the Land of Israel has been owned,^{2} not only by history and by other nations, but rather by the book”.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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**Notes**

1. Bible Study is also a mandated educational component in both secular and religious state-mandated Jewish high schools.

2. From the Hebrew term Ba’ul which also means ‘deflowered’, or the opposite of ‘virginity’.

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