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On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.

Vienna, June 2026

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To my grandparents, I wish you could have seen this.

Figure 1. Moses and the Burning Bush.

Gustave Doré, “Moses and the Burning Bush,” in *275 Bible Illustrations* (Independently Published, 1876), Engraving.



“I have come down to deliver them ... and to bring them out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...”

- Exodus 3:7 (NRSV)

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Abstract

Religion continues to influence political institutions, collective identities, and processes of political legitimization despite longstanding assumptions concerning its declining significance in public life. While Religious Zionism is frequently associated with theological claims to territory and the biblical concept of the “Promised Land”, relatively little research has examined how such narratives are actually mobilized within formal political institutions. Addressing this gap, this thesis investigates to what extent and how Bezalel Smotrich mobilized the theological narrative of the “Promised Land” in Knesset plenary sessions to legitimize territorial claims and settlement expansion between 2021 and 2025.

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in an actor-centered case study approach. The empirical analysis is based on 129 official Knesset plenary session transcripts, including a focused analysis of 77 transcripts associated with Bezalel Smotrich and a limited comparative examination of Zvi Yedidya Sukkot of 52 transcripts. Using deductive thematic analysis and systematic coding, the study identified and analyzed references associated with the “Promised Land” narrative through a broader set of theological and biblical expressions, including references to the “Land of Israel”, “Judea and Samaria”, biblical figures, scripture, covenantal language, and related religious terminology.

The findings demonstrate that the explicit term “Promised Land” appeared very rarely within the analyzed corpus. Instead, political actors relied on a wider theological vocabulary through which territorial claims were articulated and legitimized. The analysis further revealed a significant transformation in Smotrich’s parliamentary rhetoric over time. Explicit theological references, scriptural quotations, and direct appeals to religious authority were most prominent in 2021 and gradually declined. By 2025, explicit theological rhetoric had largely disappeared from the analyzed parliamentary interventions. At the same time, territorial concerns remained consistently present, increasingly framed through administrative, political, historical, and security-related arguments. The findings therefore indicate that institutional position influenced the public expression of theological rhetoric without necessarily eliminating underlying ideological commitments.

The thesis contributes to scholarship on religion and politics, Religious Zionism, and political discourse by demonstrating that ideological commitment and rhetorical expression should not be treated as synonymous. More broadly, it argues that the relationship between religion and politics cannot be understood solely through ideological labels or theological doctrine, but must also be examined through the language political actors employ within institutional settings. In doing so, the study highlights the continued relevance of religious narratives in contemporary politics while demonstrating how their public articulation adapts to changing political responsibilities and institutional contexts.

Zusammenfassung¹

Während der religiöse Zionismus häufig mit theologischen Gebietsansprüchen und dem biblischen Konzept des „Gelobten Landes“ in Verbindung gebracht wird, gibt es bislang relativ wenig Forschung dazu, wie solche Narrative innerhalb formeller politischer Institutionen mobilisiert werden. Um diese Lücke zu schließen, untersucht diese Arbeit, inwieweit und auf welche Weise Bezalel Smotrich das theologische Narrativ des „Gelobten Landes“ in den Plenarsitzungen der Knesset zwischen 2021 und 2025 mobilisierte, um territoriale Ansprüche und die Ausweitung von Siedlungen zu legitimieren.

Die Studie verfolgt einen qualitativen, akteurszentrierten Fallstudienansatz auf der Grundlage von 129 offiziellen Protokollen der Plenarsitzungen der Knesset, einschließlich einer gezielten Analyse von 77 Protokollen im Zusammenhang mit Bezalel Smotrich und einer begrenzten vergleichenden Untersuchung von Zvi Yedidya Sukkot. Mithilfe deduktiver thematischer Analyse und systematischer Kodierung identifiziert die Studie Bezüge zur Erzählung vom „Gelobten Land“ anhand eines breiteren Spektrums theologischer und biblischer Ausdrücke, darunter Verweise auf das „Land Israel“, „Judäa und Samaria“, biblische Figuren, Schriftstellen und Sprache des Bundes.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass der explizite Begriff „Gelobtes Land“ im analysierten Korpus nur selten vorkam. Stattdessen stützten sich die politischen Akteure auf ein breiteres theologisches Vokabular, durch das territoriale Ansprüche artikuliert und legitimiert wurden. Die Analyse offenbart zudem einen signifikanten Wandel in Smotrichs parlamentarischer Rhetorik im Laufe der Zeit. Explizite theologische Bezüge, Schriftzitate und direkte Appelle an religiöse Autorität waren im Jahr 2021 am ausgeprägtesten und nahmen im gesamten Untersuchungszeitraum allmählich ab. Bis 2025 war die explizite theologische Rhetorik weitgehend aus den analysierten parlamentarischen Redebeiträgen verschwunden. Gleichzeitig blieben territoriale Anliegen durchgehend präsent und wurden zunehmend durch administrative, politische, historische und sicherheitspolitische Argumente gerahmt. Die Ergebnisse legen daher nahe, dass die institutionelle Position den öffentlichen Ausdruck theologischer Rhetorik beeinflusste, ohne dabei die zugrunde liegenden ideologischen Verpflichtungen notwendigerweise zu beseitigen.

Die Arbeit leistet einen Beitrag zur Forschung über Religion und Politik, den religiösen Zionismus und den politischen Diskurs, indem sie aufzeigt, dass ideologisches Engagement und rhetorischer Ausdruck nicht als Synonyme behandelt werden sollten. Im weiteren Sinne argumentiert sie, dass das Verhältnis zwischen Religion und Politik nur dann vollständig verstanden werden kann, wenn untersucht wird, wie politische Akteure ideologische Überzeugungen innerhalb institutioneller Rahmenbedingungen in Sprache umsetzen.

¹ The German version of the Abstract (“Zusammenfassung”) was translated from the original English version using the AI software DeepL and subsequently reviewed by the author.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Despite decades of secularization and repeated claims concerning the declining significance of religion in public life; religious beliefs, symbols, and narratives continue to exert influence on societies, political institutions, and collective identities across the world. Religious narratives become politically significant not only through their simple existence, but through their articulation in language. Political actors rarely invoke those in a vacuum, rather they select, interpret, and communicate them in ways that serve specific purposes. Parliamentary speeches constitute one arena in which religious narratives can be observed and studied, as they are directed toward both political institutions and wider audiences. Examining such discourse provides an invaluable insight into how religious narratives operate within contemporary political debates, particularly within institutional environments often assumed to be governed by secular forms of reasoning and legitimacy. Understanding the political significance of religion therefore requires moving beyond questions of belief alone.

The thesis examines how the theological narrative of the “Promised Land” is mobilized within contemporary Israeli political discourse. Moving beyond abstract theological inquiry, the analysis focuses on the strategic use of religious language within institutional settings, treating scripture not as doctrine but as a resource for political argumentation. In doing so, the thesis shifts the attention from what religious texts inherently prescribe to how a single political actor employs them in practice. Accordingly, the thesis is guided by the following research question:

To what extent and how does Bezalel Smotrich mobilize the theological narrative of the “Promised Land” in Knesset plenary sessions to legitimize territorial claims and settlement expansion between 2021 and 2025?

The relevance of this research emerges across several interconnected academic and empirical dimensions. First, the study contributes to the effort of reintroducing religion into an academic arena historically dominated by secular assumptions and traditional International Relations (IR) theories. For decades, mainstream IR frameworks largely treated religion as secondary, irrational, and destined to disappear under the forces of modernity. Yet contemporary reality repeatedly demonstrates that religion has not vanished from politics as it continues to operate as a powerful source of authority.

Second, the study is relevant because it foregrounds the importance of political actors themselves. Actors are often reduced to media representations, electoral labels, campaigns, and generalized party positions. The thesis proceeds from the assumption that political actors must be studied directly and systematically, particularly those occupying positions of institutional authority. Examining how political leaders speak and justify their decision-making processes is essential in order to understand the form of authority through which societies are governed.

Third, the relevance is further amplified by the methodological and practical difficulties associated with conducting research on Israel from outside of the country. Accessing official political material, including records, often presents considerable obstacles due to linguistic barriers, security sensitivities, and bureaucratic limitations. Consequently, detailed empirical studies grounded in official Israeli political discourse remain relatively limited, particularly for researchers operating externally. In this sense, the thesis demonstrates the possibility and value of conducting such discourse-based research.

Fourth, the thesis aims to encourage future researchers examining the intersection of religion and politics, and that such study is not only methodologically possible but infinitely valuable for critical thinking and intellectual inquiry.

Finally, the relevance of the study primarily lies in the historical and political weight of the “Promised Land” narrative itself. Few concepts in this world have exercised such enduring influence across centuries of religious history. The awareness that a single specific stretch of soil shapes identities, justify claims, and influences state-building, while simultaneously contributing to conflict, division, exclusion, and political violence, remains essential for understanding the broader implications of religion in politics.

Methodologically, the thesis adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in an actor-centered case study approach. It focuses on Bezalel Smotrich as a theoretically relevant political figure due to his ideological positioning and institutional roles. The empirical foundation of the study consists of 129 official plenary sessions transcripts from the official Knesset database, covering the period from 2021 to 2025. The analysis employs a deductive thematic analysis, guided by theoretically informed categories derived from the primary sources.

The structure of the thesis is designed to guide the reader from the conceptual foundations of the study to its empirical findings and broader implications. Following the introduction, Chapter 2 presents the research question, its rationale, its terminological clarifications, and the analytical sub-questions that guide the study.

Chapter 3 reviews the relevant literature, examining the relationship between religion and politics in International Relations (IR) and the broader historical perspectives, the development of Religious Zionism as an ideological movement, and the interaction between religion and politics in Israel. The chapter further explores insights from political theology and traces of biblical origins, terminological variations, and historical transformations of the “Promised Land” narrative, including interpretations within Christianity and Islam, before identifying the literature gap that the thesis seeks to address.

Chapter 4 develops the theoretical framework of the study by introducing political narratives as mechanisms of meaning-making and historical continuity, as well as examining competing theoretical perspectives on institutional behavior and ideological persistence. Building on these perspectives, the chapter formulates two theoretical expectations.

Chapter 5 outlines the research design and methodology, including case selection, source collection, analytical procedures, and methodological limitations.

Chapter 6 presents the empirical analysis, examining the distribution, frequency, and contextual deployment of references associated with the “Promised Land” narrative, with particular attention given to Bezalel Smotrich and a limited comparative analysis of Zvi Yedidya Sukkot. The chapter concludes with a discussion of findings in relation to the theoretical expectations.

Finally, Chapter 7 answers the research question, summarizes the principal findings, and reflects on the broader implications of the study for understanding the interaction between religion, ideology, and political discourse.

Ultimately, the thesis seeks to move beyond simplistic assumptions about the role of religion in politics and instead to confront the question directly: not whether religious narratives matter, but how they function when God is spoken into power.

Chapter 2: Research Question

The thesis is guided by the following research question:

“To what extent and how does Bezalel Smotrich mobilize the theological narrative of the “Promised Land” in Knesset plenary sessions to legitimize territorial claims and settlement expansion between 2021 and 2025?”

2. 1. Research Question Clarifications

“To what extent” addresses the frequency and relative significance of theological rhetoric, the formulation of “and how” is concerned with its mode of deployment. The concept of “extent” is operationalized through a combination of qualitative measures and limited quantitative measures, including the identification, coding, and frequency of theological references including that of the “Promised Land” but not limited to. This approach enables not only the measurement of how often such narratives occur, but also an assessment of their contextual function and role in parliamentary discourse. It allows for variation in frequency, form, and context, as well as for the possibility that theological and biblical narratives may be absent, selectively deployed, or substituted by other modes of justification. By contrast, the formulation “and how” seeks to identify the rhetorical mechanisms through which the narrative is invoked, interpreted, and deployed by the selected actor.

The term *theological narrative* in this study does not refer to the doctrinal theology in the strict, ecclesiastical sense, nor to a systematic theological inquiry concerning the nature of God. Rather, it refers to the political interpretation and mobilization of religious concepts through which territorial claims are articulated and justified within contemporary Israeli political discourse. In this context, theological narratives function as interpretive frameworks that sacralize political positions by embedding them in a divinely grounded structure.

The narrative of “Promised Land” is understood not only as a purely theological doctrine, but also as a politically mobilized concept through which territorial claims are framed as historically mandated, divinely sanctioned, and thus resistant to ordinary political negotiations. While the study employs the term “Promised Land” as an analytical category, it also encompasses related theological and biblical expressions and references which, within political discourse, draw on the same underlying theological conception. Empirically, such narratives are identified through explicit or implicit references to biblical scripture, as well as through discursive patterns that draw on religious authority or faith-based justification.

The relevance of Bezalel Smotrich to the core concept examined in this thesis derives from his position as party chairman and his political agenda. In order to establish this relationship, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by “territorial claims” and “settlement expansion” within the context of Religious Zionism Party. According to the official website party platform, these concepts encompass the strengthening and expansion of Jewish set-

tlement throughout the “Land of Israel”, the legalization of settlements in “Judea and Samaria”, the extension of Israeli sovereignty over these territories, and the promotion of increased Jewish demographic presence within them.²

The connection between Smotrich and these objectives is not assumed by the researcher but explicitly articulated by the party itself. The party platform identifies sovereignty in “Judea and Samaria” as the central political objective and presents Jewish settlement as a strategic national value. Furthermore, the platform explicitly states: “The State of Israel is a Jewish country, the one and only home of the Jewish people, and the initial modern-day embodiment of prophecies spoken long ago. During our long years of exile, we always yearned to return to the land of our fathers. [...] We yearned for our homeland, the place where our forefathers lived, the land where our ancestors journeyed after they left Egypt, the land where David and Shlomo ruled, the place that they aspired toward, dreamed of, and pined for.”³ and that “[t]he Torah establishes that the Land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people.”⁴ As chairman of the party and principal representative of its political program, Smotrich is therefore not merely associated with these issues but serves as one of their foremost political advocates.

The study is deliberately bound to the period of 2021 to 2025, corresponding to a phase of political consolidation, party restructuring, internal role changes and increased institutional influence. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that this period is marked by ongoing political developments, some of which remain unresolved at the time of writing. While such dynamics do shape the articulation and reception of territorial claims, the analysis does not aim to provide a definitive account of their long-term impact.

A final terminological clarification concerns references to Jewish scripture. Throughout the thesis, the terms *Hebrew Bible (Tanakh)*, *Torah*, and, where appropriate, *Old Testament* appear. While these terms are occasionally used interchangeably in academic and political discourse, they do not refer to identical textual corpora. The *Torah*⁵ refers specifically to the Five Books of Moses, whereas the *Hebrew Bible (Tanakh)*⁶ encompasses the broader collection of Jewish sacred texts. References to the *Old Testament*

² The Religious Zionism Party Led by Bezalel Smotrich, “Settlement and Sovereignty,” ZionutDatit (Religious Zionism Party), <https://zionutdatit.org.il/en/party-platform/>.

³ The Religious Zionism Party Led by Bezalel Smotrich, “Jewish Identity,” ZionutDatit (Religious Zionism Party), <https://zionutdatit.org.il/en/party-platform/>.

⁴ The Religious Zionism Party Led by Bezalel Smotrich, “Settlement and Sovereignty.”

⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica, “Torah,” in *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Torah>.

⁶ Encyclopedia Britannica, “Hebrew Bible,” in *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hebrew-Bible>.

are retained when employed by cited authors. Where political actors themselves use the term *Torah* in a rhetorical sense, the original terminology is preserved.

2. 2. Research Question Rationale

The research question is structured in such way to investigate the relationship between ideological positioning and institutional discourse. It remains as an open empirical question whether, to what extent, and through which rhetorical mechanisms, Smotrich's theological discourse is reflected in formal parliamentary speech. The formulation deliberately avoids assuming a direct relationship between religious identity and discursive practice.

The focus on parliamentary discourse is particularly significant because Knesset plenary sessions constitute the most formal arena of political communication and institutional visibility in which arguments are put forward, articulated, defended, and even contested. Unlike media appearance for example, parliamentary speeches provide direct insight into how political actors justify their position within an institutional setting shaped by procedures, accountability, and public scrutiny. Examining such discourse allows for an assessment not only of an actor's ideological commitments, but of the way in which those commitments are truly translated into practice.

2. 3. Sub-Questions

To facilitate a systematic examination, the principal research question is complemented by a series of analytical sub-questions, as follows:

1. How prominent is the explicit term "Promised Land" relative to alternative theological and/or biblical expressions and references?
2. To what extent are expressions and references associated with the "Promised Land" narrative present within Bezalel Smotrich's parliamentary discourse between 2021 and 2025, and how does their frequency vary over time?
3. In which political contexts (e.g. territorial, security, financial) does the "Promised Land" narrative and associated expressions appear when invoked by Bezalel Smotrich?
4. To what extent does the deployment of the "Promised Land" narrative and associated expressions differ between Bezalel Smotrich and Zvi Yedidya Sukkot within Knesset plenary discourse?

First, the sub-questions examine the relative prominence of the explicit term “Promised Land” in comparison to alternative theological and/or biblical expressions that convey a similar narrative. Second, they facilitate an assessment of the frequency and temporal distribution of such references, identifying patterns of continuity, variation, or rupture across the period under examination. Third, the sub-questions introduce a limited comparative dimension through the inclusion of Zvi Yedidya Sukkot, allowing for an evaluation of similarities and differences in the deployment of narratives. Finally, the analysis examines potential shifts in Smotrich’s own discourse following his transition from Member of Knesset to Finance Minister. Collectively speaking, these sub-questions contribute to a deeper and more involved understanding of the extent and manner in which the “Promised Land” narrative is mobilized within contemporary Israeli parliamentary discourse.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3. 1. The Illusion of Separation: Religion and Politics

The difficult and strained relationship between religion and International Relations (IR) has long been shaped by a disciplinary tendency of treating religion as a secondary, inconvenient relic of the past. Regardless of the fact that religion has been accredited for influencing politics over the centuries, Prasad writes that “[it] finds little mention in mainstream international relations (IR) theories [...] occupying the margins of the discipline.”⁷ Fox addresses the problem directly, noting that “the most influential explanation [...] have their origin in the rejection of religion”⁸ and “tends to be addressed within the context of some other category as institutions, organizations, society, civilizations, or terrorism.”⁹ In a similar way, Adams observes that religion has been outsourced – “located outside departments of religion”¹⁰ – the field of religion-international relations emerged because the main canonical works of IR had failed to take religion seriously with scholars increasingly recognizing the omission as a problem for the discipline itself.

Perhaps the most corrosive element for this marginalization is owed to the secular foundations of modern political science, and by extension, of IR. Fox¹¹ explains that the

⁷ Shubha Kamala Prasad, “The Marginalisation of Religion in International Relations: Deconstructing Secular IR Theories,” *South Asian Survey* 21, nos. 1–2 (2017): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971523115592487>.

⁸ Jonathan Fox, “Religion as an Overlooked Element of International Relations,” *International Studies Review* 3, no. 3 (2001): 54, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1521-9488.00244>.

⁹ Fox, “Religion as an Overlooked Element of International Relations,” 53.

¹⁰ Nicholas Adams, “The Birth of ‘Religion and International Relations’: Questions of Scale,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89, no. 2 (2021): 412, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfab028>.

¹¹ Fox, “Religion as an Overlooked Element of International Relations,” 54.

social sciences were formed within an intellectual tradition that favored rational explanations in place of religious ones, and that leading thinkers such as Voltaire, Comte, Durkheim, Weber, and Marx regarded religion as a declining force destined to lose all relevance in modernity. Prasad¹² argues that IR is inherently a Western discipline and the exclusion of religion from the field is largely absent from non-Western places. Prasad¹³ further explains that this drift can be traced to Enlightenment assumptions in which science, rationality, and secular state authority would replace religion as sources of order and legitimacy – “the separation of the Church and the State.” Fox & Sandler¹⁴ similarly argue that the IR developed as a “microcosm of the Western social sciences”, reproducing the same expectation that religion would recede as modernization advanced.

This secular bias was reinforced by the historical development of the modern international order. Prasad¹⁵ emphasizes that the Peace of Westphalia (1648) is commonly seen as the turning point at which the sovereign territorial state devoided of faith became the legitimate center of political authority. Philpott states that “the most thorough form of secularization is the erosion of subjective belief in an ultimate ground of existence, a deity, God.”¹⁶ According to Philpott¹⁷, the “Westphalian synthesis” detached religion through sovereignty, non-intervention, the reduction of “ecclesiastical temporal authorities”, and the relocation of religion away from the core purpose of the state. Aligning with Prasad and Philpott, Thomas¹⁸ calls this the “Westphalian presumption” in IR – the assumption that “Religion must be disciplined by the state – privatized, marginalized, and nationalized as form of order and social cohesion, or [it] must be overcome[d]”.

Yet the literature also shows that this secular narrative is neither neutral nor universal. Hurd¹⁹ argues that secularism is itself a form of political authority rather than a simple

¹² Prasad, “The Marginalisation of Religion in International Relations: Deconstructing Secular IR Theories,” 38.

¹³ Prasad, “The Marginalisation of Religion in International Relations: Deconstructing Secular IR Theories,” 36.

¹⁴ Jonathan Fox and Schmucl Sandler, *Bringing Religion Into International Relations*, Culture and Religion in International Relations (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 5.

¹⁵ Prasad, “The Marginalisation of Religion in International Relations: Deconstructing Secular IR Theories,” 37–38.

¹⁶ Prasad, “The Marginalisation of Religion in International Relations: Deconstructing Secular IR Theories,” 68.

¹⁷ Daniel Philpott, “The Challenge of September 11 to Secularism in International Relations,” *World Politics* 55, no. 1 (2002): 71–76, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2003.0006>.

¹⁸ Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 33–55, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403973993>.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, “The Political Authority of Secularism in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 10, no. 2 (2004): 235–62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066104042936>.

absence of religion. In Hurd's formulation, secularism "identifies something called 'religion' and separates it from the 'secular' domains of the state, the economy and science."²⁰ More importantly, Hurd insists that "[t]he creation of the category of 'religion' and its demarcation from 'politics' is a highly politicized decision."²¹ The scholar's point is crucial for IR because it shifts the analysis away from asking why religion intrudes into politics and toward asking how and why modern Western thought produced the religion/politics division in the first place. Hurd²² further shows that secular discourse tends to define religion as the site of "intolerance" and "violence", thereby presenting the secular as naturally associated with "rationality", "public order", and "democra[cy]."

The book *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* (2000)²³ authored by Appleby strengthens this critique by showing how thoroughly cemented is the suspicion of religion. Appleby notes that "the sheer mass of incidents and reports of [...] dramatic events and misdeeds by religious actors reinforces the conventional wisdom that religious fervor [...] inevitably expresses itself in violence and intolerance."²⁴ This is an important point because it reveals that religion is not merely omitted, but pre-classified as something threatening in the first place. At the same time, Appleby's²⁵ broader argument is that religion is fundamentally ambivalent; the same traditions that can legitimate bloodshed can also motivate righteousness. In that sense, religion cannot be reduced either to a private belief system or to a source of conflict alone.

The failure of secular expectations became especially visible in the late 20th century. In the book *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations* (2005), Thomas argues that three events in particular exposed the inadequacy of secular IR frameworks, particularly two relevant to this study – the Iranian Revolution and the attacks of 11 September 2001.²⁶ These events demonstrated that religion had not disappeared from world politics and that its *political* force had been underestimated both by scholars and policymakers alike. Regarding Iran and 11 September 2001, Thomas writes that "[t]he Islamic Revolution is one of the most vivid examples of how the impact of culture and religion was ignored or marginalized in the study of international relations."²⁷ and

²⁰ Hurd, "The Political Authority of Secularism in International Relations," 235.

²¹ "The Political Authority of Secularism in International Relations," 235.

²² Hurd, "The Political Authority of Secularism in International Relations."

²³ R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000).

²⁴ Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, 5.

²⁵ Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, 1–17.

²⁶ Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations*, 1–17.

²⁷ Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations*, 2.

that “even after these horrific [September] events there is still refusal to take culture and religion seriously.”²⁸ Fox & Sandler likewise argue that the West was unprepared for the “religious phenomena [...] in the heart of the Western world”²⁹ and for the centrality of religion as a whole in events such as Iran, Al-Qaeda or the Al-Aqsa Intifada.³⁰ Both scholars emphasize that these development clearly revealed that “no understanding of international relations can be complete without bringing religion into the discipline.”³¹ Adams, reviewing the field retrospectively while drawing on Fox & Sandler, identifies both aforementioned cases as decisive ones through which religion and IR took shape as a subfield and as evidence that the neglect of religion in IR could no longer be sustained.³²

What followed was not the disappearance of religion but its return to visibility in public and global life. In the book *God’s Century (2011)*, Toft, Philpott, and Shah explicitly argue that “religion’s influence on politics has reversed its decline and become more powerful on every continent and across every major world religion.”³³ Moreover, if once religion was encapsulated only to homes and divine places, now it has exposed itself and “its influence in parliaments, presidential palaces, lobbyist’s offices.”³⁴ This resurgence has not occurred against modernity, but in spite of modernity with the assistance of forces such as globalization making it capable of adapting to survive.

At the analytical level, Fox & Sandler define religion not through one rigid essence but through its effects; it influences how people think, constitutes an aspect of identity, provides a source of legitimacy, and is associated with institutions which shape political behavior.³⁵ Fox’s earlier article makes similar points by showing how religion affects nearly every sector of international politics including “attitudes toward war and peace.”³⁶ These scholarly formulations are very important because they move beyond the reductive question of whether religion causes international events on its own.

The most convincing conclusion from this set of literature is therefore not that religion has simply returned as though it had ever truly vanished, but that the discipline of IR

²⁸ Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations*, 2;10.

²⁹ Fox and Sandler, *Bringing Religion Into International Relations*, 1.

³⁰ Fox and Sandler, *Bringing Religion Into International Relations*, 1.

³¹ Fox and Sandler, *Bringing Religion Into International Relations*, 2.

³² Adams, “The Birth of ‘Religion and International Relations’: Questions of Scale,” 414; 417–18.

³³ Monica Duffy Toft et al., *God’s Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*, 1st ed. (W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 3.

³⁴ Toft et al., *God’s Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*, 3.

³⁵ Fox and Sandler, *Bringing Religion Into International Relations*, 2–4.

³⁶ Fox, “Religion as an Overlooked Element of International Relations,” 72.

is slowly correcting a longstanding distortion of reality. The field has been shaped by Western assumptions that became universalized despite not being universally valid. The divide between religion and politics is itself political, and religion must be brought into IR if the goal is to understand international reality consciously. Religion is not to be taken as an optional add-on when suitable, but as a resolute dimension of international politics in the 21st century.

3. 2. The Conversion of Faith Into Ideology: Religious Zionism

Religious Zionism emerged from a basic tension at the heart of modern Jewish understanding. Zionism arose as a modern nationalist response to the “Jewish question”, yet much of traditional Judaism had understood redemption not as a political project but as a divinely ordained, messianic transformation of history. In *The Jewish State* (1896), Theodor Herzl – the father of modern political Zionism – framed the issue in contemporary political terms and treated statehood as the practical answer to antisemitism, statelessness, and freedom, rather than as a standalone theological event.³⁷

This tension is captured sharply by Ravitzky³⁸, who contrasts the traditional messianic ideal with the partial, historical reality produced by Zionism. Ravitzky writes that the classical messianic “demand” that acted as a form of sustenance for hundreds of years, was the day when “the entire Jewish people [...] would reassemble as one in an undivided Land of Israel [...] for its redemption would bring about the redemption of the world as a whole.”³⁹ Against this absolute vision, Zionism produced what he calls a “partial, concrete salvation in there and now”⁴⁰, thereby forcing Jewish thought to confront whether such an imperfect historical achievement could count as redemption at all in the first place. What is especially significant in Ravitzky’s work is how Zionism is framed as a fundamental ideological dilemma, posing two competing interpretations of its meaning. On the one hand, it may be understood as a rupture with traditional Judaism – “an abandonment of the Torah”⁴¹ in favor of a secular framework in which political and worldly concerns displace spiritual ones. On the other hand, Zionism can be interpreted as a form of return; a renewed connection to Jewish origins expressed through national revival, which may ultimately lead to a deeper religious and spiritual renewal. From this perspective, the establishment of the

³⁷ Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State (Der Judenstaat)*, trans. Sylvie D’Avigdor (1896).

³⁸ Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, trans. Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

³⁹ Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, 1.

⁴⁰ Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, 2.

⁴¹ Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, 6.

Jewish state represents not the desired endpoint but part of a broader redemptive process. Writing with the benefit of historical hindsight, Ravitzky suggests that the development of the State of Israel allows for a reassessment of these opposing visions. Hence, Religious Zionism emerged as a modern political project of Zionism re-read through the lens of religion.

In its early form, however, Religious Zionism was not yet the militant, settlement-centered ideology with which it is associated today. Don-Yehiya argue that “early religious Zionism contained messianic as well as pragmatic elements [...] manifested in the fact that the forerunners [...] firmly rejected any use of force in the implementation of their ideas [...] carried out only with the permission of the gentile rulers of European countries and the Ottoman Sultan.”⁴² Don-Yehiya also notes that in the pre-state period the “dominant ideology of Religious Zionism was characterized by a moderate messianic stance”⁴³, applying the idea of ‘*atchalta degeulah*’ – the “beginning of redemption”⁴⁴ – to events such as the “Balfour declaration, Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel, and the growth of Jewish settlements in the Land.”⁴⁵ but without yet producing a fully radical political program. This matters because it prevents the flattening of Religious Zionism into a single continuous line from its birth to post-1967 maximalism.

Katsman likewise stresses that the earlier movement is best understood through what it is called the “ideological narrative”⁴⁶ of Religious Zionism – a pragmatic movement that tried to live according to the “Orthodox Halakhic code”⁴⁷ while fully participating in the Zionist national project. Only later in 1967, it underwent a theological, political, and cultural revolution.⁴⁸ In his famous formulation, Yosef Burg’s answer to whether Judaism or Zionism mattered more was “the hyphen” in Religious-Zionism.⁴⁹ That phrase captures perfectly the central doctrinal fact – it was built not on abandoning either side but on insisting that religion and nationalism could be held together, inseparably.

This early synthesis did not emerge from nowhere; one of its neglected roots lies in the 19th century proto-Zionist thought. According to Herschkowitz, Rabbi ZH Kalisher’s

⁴² Eliezer Don-Yehiya, “Messianism and Politics: The Ideological Transformation of Religious Zionism,” *Israel Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 242, <https://doi.org/10.2979/israelstudies.19.2.239>.

⁴³ Don-Yehiya, “Messianism and Politics: The Ideological Transformation of Religious Zionism,” 243.

⁴⁴ Don-Yehiya, “Messianism and Politics: The Ideological Transformation of Religious Zionism,” 243.

⁴⁵ Don-Yehiya, “Messianism and Politics: The Ideological Transformation of Religious Zionism,” 243.

⁴⁶ Hayim Katsman, “The Hyphen Cannot Hold: Contemporary Trends in Religious-Zionism,” *Israel Studies Review* 35, no. 2 (2020): 155, <https://doi.org/10.3167/isr.2020.350210>.

⁴⁷ Katsman, “The Hyphen Cannot Hold: Contemporary Trends in Religious-Zionism,” 157.

⁴⁸ Katsman, “The Hyphen Cannot Hold: Contemporary Trends in Religious-Zionism,” 157–58.

⁴⁹ Katsman, “The Hyphen Cannot Hold: Contemporary Trends in Religious-Zionism,” 154.

framework of achieving the desired redemption stemmed from the belief of “two parallel forces [...] an earthly rebuilding of the land [...] and the renewal of Temple worship to stimulate Divine intervention.”⁵⁰ However, the return of the land was not enough by itself as sacrifices and Temple worship were also part of the redemptive process. As Herschkowitz argues, although no biblical sources could support Kalisher’s belief, the latter managed to secure the support of two major rabbinic scholars facilitating the wider circulation of his ideas among expanding rabbinic circles.⁵¹ The larger point is important. Temple-oriented activism in the ideological movement is not some late aberration but has roots in earlier religious Zionist discourse. In a similar manner, Inbari’s study of the Temple Mount – “the most sacred side of Judaism”⁵² – shows that one stream increasingly linked the sanctity of the state and the land to activism around the Temple, especially after the 1996 Yesha Rabbis ruling that encourage Jewish ascent to the site.⁵³ Together, Herschkowitz and Inbari prove that Religious Zionism’s doctrinal foundations were never limited to generic support for mere Jewish sovereignty but from early on, some of its currents carried a much denser theology of sacred space, ritual preservation, and historical acceleration.

The theological consolidation of Religious Zionism is indivisible and cannot be explained without the *Kookian* tradition. In the book *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (1996)⁵⁴, Ravitzky devotes the majority of the work to describe and understand Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook’s life, growing influence and committed belief system. Ravitzky describes how Kook and his followers treated the entire Zionist process as messianic history unfolding in concrete political form. Around 1920, Kook authored an essay titled *The State of Israel* claiming as possessing “messianic, metaphysical standards to live up to [...] the pedestal of God’s throne in this world.”⁵⁵ Kook went further, writing in a letter to the Mizrahi movement that “[t]he source of Zionism is the most supreme source of holiness, the Bible.”⁵⁶ Accordingly, the state becomes inseparable from notions of biblical authority and holiness, positioning it in direct tension with secularist tendencies within Zionism. The political and the religious are not distinct spheres; rather what this means is that the state is holy in itself.

⁵⁰ Isaac Herschkowitz, “Early Religious Zionism and Erudition Concerning the Temple and Sacrifices,” *Religions* 13, no. 4 (2022): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040310>.

⁵¹ Herschkowitz, “Early Religious Zionism and Erudition Concerning the Temple and Sacrifices,” 2.

⁵² Motti Inbari, *Jewish Fundamentalism and the Temple Mount*, trans. Shaul Vardi (State University of New York Press, 2009), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1353/book10154>.

⁵³ Inbari, *Jewish Fundamentalism and the Temple Mount*, 1–16.

⁵⁴ Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*.

⁵⁵ Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, 5.

⁵⁶ Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, 57.

Beyond the simple discussion of religion and nationalism, Yadgar & Hadad⁵⁷ argue that Religious Zionism is best understood as a “political theology” in which statehood and all attributing elements are sacralized, essentially nationalizing religion. In their words, this framework “re-interprets and constructs major elements of Jewish tradition” so that they become subservient to the political theology of the nation state and “patriotism does not contradict theology: rather, it is in itself the essence of this theology.”⁵⁸

The Six-Day War of 1967 was the tipping point which transformed the theological structure, still somewhat powerless, into the mass political force it became later. Don-Yehiya is explicit that although 1967 did not create Religious Zionist messianism out of nothing, it made previously marginal ideas politically influential. In turn, enabling Kook and his loyal disciples to spread them broadly, linking them to settlement activism and educational institutions⁵⁹ – “this imposes on the Jews the holy duty to take an active part in the messianic project by striving to attain Jewish rules on all territories of the Land of Israel that were still under foreign rule.”⁶⁰ Peled similarly argues the importance of 1967 and the younger generation’s newly founded inspiration “to move from the back of the driver’s seat to the driver’s seat of Israeli society.”⁶¹, motivated by a vision of a “Torah state”⁶² essentially fusing nationalism and religion. Here, faith becomes ideology in the strongest sense as it no longer only interprets politics, it claims jurisdiction over the latter.

This transformation also changed the place of land in Religious Zionism thought. Sagi identifies messianism as the “original foundational myth”, but explains that this myth was historically reworked so that the Zionist return to the land became “an awakening below” that would trigger the divine “awakening above.”⁶³ In that scheme, the Land of Israel is not simply the historical homeland but “the place of redemption”, even “the axis mundi”, without which Jewish existence remains incomplete.⁶⁴ What this means is that land is not only owned, inhabited, or defended; it is metaphysically charged.

⁵⁷ Yaacov Yadgar and Noam Hadad, “A Post-Secular Interpretation of Religious Nationalism: The Case of Religious-Zionism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 28, no. 2 (2023): 238–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2021.1957297>.

⁵⁸ Yadgar and Hadad, “A Post-Secular Interpretation of Religious Nationalism: The Case of Religious-Zionism,” 244–46.

⁵⁹ Don-Yehiya, “Messianism and Politics: The Ideological Transformation of Religious Zionism,” 247–49.

⁶⁰ Don-Yehiya, “Messianism and Politics: The Ideological Transformation of Religious Zionism,” 247.

⁶¹ Yoav Peled, “From Safe Haven to Messianic Redemption: The Ascendancy of Religious Zionism,” *Politics and Religion* 16, no. 1 (2022): 137, <https://doi.org/10.54561/prj1601127p>.

⁶² Peled, “From Safe Haven to Messianic Redemption: The Ascendancy of Religious Zionism,” 137.

⁶³ Avi Sagi, “‘Religious-Zionism’: Signifier without Signified? Or—Is Religious-Zionism Still Alive?,” *Religions* 14, no. 1 (2022): 4–5, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010030>.

⁶⁴ Sagi, “‘Religious-Zionism’: Signifier without Signified? Or—Is Religious-Zionism Still Alive?,” 5.

Religious Zionism does not only sacralize high politics; it sacralizes everyday productive activity when the latter is tied to the land itself and working on this land. Mashiach's study of Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Harlap explains this by showing how ordinary labor is incorporated in redemption – “part of perfecting the Land of Israel”.⁶⁵

When state policy deviates from territorial-messianic expectation, the crisis is not merely political but theological. This tension has major implications for Israeli public life. Lehmann argues that religious interests and ideologies have found “substantial niches in the legal system, in education, in the army and in the West Bank settlements”, contributing to a situation in which the secular state has been eroded.⁶⁶ Hermann likewise notes that the Religious Zionism Sector (RZS) has moved “from the margins to the center of Israeli society and politics” and that members of this sector now hold top positions, from academia to politics.⁶⁷ Peled goes further and argues that Religious Zionism has been gradually supplying the “givens” of the dominant worldview in Jewish Israeli culture⁶⁸, essentially turning away from mere sectoral ideology to a consolidated hegemonic project of power.

Religious Zionism thus emerges as a form of political theology in which the modern nation-state is sacralized and integrated into a redemptive framework. The “State of Israel” is not merely a political entity but is understood as imbued with holiness, while the land itself carries metaphysical significance as the site of salvation. In this way, the distinction between religion and politics collapses, as national activity becomes a driving vehicle for divine purpose.

3. 3. The Negotiation of Power: Religion and Politics in Israel

The liaison between religion and politics in Israel is neither linear, nor can be reduced to a simple opposition between the secular state and the religious actors pressing from its margins. Rather, religion has been constitutive of Israeli politics from the outset, though its role, mode of expression, and significance have shifted over the decades. The historical trajectory that emerges from the following literature moves from early institutional accommodation, to the consolidation of religion as a cleavage within electoral politics and finally to its contemporary ascent and fragmentation of Religious Zionism as a

⁶⁵ Amir Mashiach, “Ontological Theology in Religious Zionism—Rabbi Y.M. Harlap as a Case Study,” *Religions* 11, no. 7 (2020): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11070352>.

⁶⁶ David Lehmann, “Israel: State Management of Religion or Religious Management of the State?,” *Citizenship Studies* 16, no. 8 (2012): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2012.735027>.

⁶⁷ Tamar Hermann, “The Religious Zionist Sector at Bay,” *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022): 178, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020178>.

⁶⁸ Peled, “From Safe Haven to Messianic Redemption: The Ascendancy of Religious Zionism,” 129.

major ideological force. Treating religion as having simply returned would be an understatement of its weight. Rather, religion has been gradually restructured and shifted from being managed by the state to helping define the state's political and most importantly territorial horizons.

The first phase is rooted in state configuration. Lehmann shows that Israel's architects were "predominantly secular social democrats" who nevertheless managed to strike a deal by entering into an early agreement with ultra-Orthodox leadership that carved out durable religious enclaves within the state itself.⁶⁹ For example, agreements extended beyond formal legal provisions by granting Torah students exemption from military service and providing them with financial support to pursue full-time religious study, even after marriage and up to the age of forty.⁷⁰ For Lehmann, the core question is the relationship between state regulation of religion and the extent to which religion shapes state authority. Over time, religious authority weaved itself into law and education, while the concept of "citizenship" gradually eroded.⁷¹ Similarly, Yonah⁷² argues that Israel's political stability cannot be understood simply by labeling it a democracy, but must be assessed in terms of its legitimacy across different ethnic groups. The article highlights that the state's strong identification, exclusively with Judaism and the continued influence of religion in laws and policies, undermines liberal neutrality, creating inner state tensions conflicting with the principles of democracy. Yonah reaches a parallel conclusion, asserting that Israel's political order is only partly legitimate, particularly for non-Jewish citizens weakening the state's long-term stability and credibility. In other words, early Israeli politics did not separate religion from the state; it designed and gave precedence to a specific environment of belonging.

These early institutional arrangements also help explain why the land – treated as nothing short of paramount – became such a central nucleus between religion, nationalism, and politics. Yonah & Saporta argue that in a "settler society"⁷³ such as Israel, land and housing are never merely administrative issues – they are bound to the "construction of citizenship and national identity."⁷⁴ The scholars' claim that Zionism elevated land redemption into

⁶⁹ Lehmann, "Israel: State Management of Religion or Religious Management of the State?," 1029–31.

⁷⁰ Lehmann, "Israel: State Management of Religion or Religious Management of the State?," 1030.

⁷¹ Lehmann, "Israel: State Management of Religion or Religious Management of the State?," 1032–35.

⁷² Yossi Yonah, "Israel's Political Stability: A Matter of Principle," *Israel Studies* 5, no. 2 (2000): 128–53, <https://doi.org/10.1353/is.2000.0030>.

⁷³ Yossi Yonah and Ishak Saporta, "The Politics of Lands and Housing in Israel: A Wayward Republican Discourse," *Social Identities* 8, no. 1 (2002): 91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630220132035>.

⁷⁴ Yonah and Saporta, "The Politics of Lands and Housing in Israel: A Wayward Republican Discourse."

“an idyllic process”⁷⁵ is crucial because it shows how territorial politics are sacral and largely distant from bargaining. Yoseph Weiz stated the following: “What was clear to us since the inception of Zionism is that without land no state can endure, even not for one hour. Our existence, our life and our struggle are entirely grounded in this principle: the land that is under [our] feet.”⁷⁶ This territorial logic would later become indispensable to Religious Zionism. In that sense, messianic territorial beliefs radicalized an already existing political grammar rather than inventing it from scratch.

The second phase begins with the reconfiguration of the party system and the crystallization of identity from the late 1960s onward. In a 1999 work, Shamir & Arian⁷⁷ demonstrate that Israel diverged from the broader Western pattern in which social cleavages weakened over time. In Israel, in 1966, issue voting increased, but social cleavages did not recede accordingly because the major issues on the agenda were themselves identity driven.⁷⁸ As Shamir & Arian put it, Israeli politics increasingly revolved around “collective identity dilemmas”⁷⁹, particularly external ones concerning borders, and internal ones concerning “Who is a Jew? What is an Israeli? What is the role of religion? What is the basis of citizenship?”⁸⁰ In a later 2002 work – *The Elections in Israel 1999*⁸¹ – Shamir & Arian demonstrate that religion and ethnicity continued to structure political competition, with voters often supporting parties that represented their communal identities. The success of religious parties, most notably *Shas*, which expanded its representation significantly and the simultaneous rise of explicitly secular parties highlight how the religious-secular divide became a central axis of politics.

The literature on Israeli electoral-system is important in order to understand both inner division and inner unity. Rahat & Hazan⁸² show that Israel’s electoral system was designed as an exceptionally proportional one from the beginning – “a single nationwide

⁷⁵ Yonah and Saporta, “The Politics of Lands and Housing in Israel: A Wayward Republican Discourse,” 91.

⁷⁶ As cited in Yonah & Saporta, 2002, p.91

⁷⁷ Michal Shamir and Asher Arian, “Collective Identity and Electoral Competition in Israel,” *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 2 (1999): 265–77, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2585395>.

⁷⁸ Shamir and Arian, “Collective Identity and Electoral Competition in Israel,” 270–72.

⁷⁹ Shamir and Arian, “Collective Identity and Electoral Competition in Israel,” 266.

⁸⁰ Shamir and Arian, “Collective Identity and Electoral Competition in Israel,” 266.

⁸¹ Asher Arian and Michal Shamir, eds., *The Elections in Israel 1999*, SUNY Series in Israeli Studies (State University of New York Press, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18254824>.

⁸² Gideon Rahat and Reuven Y. Hazan, “Israel: The Politics of an Extreme Electoral System,” in *The Politics of Electoral Systems*, 1st ed., ed. Michael Gallagher and Paul Mitchell (Oxford University Press, 2005).

district”, “rigid closed lists”, and traditionally “low thresholds” created broad representation but also chronic fragmentation. Rosenthal⁸³ extends that logic by showing that fragmentation became an almost defining feature of Israeli politics, even while prime ministers themselves could remain relatively stable. The scholar’s analysis is useful as it explains how a highly fragmented parliamentary arena can still allow certain ideological sectors such as religious ones to exercise influence disproportional to their demographic weight.

The turning point that most of the literature always identifies is the 1967 War. Peled, as many others, argue that the Six-Day War generated a profound “legitimacy crisis” which would later be exacerbated by the 1973 Yom Kippur War.⁸⁴ The dilemmas of territorial control, Palestinian dispossession, and the sacrifices demanded by Zionism became increasingly difficult to justify through older “survivalist arguments [...] especially for the younger generations.”⁸⁵ It was in this context that Religious Zionism moved from being a secondary partner to a central ideological challenger. As Peled argues, the process of “*hadata*” (religionization) did not simply reflect a rise in religiosity, but rather a growth of Religious-Zionist hegemony within Israeli public discourse.

Seen in historical perspective, three interrelated developments stand out. First, religion was embedded within the institutional foundations of the state from its inception, rather than added at a later stage. Second, evolving electoral dynamics and identity cleavages made religion increasingly central to political competition, particularly as questions of territory and citizenship moved to the forefront. Third, following the 1967 War, Religious Zionism transformed territorial nationalism into an aspirational hegemonic project, oriented less toward compromise than toward shaping the direction of the state itself. It is precisely this shift that opens the way for understanding how territorial claims came to be framed not only in strategic or political terms, but as part of a broader ideological vision rooted in the idea of the promised land.

3. 4. The Sacred and the Political: Insights from Political Theology

At its core, *political theology* interrogates the relationship between theological concepts and modern political authority. The foundational premise of the theory is most famously

⁸³ Maoz Rosenthal, “Israel’s Electoral System and Political Instability: Electoral Fragmentation, Party Unity and the Prime Ministers’ Political Leadership,” in *Routledge Handbook on Elections in the Middle East and North Africa*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003185628>.

⁸⁴ Peled, “From Safe Haven to Messianic Redemption: The Ascendancy of Religious Zionism,” 128.

⁸⁵ Peled, “From Safe Haven to Messianic Redemption: The Ascendancy of Religious Zionism,” 129.

articulated by the seminal work of Carl Schmitt⁸⁶ titled *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (1922). Schmitt argues that modern political concepts are not autonomous or purely secular in nature but historically driven and derived from a theological background. As Schmitt writes: “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts [...] transferred from theology to the state [...] because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts.”⁸⁷ Essentially, this claim directly challenges the conventional assumption by many, that modern politics has transcended religion. Instead, it suggests that political authority has retained a pious grammar even in seemingly secular contexts.

Schmitt’s most influential contribution lies in his conceptualization and understanding of ‘sovereignty’; defining the ‘sovereign’ as “he who decides on the exception.”⁸⁸ This definition shifts the focus from formal legal norms to the precise moment of decision-making, particularly in situations where existing rules are suspended (e.g. war). Both sovereignty and the sovereign are revealed precisely when the normal legal order (routine) is disrupted. Furthermore, Schmitt writes: “The exception to jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology.”⁸⁹ What this means is that just as a miracle suspends the ordinary laws of nature, thereby revealing the presence and authority of God, the state of exception suspends the normal legal order, revealing in turn the power of decision-making by the sovereign. According to Schmitt, political systems, even those that claim to be exclusively secular and rule-based, ultimately depend on decisions that cannot be fully codified. As Schmitt emphasizes: “all law is situational law”⁹⁰, meaning that legal and political orders are contingent upon context and subjective interpretation and that “rule is of men and not of law [...] [and] to pretend [...] is to lose the human element in and of our world.”⁹¹ This insight is central to the present thesis, as it underscores that political authority transcends beyond rationality into symbolism.

⁸⁶ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (1922; 1st ed., The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁸⁷ Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, 59.

⁸⁸ Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, 35.

⁸⁹ Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, 59.

⁹⁰ Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, 9.

⁹¹ Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, 9.

Giorgio Agamben⁹², Paul W. Kahn⁹³, and Mikkel Flohr⁹⁴ represent three distinct yet analytically interconnected extensions that remain firmly anchored in the Schmittian tradition. Rather than introducing theoretically disparate approaches, each address a different dimension of the same conceptual core. This continuity is particularly important, clearly showing that Schmitt's political theology has not been rendered obsolete as time passed. Instead, it remains a living framework which is continuously revisited, adapted, extended, and even criticized by scholars across different periods and backgrounds – Agamben (2008), Kahn (2011), and Flohr (2025).

In Kahn's work *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (2011), almost ninety years after Schmitt, the author extends the understanding of political theology by shifting the analytical focus from the moment of sovereign decision to the structures of meaning and belief that sustain political order. Drawing explicitly on Schmitt's claim that political concepts are rooted in theological bedrocks, Kahn argues that "Political theology [...] helps us recognize that our political practices remain embedded in forms of belief and practice that touch upon the sacred."⁹⁵ Kahn reintroduces concepts such as "faith, sacrifice, the sacred"⁹⁶ usually omitted from generic political theories, emphasizing religion's neglect. Furthermore, Kahn argues that politics equals the "organization of everyday life founded on the imagination of the sacred."⁹⁷ These statements collectively suggests that politics cannot be reduced to a purely rational or institutional system, rather it is sustained by symbolic and affective structures that render authority meaningful and legitimate.

By contrast, Agamben's work *State of Exception* (2008) radicalizes Schmitt's concept of "the state of exception" by tracing its transformation in modern governance - from a temporary mechanism to a permanent governing model. While Schmitt conceptualizes the exception as a moment in which sovereign power reveals itself through the suspension of law, Agamben demonstrates what happens when this distinction collapses, when the suspension of law becomes normalized and embedded within the order itself. Exception no longer appears an extraordinary phenomenon but as a permanent governing technique.

⁹² Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁹³ Paul W. Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, Political Thought/Political History (Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁹⁴ Mikkel Flohr, "Political Theology: Origins, Concepts, and Contradictions," *Theory, Culture & Society* 42, no. 4 (2025): 43–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764241311250>.

⁹⁵ Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, 3.

⁹⁶ Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, 8.

⁹⁷ Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, 23.

Recent scholarship further reinforces the need to treat these developments as interconnected rather than conceptually distinct. Flohr’s article on *Political Theology: Origins, Concepts, and Contradictions* (2025), represents one of the most conceptually clarifying, modern, engagements with the theory. Flohr dismantles and reconstructs Schmitt’s foundational claims, demonstrating that what is often treated as a coherent theory is, in fact, composed of three distinct conceptual strands.⁹⁸ Political theology as “transfer” (i.e. the historical migration of theological concepts into political theory), as “correspondence” (i.e. the structural parallels between theology and political order), and as “decisionism” (i.e. the normative doctrine of sovereign authority).⁹⁹

Taken together, these contributions demonstrate that political theology provides valuable insights into the relationship between religious belief, political authority, and the processes through which sacred ideas acquire political significance.

3. 5. The Claim: A “Promised Land”

3. 5.1 Biblical Origins

The *concept* of the “Promised Land” is first mentioned in the *Book of Genesis*, the first book of the Torah. According to scripture, God had made the following promises to Abram, recorded in the following verses of *Genesis*:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” – Genesis 12:1 NRSV¹⁰⁰

Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” – Genesis 12:4 NSRV¹⁰¹

Then God repeated the promise to Abram:

The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever.” – Genesis 13:14 NSRV¹⁰²

Later in “God’s Covenant with Abram”, Genesis 15:17 sets out an account of God’s gift to Abram - the land, defined by its borders:

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,

⁹⁸ Flohr, “Political Theology: Origins, Concepts, and Contradictions,” 1–2.

⁹⁹ Flohr, “Political Theology: Origins, Concepts, and Contradictions,” 11.

¹⁰⁰ *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version (American Bible Society, n.d.).

¹⁰¹ *Holy Bible*.

¹⁰² *Ibid*.

*the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.” – Genesis 15:17
NRSV¹⁰³*

These promises were given prior to the birth of Abram’s children. God’s further promise was given to Abraham¹⁰⁴ when he was “ninety-nine years old”, after his first son Ishmael had been born:

*And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.” –
Genesis 17:1 NRSV¹⁰⁵*

Later, God appeared to Abraham’s son Isaac, reconfirming the promise once made:

“Do not go down to Egypt; settle in the land that I shall show you. Reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham.” – Genesis 26:1 NRSV¹⁰⁶

Isaac reconfirms the promise to *his* own son – Jacob, later renamed “Israel”:

May he give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your offspring with you, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien – land that God gave to Abraham – Genesis 28:1 NRSV¹⁰⁷

“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” – Genesis 32:22 NRSV¹⁰⁸

In the *Book of Exodus*, God speaks to Moses at the Burning Bush:

Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey – Exodus 3:7 NRSV¹⁰⁹

The passage of *Exodus 23:1-19* is a collection of laws and covenant instructions, moving through themes of justice, mercy, holiness, Sabbath rest, and covenant faithfulness. It connects the promise of the land with ethical living where the laws are not presented as random moral teachings but part of the covenant conditions for Israel’s life in the land God is giving them.

In the *Book of Deuteronomy*, passage *1:6* presents the occupation of the land as God’s fulfillment of the promise once made:

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ In Genesis 17:1 (NRSV), God changes Abram’s name to Abraham, signifying his covenantal role as “the ancestor of a multitude of nations.”

¹⁰⁵ *Holy Bible*.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

“See, I have set the land before you; go and take possession of the land that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and their descendants after them.” – Deuteronomy 1:6 NRSV¹¹⁰

Moreover, God might give the Israelites additional land reflecting the boundaries of the original promise only if they obeyed to the covenant:

If the Lord your God enlarges your territory, as he swore to your ancestors – and he will give you all the land that he promised your ancestors to give to you provided you diligently observe this entire commandment that I will command you today, by loving the Lord your God and walking always in his ways. – Deuteronomy 19:8

You must not move your neighbor’s boundary marker, set up by former generations, on the property that will be allotted to you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess. – Deuteronomy 19:14

Although the notion commonly referred to as the “Promised Land” occupies a central place in both religious and political discourse, it is important to clarify that the term itself does not appear *verbatim* in the Torah. Rather, the biblical corpus contains a series of covenantal passages in which God pledges the land to Abraham, his descendants, and subsequently to the Israelites through Moses. The modern expression “Promised Land” therefore constitutes a later interpretative abstraction, derived from these narratives rather than a direct scriptural designation.

Furthermore, the Torah refers to territorial concepts through formulations such as “*the land of Canaan*” and descriptions of divine covenant and inheritance. In this sense, biblical framing is simultaneously theological and geographical, rather than being terminologically fixed. The land is embedded within a range of narratives of divine mandate, conquest, and settlement, which, in turn, articulates claims of possession and legitimacy grounded in divine authority.

3.5.2 Terminological Variations and Transformations

Building directly upon the biblical foundations of the “Promised Land”, the terminology used to describe this territory has undergone significant historical and political transformations. What begins in the biblical corpus as a theological and covenantal space gradually evolves into a set of competing geographical and political designations, each carrying distinct historical, ideological, and legal implications. Terms such as “*Eretz Israel*”, “*Judea and Samaria*”, and later “*West Bank*” are not neutral descriptors, rather they reflect shifting frameworks through which land, identity, and legitimacy are constructed.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

The term “Eretz Yisrael”¹¹¹ or “Eretz Israel” (translated from Hebrew to English as “Land of Israel”) first appears in the following passage:

*Now there was no smith to be found throughout all the land of Israel – 1 Samuel
13:19 NRSV*¹¹²

The term should not be interpreted as a strictly geographical designation, as it signifies the land associated with the people of Israel, reflecting a relational and identity-based understanding rather than fixed territorial boundaries.¹¹³ This notion appears in the biblical corpus, for instance in *Genesis 40:9 NRSV*¹¹⁴ – “the land of the Hebrews”, *Joshua 11:21 NRSV*¹¹⁵ – “the land of the Israelites” and *2 Kings 5:1 NRSV*¹¹⁶ – “the land of Israel”. The broad and more consistent usage of the term developed in later period as the Israelite presence in the land became more established.¹¹⁷ Importantly, the term is a “philosophical, theological, and halakhic (Jewish legal) concept and is not the equivalent to the political State of Israel.”¹¹⁸

Parallel to this concept, the term “*Judea and Samaria [Area]*” is derived from the biblical regions historically known as “*Judaea*” and “*Samaria*” (*Greek and Latin Translations*). Both terms appear extensively in the Hebrew Bible, however under their original Hebrew names – “*Yehudah*” for Judea and “*Shomron*” for Samaria.

These regions correspond to the southern and central parts of ancient Israelite territory and are directly linked to the division of the united monarchy.¹¹⁹ Following the reign of King David, the kingdom split into the southern Kingdom of Judah and the northern Kingdom of Israel, centered in Samaria.¹²⁰ Judaea became the political and religious core of the southern kingdom, associated with Jerusalem and the Davidic dynasty, while Samaria functioned as the capital of the northern kingdom until its conquest by the Assyrians in 722 BCE.¹²¹ These historical developments are not merely antiquarian as they form the symbolic infra-

¹¹¹ The Hebrew term *Eretz Yisrael* (“Land of Israel”) combines *Eretz* (“land” or “earth”) and *Yisrael* (“Israel”) originally the biblical name given to Jacob (*Genesis 32:22 NRSV*), and later given to the people descendant from him.

¹¹² *Holy Bible*.

¹¹³ Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue, “Eretz Israel,” Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue, <https://rossingcenter.org/judaisms/eretz-israel/>.

¹¹⁴ *Holy Bible*.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue, “Eretz Israel.”

¹¹⁸ Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue, “Eretz Israel.”

¹¹⁹ Encyclopedia Britannica, “What Does the Term ‘Judea and Samaria’ Mean?,” in *Britannica*.

¹²⁰ Encyclopedia Britannica.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

structure through which later political claims are articulated. *Judaea* associated with covenant and Davidic lineage, occupies a central place in Jewish historical memory, while *Samaria* represents the political fragmentation and religious divergence. Furthermore, in the *1947 United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine Resolution* the terminology appears and is noted by the United Nations – “the boundary of the hill country of Samaria and Judea starts on the Jordan River.”¹²² It shows that biblical terminology was not confined to religious or ideological discourse but was also recognized and operationalized within international diplomatic language at a key moment of territorial delimitation. By referencing explicitly “Samaria and Judea”, the UN implicitly acknowledged the historical and geographical embeddedness of these terms, even while attempting to construct a modern political settlement. This occurrence reinforces the argument that such terminology does occupy a hybrid space between history, religion, and international politics. The *1947 United Nations Partition Plan* did introduce, however, a fundamentally different framework for conceptualizing territory – one grounded in international law, demographic distribution, and political compromise. Although the plan was never fully implemented due to the subsequent conflict of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, it marked a decisive shift, laying the groundwork for later references such as the “*West Bank*”.¹²³

Following the 1948 War, the territory west of the Jordan River came under Jordanian control and was designated as the “*West Bank*” – a term explicitly employed to differentiate it from Jordan’s “*East Bank*”.¹²⁴ However, this changed following the 1967 Six-Day War, where Israel took control over the “*West Bank*” and through the military order (no. 187) in December of the same year the term “*Judea and Samaria*” began to be used to refer to the “*West Bank*”, reflecting the region’s importance in Jewish history.¹²⁵ This reintroduction of biblical terminology into modern political discourse represents a critical moment of terminological transformation. By overlaying contemporary territorial control with historically and religiously charged language it reactivates ancient narratives – “*West Bank*” operates within international law and diplomacy, while “*Judea and Samaria*” invokes theological legitimacy.

¹²² United Nations General Assembly, *United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 (II): Future Government of Palestine*, A/RES/181(II) (United Nations, 1947), 143.

¹²³ Encyclopedia Britannica, “What Does the Term ‘Judea and Samaria’ Mean?”

¹²⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

In this sense, terminological variations and transformations reflect a broader shift from sacred narrative to political instrumentalization. The usage of terms such as “Promised Land”, “Eretz Yisrael”, “Judea and Samaria”, “West Bank” demonstrates that biblical geography has not disappeared but has instead been reinterpreted and strategically mobilized within modern political discourse. Consequently, terminology itself becomes an analytical entry point into broader dynamics of political theology, where language functions as a bridge between ancient covenant and modern sovereignty.

3. 5.3 The Role of Biblical Narratives in Modern Israeli Society

Biblical land narratives remain deeply embedded in Israeli political and cultural discourse, functioning as sources of identity, legitimacy, and symbolic continuity. However, they are continuously reinterpreted within shifting political contexts.

Kimmerling¹²⁶ argues that biblical land narratives played a central role in the construction of Zionist nationalism and Israeli identity. According to Kimmerling, Zionism transformed religious memory and biblical mythology into modern political and territorial claims – “The secular [...] founding fathers and the inventors of modern Jewish nationalism borrowed the religiously preserved collective memory of the ancient Holy Land, *Zion*, as the territorial base for their nation-and state-building efforts.”¹²⁷ Kimmerling further argues that biblical texts and symbols were used to legitimize Zionist settlement in Palestine both internally and externally – “religious symbols and especially biblical texts, constructed and reinterpreted as “history”, were considered very useful tool for generating internal and external legitimacy for the Zionist colonization venture.”¹²⁸ Thus, ancient Jewish attachment to the land was reframed as historical evidence supporting modern territorial claims. In discussing Israeli collective memory more broadly, Kimmerling maintains that history itself became politicized, writing that in Israel, “collective memory is considered objective history, and history is a powerful weapon, used both in domestic struggles and external conflict.”¹²⁹ The author also highlights how biblical accounts such as Joshua’s conquest of Canaan or the concept of the “Promised Land” became foundational to Israeli nationalism¹³⁰, arguing that these “semi-historical and semi-mythological occurrences, which occurred 3,000 to 3,500 years ago, are still used and abused in the “historiography” of the

¹²⁶ Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society, and the Military* (University of California Press, 2001).

¹²⁷ Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society, and the Military*, 4.

¹²⁸ Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society, and the Military*, 4.

¹²⁹ Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society, and the Military*, 16.

¹³⁰ Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society, and the Military*, 17–18.

present struggle over the land of Palestine.”¹³¹ Building on this observation, the frequently invoked claims of a “3,000-year connection” between the Jewish people and the land can be understood as a condensed expression. Rather than constituting an independent historical claim, it operates as a rhetorical shorthand that links contemporary political positions to an ancient and sacralized past.

Following the 1967 Six-Day War, biblical land narratives acquired renewed political and ideological significance within Israeli society. Lustick¹³² argues that Israel’s capture of the West Bank and Gaza Strip generated “religious and emotional fervor surrounding the renewal of contact between Jews and the historical heartland of ancient Judea”¹³³ The war therefore marked not only a military victory for Israel, but also a symbolic reconnection with territories associated with biblical Jewish history. According to Lustick, the post-1967 period witnessed the revival of ancient Jewish myths and messianic ideas within modern Israeli politics. Lustick argues that political and religious figures “used the historic success of Zionism and the consequences of both the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War [...] advancing their own political fortunes and shifting the agenda of Israeli politics from pragmatism toward redemption.”¹³⁴ In this sense, the capture of territories associated with biblical lands strengthened beliefs of ongoing redemptive process tied to biblical promises and restorationist aspirations. Lustick contends that some post-1967 religious-nationalist movements invoked biblical conquest narratives to legitimize violence in the contemporary territorial conflict. Noting that the fears over the growing demographic of Arabs within Israel made “attractive fundamentalist appeals to use Joshua’s destruction and subjugation of the Canaanites as a model for solving the contemporary “Arab problem.”¹³⁵ These narratives framed the use of force as historically and religiously justified in the struggle to secure Jewish sovereignty over the land.

In the same vein, Gorenberg¹³⁶ explains that religious Zionist thinkers, especially Rabbi Kook (son) and his followers, understood the “Land of Israel” not simply as a territory, but as a sacred covenantal land inseparable from Jewish redemption. Gorenberg notes that for Kook, “[t]he world’s redemption depended on the Jews living in the Land of Israel, and

¹³¹ Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society, and the Military*, 17.

¹³² Ian S. Lustick, *Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel: For the Land and the Lord* (Council of Foreign Relations, 1988).

¹³³ Lustick, *Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel: For the Land and the Lord*, 2.

¹³⁴ Lustick, *Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel: For the Land and the Lord*, 18.

¹³⁵ Lustick, *Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel: For the Land and the Lord*, 3.

¹³⁶ Gershom Gorenberg, *The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of The Settlements, 1967-1977* (Times Book, 2006).

therefore the return of Jews to their homeland was an expression of God's will."¹³⁷ Settlement was essentially transformed into a religious obligation tied to fulfilling divine promises. The events of 1967 intensified these beliefs dramatically, recounting Kook's emotional rejection of territorial partition, in which he lamented the loss of biblical lands such as Hebron and Shekhem (biblical name for Nablus): "They have divided my land [...] every clod of soil...every region and bit of earth belonging to the Lord's land. Is it in our hands to give up even a millimeter?"¹³⁸ This presents a language which is profoundly emotional, spiritual, and most of all – theological. Relinquishing any part of the land was perceived not simply as an unthinkable political concession, but as a violation of divine promises and a rupture in the redemption process itself.

3. 5.4 Subsequent Interpretations of the Land: Christianity and Islam

What has been established until now is that the biblical idea of the "Promised Land" is not merely geographic, it is theological, covenantal, and symbolic. Brueggemann argues that "[l]and is central, if not the central theme of biblical faith [...] a pursuit of historical belonging that includes a sense of destiny derived from such belonging."¹³⁹ In the Hebrew biblical narrative, the land is given to Abraham and his descendants as a promise, but also a responsibility to bare. It was never just about territory; it is that a "land is never simply physical dirt but is always physical dirt freighted with social meanings derived from historical experience."¹⁴⁰ This is crucial because later Christian and Islamic interpretations do not simply repeat the territorial logic of the Hebrew Bible; they reframe it through their own theological structures.

In *Chapter 13: Scripture and the Holy Land* in *The Oxford History of the Holy Land* (2023), Silverstein argues that while the New Testament, and Christian theology more broadly, engage extensively with the question of the identity and the status of the chosen people, they display far less clarity and emphasis regarding the notion of a chosen land.¹⁴¹ The radical rupture introduced by the New Covenant entailed not only theological but also practical reorientations.¹⁴² In particular, the significance of the Holy Land with its temple-

¹³⁷ Gorenberg, *The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of The Settlements, 1967-1977*, 39.

¹³⁸ Gorenberg, *The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of The Settlements, 1967-1977*, 39.

¹³⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Fortress Press, 1977), 3.

¹⁴⁰ Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2.

¹⁴¹ Adam Silverstein, "Chapter 13: Scripture and the Holy Land," in *The Oxford History of the Holy Land*, ed. H. G. M. Williamson and Robert G. Hoyland (Oxford University Press, 2023), 363.

¹⁴² Silverstein, "Chapter 13: Scripture and the Holy Land," 363.

centered rituals and land-based legal structures, was increasingly transposed onto a non-material plane. In this framework, Jerusalem was no longer a terrestrial city but a heavenly one.¹⁴³ The New Covenant suggests that it does not constitute a mere renewal of the existing relationship between God and His people but represents a fundamentally different kind of covenantal arrangement.¹⁴⁴ For early Christians who understood this New Covenant as mediated through Jesus, the notion of “Scripture” itself underwent a significant transformation.¹⁴⁵ On the one hand, the relationship to the First Covenant (Hebrew Bible) required reinterpretation, and on the other hand, new writings recounting the life and teachings of Jesus, as well as theological reflections of the early Christian community were incorporated into the scriptural corpus.¹⁴⁶ As a result, both scripture and interpretation of land theology were substantially reconfigured. Silverstein notes that at the same time it would be misleading to suggest that the New Testament entirely abandons the concept of land. The Gospels depict Jesus as deeply embedded within the historical and geographical context of the Land of Israel – his lineage, ministry, and movements were all closely tied to this space.¹⁴⁷ Importantly, the events of Jesus’s death and resurrection also occur within the Holy Land, reinforcing its enduring symbolic and theological significance.¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Silverstein argues that despite inheriting the Hebrew Bible with its strong emphasis on land, the New Testament offers relatively limited direct engagement with its theme.¹⁴⁹ In this line of view, Wright in *Chapter 12: Praxis, Symbol and Questions: Inside Early Christian Worldviews in The New Testament and the People of God* (1992), contends that the land ceased to operate as the primary marker of geographical identity and the people of God. A shift explained by the universal composition of the early Christian community, encompassing Jews, Greeks, and other groups alike, thereby undermining the ideas that any single territory could hold exclusive religious significance.¹⁵⁰ As a result, Wright argues that there is little evidence from this early period to suggest that Christians sought to define or defend the notion of a distinct Holy Land.¹⁵¹

¹⁴³ Silverstein, “Chapter 13: Scripture and the Holy Land,” 364.

¹⁴⁴ Silverstein, “Chapter 13: Scripture and the Holy Land,” 362.

¹⁴⁵ Silverstein, “Chapter 13: Scripture and the Holy Land,” 363.

¹⁴⁶ Silverstein, “Chapter 13: Scripture and the Holy Land,” 363.

¹⁴⁷ Silverstein, “Chapter 13: Scripture and the Holy Land,” 364.

¹⁴⁸ Silverstein, “Chapter 13: Scripture and the Holy Land,” 364.

¹⁴⁹ Silverstein, “Chapter 13: Scripture and the Holy Land,” 366.

¹⁵⁰ Nicholas Thomas Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1992), 1:359.

¹⁵¹ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:359.

In Islam, Muslims believe not only in their own Prophet Muhammad but in the other prophets of the Hebrew Bible – including Abraham and Moses, and of the New Testament – Jesus and John the Baptist.¹⁵² Muslims regard Jews and Christians as “People of the Book” meaning they are part of a religious community that received divine revelation through prophets in the form of sacred scriptures.¹⁵³ While Christians understand their revelation as fulfilling and completing the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible), Muslims hold that the Prophet Muhammad received God’s final and complete revelation – the original and final expression of the same divine message revealed to Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.¹⁵⁴ Islam holds the belief that after God established earlier covenants with Moses and the Jewish people and later with Jesus and the Christians, the final covenant was made through Muhammad with the Muslim community.¹⁵⁵ In contrast to the Torah and the New Testament, the emergence of Islam is not situated within the Holy Land as Muhammad’s activity and foundational narrative of Islam unfolds outside of this territory.¹⁵⁶ As a result, references to the Holy Land in the Qur’an are limited, appearing only occasionally and typically within retellings of earlier prophetic stories, rather than as a central theological focus.¹⁵⁷ In sum, Islamic tradition recontextualizes key biblical episodes often relocating them from their original setting in Canaan to Arabia, thereby shifting geographical and theological center of sacred history.¹⁵⁸

In light of the above, Judaism understands the “Promised Land” as a concrete, divinely granted territory, central to covenant, identity, and historical destiny. Christianity reinterprets this land in more universal and spiritual terms, shifting the emphasis from a specific territory to a broader, non-material conception of belonging. Islam largely decouples revelation from the Holy Land altogether, re-centering sacred history in Arabia and treating the land as peripheral rather than theologically central.

3. 6. The Literature Gap and Research Positioning

Despite the extensive body of literature addressing the relationship between religion, nationalism, and politics in Israel, a number of important analytical gaps remain. Existing scholarship has made significant contributions to understanding the ideological foundations

¹⁵² John L. Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

¹⁵³ Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*, 5.

¹⁵⁴ Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*, 6.

¹⁵⁵ Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*, 72.

¹⁵⁶ Silverstein, “Chapter 13: Scripture and the Holy Land,” 369.

¹⁵⁷ Silverstein, “Chapter 13: Scripture and the Holy Land,” 369.

¹⁵⁸ Silverstein, “Chapter 13: Scripture and the Holy Land,” 373.

of Religious Zionism, the historical development of territorial claims, and the broader role of religion in shaping Israeli political identity. However, these approaches tend to operate at a high level of abstraction, focusing primarily on ideological frameworks, historical trajectories, or structural dynamics, while paying relatively limited attention to how such ideological commitments are articulated within concrete institutional settings.

In particular, much of the literature implicitly assumes a correspondence between religious-ideological positioning and political behavior. Religious Zionism is characterized as inherently theological, messianic, and territorially maximalist, with the “Promised Land” narrative often treated as a defining and persistent feature of its worldview. While this characterization is well-supported at the level of doctrine and ideological beliefs, it remains insufficiently tested at the level of actual political discourse, particularly within formal parliamentary environments, for example, in the Knesset.

The first gap is the absence of actor-centered, discourse-based analysis that examines how individual political actors mobilize religious narratives in practice. Existing studies rarely move beyond party-level analysis to investigate how specific actors translate ideological promises and commitments into actual institutional speech. As such, the relationship between ideological identity and rhetorical practice remains underexplored.

The second gap concerns the lack of systematic empirical assessment of religious narrative usage. While scholars have identified the importance of symbolic language, narratives, and historical references, these elements are often discussed in conceptual terms. Few studies have attempted to systematically operationalize and measure the presence, frequency, and contextual deployment of specific theological narratives within the context of Religious Zionist parliamentary discourse.

The third gap, and the most crucial one, is that the literature does not sufficiently address the potential divergence between ideological branding and institutional discourse. Political actors associated with strong religious ideologies on the outside, may not necessarily reproduce these in a consistent way within formal settings. This raises an open empirical question that remains largely unaddressed: whether religious narratives function as central justificatory frameworks, or whether they are selectively employed, marginalized, or even absent in certain contexts.

Ultimately, the study positions itself at the intersection of religion, politics, and rhetoric by shifting the focus from ideological assumptions to empirical observations. Rather than presuming that actors associated with Religious Zionism consistently reproduce theological narratives, the study investigates the extent to which such narratives are actually

mobilized within parliamentary discourse and how their usage varies across institutional contexts.

Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework

4. 1. Political Narratives and Meaning-Making

The contemporary study of political narratives is rooted in the broader narrative scholarship, particularly in the work of Walter Fisher¹⁵⁹ and his *Narrative Paradigm* (1984). Developed as a concept and response to dominant models of rationality, Fisher argued that human communication cannot be fully understood through pure rationality and logic. According to Fisher, human beings are best understood as “homo narrans” whose perception of the surrounding world is structured through narratives rather than through formal argumentation. The scholar argues that people continuously make judgments by drawing upon stories, experiences, values, and culturally embedded understandings. In Fisher’s formulation of the *Narrative Paradigm*, the scholar contends that “people are storytellers”¹⁶⁰ and that the word itself may be understood as “a set of stories which must be chosen among to live the good life in a process of continual recreation.”¹⁶¹ Central to Fisher’s argument is the idea people rely on what is called “narrative rationality”, a form of rationality that rests upon two interrelated criteria: coherence and fidelity.¹⁶² Coherence concerns the internal consistency of a story whether its elements fit together in a meaningful and plausible manner. Fidelity refers to the extent to which a narrative resonates with an individual’s lived experiences and values. Fisher argues that people possess an inherent capability to judge whether stories “ring true” when compared to the narratives they already accept and experience in their own lives.¹⁶³

The significance of Fisher’s contribution extends beyond communication theory. By challenging the traditional separation between rational argument and narrative expression, Fisher repositions storytelling as not only a legitimate but influential form of public reasoning. Narratives are not secondary to facts but central mechanisms of one’s functionality. Therefore, political actors do not simply communicate objective facts but they actively construct interpretations of a reality through narratives that connect to events, values,

¹⁵⁹ Walter R. Fisher, “The Narrative Paradigm: In the Beginning,” *Journal of Communication* 35, no. 4 (1985): 74–89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1985.tb02974.x>.

¹⁶⁰ Fisher, “The Narrative Paradigm: In the Beginning,” 86.

¹⁶¹ Fisher, “The Narrative Paradigm: In the Beginning,” 75.

¹⁶² Fisher, “The Narrative Paradigm: In the Beginning,” 87.

¹⁶³ Fisher, “The Narrative Paradigm: In the Beginning,” 75.

identities, and most of all collective memories in order to create something whole. For the purpose of this thesis, Fisher's work provides an important theoretical point of departure. If Fisher demonstrates why narratives constitute a fundamental mode of human reasoning, an important question remains: what role do narratives play within political life?

Rejecting the positivist assumption that politics operates within a world of stable facts, Edelman¹⁶⁴ argues that "[t]he spectacle constituted by news reporting continuously constructs and reconstructs social problems, crises, enemies, and leaders and so creates a succession of threats and reassurances."¹⁶⁵ The scholar rejects the notion of political objects as fixed entities, instead conceptualizing them as products of interpretation whose significance is contingent upon the social context and the interpretive frameworks of those who perceive them.¹⁶⁶ As further emphasized, "political developments [are treated] as creations of the publics concerned with them."¹⁶⁷ If political realities are socially constructed through symbols and narratives, then concepts such as threats, crises, national interests, and even leadership cannot be understood solely as objective conditions. The comforting idea that politics operate on stable, verifiable facts crashes again the idea that what people experience in their reality is constantly being molded.

While Edelman focuses on the construction of political reality at the level of discourse and representation, Somers¹⁶⁸ extends this argument to the construction of identity itself. The scholar critiques "categorical" and "essentialist" approaches, arguing instead that "all of us come to *be* who we *are* [...] by being located or locating ourselves [...] in social narratives *rarely of our own making*."¹⁶⁹ Identity in this view is not an inherent or fixed characteristic but emerges through social narratives within which individuals are situated. People understand themselves through stories that precede them, surround them, and connect them to communities, histories, and social relationships. Crucially, Somers argues "it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world"¹⁷⁰ and "that social life is itself *storied* and that narratives is *an ontological condition of social life*."¹⁷¹ What the scholar ultimately suggests is more radical than a claim about discourse. Narratives are not simply tools used to describe existence; they are the means

¹⁶⁴ Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

¹⁶⁵ Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, 1.

¹⁶⁶ Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, 2.

¹⁶⁷ Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, 2.

¹⁶⁸ Margaret R. Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach," *Theory and Society* 23, no. 5 (1994): 605–49, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00992905>.

¹⁶⁹ Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach," 606.

¹⁷⁰ Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach," 606.

¹⁷¹ Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach," 613–14.

through which it becomes intelligible. Social life does not exist as a neutral sequence that is later interpreted by individuals. Rather, narratives constitute one of the primary mechanisms through which social experiences become intelligible. The convergence between Edelman and Somers is evident in their rejection of fixed meaning and essentialist understandings of political and social reality. Together, their works suggest that narratives do not operate simply as rhetorical devices but as mechanisms through which realities and identities are produced and reproduced over time.

On the other hand, Sewell¹⁷² provides an explanation as for why narratives remain adaptable across different contexts. Sewell's¹⁷³ reformulation of "social structure" as the dynamic interplay between "schemas" (cultural frameworks of meaning) and "resources" (material and institutional capacities), emphasizes that each simultaneously shapes and is shaped by the other.¹⁷⁴ Sewell critiques deterministic models of structure that reduce actors to passive subjects, arguing that such approaches "tend to reduce actors to cleverly programmed automatons."¹⁷⁵ The scholar instead demonstrates that structures are not static but inherently transformable. Schemas are "transposable"¹⁷⁶ across contexts, resources yield unpredictable outcomes¹⁷⁷, and multiple "structures intersect and overlap"¹⁷⁸ in ways that enable actors to reinterpret meanings and mobilize them for new purposes.

This insight is valuable for understanding the political deployment of narratives. Rather than functioning as fixed or unchanging frameworks, narratives may be adapted to different political circumstances while retaining their intrinsic symbolic significance. A single narrative can be invoked across multiple domains of discourse and connected to a variety of contemporary political issues. Additionally, Sewell's emphasis on "polysemy (or multiplicity of meaning)"¹⁷⁹ highlights why meanings remain contested. The same symbolic forms may acquire different interpretations depending on the context in which they are deployed, creating opportunities for political actors to strategically frame and reframe nar-

¹⁷² William H. Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (1992): 1–29.

¹⁷³ Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation."

¹⁷⁴ Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," 8;13–14.

¹⁷⁵ Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," 2.

¹⁷⁶ Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," 17.

¹⁷⁷ Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," 18.

¹⁷⁸ Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," 19.

¹⁷⁹ Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," 18–19.

ratives in support of different objectives. In this sense, power and meaning are closely intertwined: what things mean determine how power operates, and in turn power contributes to the stabilization and reproduction of those meanings.

4. 2. Political Narratives and Historical Continuity

If narratives shape meaning and identity, they also serve as important sources of political legitimacy. Political actors frequently seek to justify contemporary claims through appeals to history, collective memory, and continuity tied to a meaningful past.

The historical dimension is most clearly articulated by Hobsbawm & Ranger¹⁸⁰, who introduce the concept of “invented tradition” referring to “traditions actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief [...] period [...] establishing themselves with great rapidity.”¹⁸¹ and “normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past.”¹⁸², even when such continuity is “largely factious”.¹⁸³ Crucially, these traditions are to be understood not as passive inheritances from the past but active responses to novel political conditions, taking the form of symbolic practices that aim to weld themselves into reality. In this sense, traditions function not merely as reflections of history but as mechanisms through which contemporary political projects acquire the desired legitimacy and authority. Therefore, references to sacred history, collective memory, or ancestral inheritance can be understood as political narratives capable of legitimizing contemporary claims through their association with a meaningful and often symbolically charged past. While Hobsbawm & Ranger draw attention to the political constriction of historical continuity with traditions, their approach leaves open the question of why certain narratives retain their appeal and stronghold across generations.

Smith¹⁸⁴ directs attention to the enduring power of myths, memories, symbols, and traditions in shaping collective identities. Writing from an ethno-symbolist perspective, Smith argues that the persistence of collective communities cannot be fully understood through contemporary political developments alone. What give communities resilience

¹⁸⁰ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Canto Classics (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹⁸¹ Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 1.

¹⁸² Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 1.

¹⁸³ Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 2.

¹⁸⁴ Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

over time is the continuous shielding of shared historical memories, myths of origins, symbols, traditions, and attachments to territory.¹⁸⁵ As Smith notes, “Where there are clashing interpretations of ancestral homelands, and cultural heritages – as for example in [...] Palestine – normal conflicts of interests are turned into cultural wars, and moral and political crusades replace everyday politics.”¹⁸⁶

Central to Smith’s argument is the relationship between identity and memory – “memory, almost by definition, is integral to cultural identity, and the cultivation of shared memories is essential to the survival and destiny of such collective identities.”¹⁸⁷ Smith argues that “what gives nationalism its power are the myths, memories, traditions, symbols of ethnic heritages and the ways in which a popular *living past* had been, and can be, rediscovered reinterpreted by modern nationalist intelligentsias [...] modern national identities are re-constituted in each generation, as the nation becomes more inclusive and as its members cope with new challenges.”¹⁸⁸ According to Smith, narratives tied to “homeland” possess exceptional longevity because they connect a community’s present existence to a subjectively perceived ancestral past. Through myths, symbols, and memories, territories transcend geographical spaces and are in turn transformed into repositories of belonging.

Taken together, the works of Hobsbawm & Ranger and Smith, demonstrate that political narratives derive legitimacy from their ability to connect contemporary political claims to historical heritages. Whether understood as strategically mobilized traditions or as expressions of collective culturally embedded memories, narratives provide a means through which political actors achieve their goals.

4. 3. Theoretical Perspectives: Institutions and Ideology

4. 3.1. Political Discourse, Institutional Context, and Role-Based Behavior

Political narratives do not emerge in a vacuum but they are manufactured, communicated, disseminated, and contested within institutional environments that shape both what political actors can say and how they are expected to behave. Political discourse is therefore closely connected to the institutional settings in which it is articulated. Changes in institutional role may influence not only political action but also the narratives through which such action is justified, legitimized, and communicated to audiences. Understanding this

¹⁸⁵ Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, 9.

¹⁸⁶ Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, 9.

¹⁸⁷ Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, 10.

¹⁸⁸ Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, 9.

relationship is important when examining whether a politician's transition from a parliamentary role to executive office affects the content and character of their political narratives.

This relationship is central to Schmidt's¹⁸⁹ concept of *Discursive Institutionalism* (DI), "a fourth [kind of] institutionalism"¹⁹⁰ which is defined as "the substantive content of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse in institutional context."¹⁹¹ DI was developed as a response to the limitations of earlier institutionalist approaches (Rational, Historical, Sociological) that primarily focused on formal rules or structural constraints, instead highlighting the role of political actors in generating, communicating, and legitimizing ideas.¹⁹² At the core of DI lies the distinction between ideas and discourse, where ideas constitute the content of political communication, and discourse refers both to the representation of those ideas and to the interactive processes through which they are conveyed. Schmidt defines discourse as encompassing not only "what is said" but also "who said what to whom, where, when, how, and why."¹⁹³ Political discourse therefore represents a bridge between "text", "structure", and "agency"¹⁹⁴ through which actors construct meanings, persuade audiences, and establish legitimacy.

Schmidt further argues that DI operates at "different levels of abstraction, [...] generalizations, and [...] objects and logics of explanation."¹⁹⁵ What this means is that there are different typology of ideas, including "policy ideas" which provide solutions to concrete political problems; "programmatic ideas" which offer broader frameworks for understanding political issues; and "philosophical ideas" which reflect deeper beliefs, values, and worldview but "sit in the 'background' as the underlying assumptions which are rarely contested except in times of crisis."¹⁹⁶ Each of these three aforementioned typologies contain two type of ideas: "cognitive" and "normative".¹⁹⁷ Cognitive ideas explain "what is and what to do" by identifying political problems and proposing solutions.¹⁹⁸ Here, what is

¹⁸⁹ Vivien A. Schmidt, "Chapter 9: Discursive Institutionalism: Understanding Policy in Context," in *Handbook of Critical Policy Studies*, ed. Douglas Torgerson et al. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781783472352.00016>.

¹⁹⁰ Schmidt, "Chapter 9: Discursive Institutionalism: Understanding Policy in Context," 1.

¹⁹¹ Schmidt, "Chapter 9: Discursive Institutionalism: Understanding Policy in Context," 1.

¹⁹² Schmidt, "Chapter 9: Discursive Institutionalism: Understanding Policy in Context," 1–3.

¹⁹³ Vivien A. Schmidt, "Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2008): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060606.135342>.

¹⁹⁴ Schmidt, "Discursive Institutionalism," 2.

¹⁹⁵ Schmidt, "Discursive Institutionalism," 21.

¹⁹⁶ Schmidt, "Discursive Institutionalism," 4.

¹⁹⁷ Schmidt, "Discursive Institutionalism," 4.

¹⁹⁸ Schmidt, "Discursive Institutionalism," 4.

relevant are the normative ideas which address questions of legitimacy and appropriateness by defining “what one ought to do.”¹⁹⁹ As Schmidt argues in a later work, normative ideas “attach values to political action and serve to legitimize the policies in a program [...] often with regard to underlying public philosophies”, meaning through appeals to morality, identity, and collective understandings of public good.²⁰⁰ In that sense, theological narratives can be equated to normative ideas because their persuasive power derives less from technical policy reasoning than from their ability to connect political claims to broader moral and religious frameworks.

DI also emphasizes the importance of communication in political life, as Schmidt distinguishes between two types of discourse: “coordinative” and communicative”. Coordinative discourse emerge “among policy actors²⁰¹ [...] at the center of policy construction who are involved in the creation, elaboration, and justification of policy and programmatic ideas.”²⁰² Here, the relevant discourse is the communicative one which occurs between political actors and wider audiences, in which “the agents of change consist [of] [...] political leaders, elected officials, party members [...] as they attempt to form mass public opinion, engage the public in debates about policies they favor, and win elections”²⁰³ and are “involved in the presentation, deliberation, and legitimization of political ideas.”²⁰⁴ In this sense, parliamentary speeches serves as a key arena through which political actors communicate and justify their positions and decisions both to the parliamentary audience and the public audience. As Schmidt argues: “discourse may also exert a causal influence beyond what [it] does in representing ideas [...] not just to express one set of actors’ strategic interests or normative values but also to persuade others of the necessity and/or appropriateness of a given course of action.”²⁰⁵

While Discursive Institutionalism provides the framework for understanding how political actors communicate and legitimize ideas through discourse, it offers only a partial explanation of why particular forms of discourse emerge in certain specific institutional

¹⁹⁹ Schmidt, “Discursive Institutionalism,” 4.

²⁰⁰ Schmidt, “Chapter 9: Discursive Institutionalism: Understanding Policy in Context,” 3;9.

²⁰¹ Schmidt, “Discursive Institutionalism,” 1.

²⁰² Schmidt, “Discursive Institutionalism,” 8.

²⁰³ Schmidt, “Chapter 9: Discursive Institutionalism: Understanding Policy in Context,” 10.

²⁰⁴ Schmidt, “Discursive Institutionalism,” 8.

²⁰⁵ Schmidt, “Discursive Institutionalism,” 10.

contexts. To address this, the following section draws on March & Olsen's²⁰⁶ *Logic of Appropriateness*, which shifts the attention to the content of political narratives to the institutional environments within which political actors operate and the expectations attached to different political roles.

March & Olsen argue that political behavior cannot be understood solely through calculations of costs and benefits.²⁰⁷ Instead, human action is frequently guided by rules, identities, and institutional expectations. According to the scholars, actors often follow rules because they are perceived as “natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate [...] seek[ing] to fulfill the obligations encapsulated in a role, identity, a membership in a political community or group, and the ethos, practices, and expectations of institutions.”²⁰⁸

At the center of their argument lies the proposition that actors rely upon socially constructed understandings of appropriate behavior when making decisions. This process is described through three fundamental questions: “What kind of a situation is this? What kind of a person am I? What does a person such as I do in a situation such as this?”²⁰⁹ Hence, political behavior is shaped not only by strategic considerations but also by the actor's understanding of who they are and what is expected of them as someone occupying a particular position. The Logic of Appropriateness therefore suggests that political actors adapt their behavior to institutionalized role expectations rather than constantly pursuing utility-maximizing strategies.

March & Olsen's understanding of an institution is defined as “a relatively stable collection of rules and practices, embedded in structures of resources that make action possible [...] and structures of meaning that explain and justify behavior.”²¹⁰ In this sense, institutions do not merely constrain behavior, they create actors, define legitimate forms of conduct, and establish standards through which actions are evaluated. As the authors argue, institutions “guide behavior and stabilize expectations”²¹¹ while simultaneously defining “what are legitimate arguments and standards of justification and criticism in different situations.”²¹² This perspective is especially relevant for analyzing political discourse because it suggests that political narratives are not solely the product of individual preference or

²⁰⁶ James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, “Chapter 34: The Logic of Appropriateness,” in *The Oxford History of Public Policy*, ed. Michael Moran et al., The Oxford Handbooks of Political Science (Oxford University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199548453.003.0034>.

²⁰⁷ March and Olsen, “Chapter 34: The Logic of Appropriateness,” 693.

²⁰⁸ March and Olsen, “Chapter 34: The Logic of Appropriateness,” 689.

²⁰⁹ March and Olsen, “Chapter 34: The Logic of Appropriateness,” 690.

²¹⁰ March and Olsen, “Chapter 34: The Logic of Appropriateness,” 691.

²¹¹ March and Olsen, “Chapter 34: The Logic of Appropriateness,” 691.

²¹² March and Olsen, “Chapter 34: The Logic of Appropriateness,” 691.

ideology but they are shaped by institutional settings that seek to establish expectations considering what kind of narratives and arguments are considered as appropriate. Political actors occupying different offices may therefore face different incentives, responsibilities, and codes of conduct, all of which influence in turn how they communicate their political ideas.

Importantly, the authors emphasize that “individuals have multiple roles and identities and the number and variety of alternative rules assures that only a fraction of the relevant rules are evoked in a particular place at a particular time.”²¹³ What this means is that individuals are simultaneously embedded in several institutions and roles, meaning that different identities and role obligations may become relevant in different situations and may point toward different courses of action. Therefore, actors must interpret on their own which identity and role is most relevant, however “in different situations and when circumstances fluctuate fast, they may be rapid shifts within existing repertoire of rules based on institutionalized switching rules.”²¹⁴

Applied to the present study, when combined with Schmidt’s *Discursive Institutionalism*, this perspective offers a more comprehensive explanation of political rhetoric. Schmidt demonstrates how ideas are communicated, legitimized, and contested through discourse, and how political actors used narratives to construct meaning and justify political action. On the other hand, March & Olsen’s *Logic of Appropriateness* explain why those narratives may change as actors move between institutional roles characterized by different expectations and responsibilities.

4. 3.2. Ideological Continuity and Persistence of Political Beliefs

Although institutional theories provide important insights into how political actors adapt to changing political environment, they are less equipped to explain the endurance of ideological commitments. To address this limitation, this next section draws on Freeden’s²¹⁵ *Morphological Analysis of Ideology*, namely Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 from the book *Ideologies and Political Theory*, which examines the relationship between political concepts, ideological structures, and historical continuity.

²¹³ March and Olsen, “Chapter 34: The Logic of Appropriateness,” 694.

²¹⁴ March and Olsen, “Chapter 34: The Logic of Appropriateness,” 698.

²¹⁵ Michael Freeden, “Chapter 2: Assembling: From Concepts to Ideologies,” in *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford University Press, 1998), <https://doi.org/10.1093/019829414X.001.0001>; Michael Freeden, “Chapter 3: The Contexts of Ideological Meaning,” in *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford University Press, 1998), <https://doi.org/10.1093/019829414X.001.0001>.

At the center of Freeden's argument is the claim that ideologies should be understood as "ideational formations consisting of political concepts"²¹⁶ and as "complex constructs through which specific meanings, out of potentially unlimited and essentially contestable universe of meanings, are imparted to the wide range of political concepts they inevitably employ."²¹⁷ Freeden argues that ideologies constitute distinctive arrangements of political concepts that provide meaning, coherence, and direction to political thought. From this perspective, an ideology is understood as "a concept with recognizable form, a particular way of organizing clusters of other political concepts."²¹⁸ The significance of this insight lies in its rejection of the notion that political beliefs exist independently from one another. Rather, concepts derive meaning through their relationship to other concepts within the broader ideological structure. Freeden writes: "Political concepts acquire meaning not only through historically transferred traditions of discourse, and not only through the pluralist disparities of culture, but also through their particular location within a constellation of other political concepts."²¹⁹ What this means is that concepts derive their meaning from their relationship to other concepts within an ideological configuration. Consequently, ideological change is often constrained, as modifications to one concept may require adjustments to related concepts in order to preserve coherence within the broader ideological structure. This interconnectedness is central to Freeden's notion of ideological morphology, as ideologies are "particular patterned clusters and configurations of political concepts"²²⁰, they derive meaning from their relationship with neighboring concepts, thus changes to one component of an ideology may affect the interpretation of others. At the same time, this structure provides stability and continuity and political actors are therefore unlikely to abandon core ideological commitments as they remain deeply embedded in political meaning.

Freeden further reinforces this argument by emphasizing the importance of historical continuity in ideological thought.²²¹ The scholar discusses the "role of history in ideological analysis [...] through four different apertures"²²² from which the fact that "history [...] is an integral arena within which political concepts and ideologies are located"²²³ and

²¹⁶ Freeden, "Chapter 2: Assembling: From Concepts to Ideologies," 48.

²¹⁷ Freeden, "Chapter 2: Assembling: From Concepts to Ideologies," 54.

²¹⁸ Freeden, "Chapter 2: Assembling: From Concepts to Ideologies," 48.

²¹⁹ Freeden, "Chapter 2: Assembling: From Concepts to Ideologies," 54.

²²⁰ Freeden, "Chapter 2: Assembling: From Concepts to Ideologies," 54.

²²¹ Freeden, "Chapter 3: The Contexts of Ideological Meaning," 98.

²²² Freeden, "Chapter 3: The Contexts of Ideological Meaning," 98.

²²³ Freeden, "Chapter 3: The Contexts of Ideological Meaning," 98.

“political concepts bear the accumulative burdens of their past.”²²⁴ In this sense, concepts such as nationhood, for example, do not emerge anew in every political context but they retain historical associations, traditions, and pre-established interpretations that influence contemporary meaning. As Freedman notes: “political concepts are notable for their strong historical grounding [...] so that historical continuity plays an important role in organizing the political thinking of the members of a society, as well as in selecting the political words they employ.”²²⁵ Hence, Freedman’s framework suggests that ideological commitments are embedded within durable conceptual and historical structures that tend to persist over time. Even when political actors encounter changing institutional environments, these inherited frameworks continue to shape how political reality is understood and interpreted.

Freedman’s morphological approach provides a theoretical basis for expecting ideological continuity despite changes in political roles or institutional positions, as political actors remain embedded within historically transmitted configurations of meaning that structure their understanding of political reality.

4. 4. Theoretical Expectations

4. 4.1. Expectation 1 (E1): Institutional Context

The theoretical literature on political discourse and institutionalism suggests that political behavior is shaped by the roles, responsibilities, and constraints associated with different political positions. As political actors move from legislative or opposition positions into executive and governmental roles, they become responsible for policy implementation and administrative decision-making. Hence, political discourse and rhetoric are expected to adapt to these institutional demands.

Applied to the present study, this logic suggests that Bezalel Smotrich’s transition from a Member of Knesset to Finance Minister should be associated with a decline in the frequency and explicitness of theological references to the “Promised Land” narrative. In contrast, Zvi Yedidya Sukkot, as a Member of Knesset, is expected to face fewer institutional constraints on the usage of theological language.

Expectation 1 (E1): Greater institutional responsibility will be associated with a lower frequency of explicit theological rhetoric.

²²⁴ Freedman, “Chapter 3: The Contexts of Ideological Meaning,” 98.

²²⁵ Freedman, “Chapter 2: Assembling: From Concepts to Ideologies,” 52.

4. 4.2. **Expectation 2 (E2): Ideological Persistence**

The theoretical literature suggests that ideological beliefs are embedded within durable configurations of interconnected political concepts that provide coherence and meaning to political thought. As these conceptual structures are reinforced by historical continuity and shared ideological traditions, political actors are not expected to abandon core ideological commitments simply as a consequence of switching institutional positions. Instead, ideological frameworks continue to shape how political reality is understood and interpreted, even when political actors assume new responsibilities or operate within different institutional contexts.

Applied to the present study, this logic suggests that Bezalel Smotrich's transition from Member of Knesset to Finance Minister should not result in complete disappearance of references associated with the "Promised Land" narrative if theological-territorial beliefs constitute a significant component of his ideological identity. Similarly, Zvi Yedidya Sukkot, as Member of Knesset, is expected to continue employing elements of the "Promised Land" narrative as part of a broader Religious Zionist ideological framework.

Expectation 2 (E2): Because religious and ideological beliefs are deeply embedded within political worldviews, elements of the "Promised Land" narrative are expected to persist despite changed in institutional position and governmental responsibility.

Chapter 5: Research Design and Methodology

5. 1. Research Design

The study adopts a *qualitative, interpretive research*²²⁶ in order to examine how political meaning is constructed and mobilized through religious narratives within institutional discourse. Rather than treating religion as a static background variable, the study approaches it as an active and meaning-producing resource through which political claims are articulated and justified in specific contexts.

The research is structured as an *actor-centered single case study*²²⁷, focusing on Bezalel Smotrich as a theoretically relevant political actor. The choice to focus on an actor is de-

²²⁶ Claudia Wiesner, "Doing Qualitative and Interpretative Research: Reflecting Principles and Principled Challenges," *Political Research Exchange* 4, no. 1 (2022): 2127372, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2022.2127372>.

²²⁷ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, Sixth edition (SAGE, 2018).

liberate as this approach enables the assessment of how ideological positioning is performed and translated into formal political speech, rather than assumed at the level of organizational identity as a whole.

Within this framework, the study employs the analytical method of *discourse analysis*²²⁸, focusing on how language, narratives, rhetorical strategies function in the construction of political legitimacy. Particular attention is given to the institutional context of Knesset plenary sessions, where speech is formalized, publicly accountable, and politically consequential.

The research design is further guided by the very formulation of the research question in terms of “extent”. This reflects an analytical strategy in which rather than presupposing the prominence of religious narratives, the study seeks to empirically assess their presence, frequency, and significance. In doing so, the design explicitly allows for variation, including limited, absent, or unexpected usage, enabling a systematic overview of whether ideological positioning is consistently reflected in institutional speech.

5. 2. Case Selection: Actor-Centered Approach

5. 2.1. Case Selection Rationale

The case selected for this study is the political actor Bezalel Smotrich, continuing leader of *the Religious Zionism Party*, examined as a single, theoretically relevant political actor. While the party is commonly referred to in English as the *Religious Zionism Party* (Hebrew: *HaTzionut HaDatit*), its official materials are sometimes translated as *Religious Zionist Party*. Notably, on the official Knesset website, the parliamentary group is identified as the *Religious Zionism Party Chaired by Bezalel Smotrich*²²⁹ in order to differentiate from the prior party with the same name that is no longer active since 2022. However, for the sake of terminological efficiency and consistency, the study adopts the designation *Religious Zionism Party* when mentioned in the study.

As uninterrupted party leader and a central ideological figure within Israeli politics, Smotrich constitutes a critical case through which the relationship between religious-ideological branding and parliamentary speech can be directly assessed. The selection is not

²²⁸ Luísa Godinho, “Discourse and International Relations: A Theoretical and Methodological Approach,” *JANUS.NET: E-Journal of International Relations* 7, no. 2 (2016): 1–13.

²²⁹ The Knesset, “Parliamentary Groups in the 25th Knesset: Religious Zionism Chaired by Bezalel Smotrich,” Government, The Knesset, 2022, <https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/mk/apps/faction/faction-lobby?KnessetID=25&FactionID=1105>.

incidental but grounded in explicit ideological positioning, political influence, and institutional authority. According to the party's official website²³⁰, Smotrich not only serves as chairman of the Religious Zionism Party, but also played a central role in its transformation and expansion, having rebranded the party under its current name, promoting its consolidation and unity within the broader Religious Zionist camp. Furthermore, his political career has been closely associated with questions of settlement, land policy, and Jewish sovereignty. Prior to entering the Knesset, he served as Director of Operations of Regavim, an organization dedicated to advancing Zionist land policy, while his publicly articulated political vision emphasizes strengthening Israel's hold over *Eretz Yisrael* and rejecting the establishment of a Palestinian state.

At the same time, Smotrich's role extends beyond mere ideological representation and personal belief. As both party leader and key figure within government structures during the period under study, Smotrich occupies a position in which discursive choices carry both symbolic and tangible political consequences. This combination of ideological commitment, political influence, and institutional authority renders him an analytically significant case for assessing whether religious narratives are only part of a strategic political branding, or whether they are actively translated into formal parliamentary discourse.

To complement the primary case study, the analysis incorporates Zvi Yedidya Sukkot as a secondary actor drawn from the same ideological and institutional movement. The inclusion of Sukkot introduces a limited comparison, allowing for the study to assess whether the deployment of theological-territorial narratives is confined to the party leadership or also observable among other representatives of the Religious Zionism Party. Rather than functioning as an independent case, Sukkot serves as a comparative reference point through which patterns identified in Smotrich's discourse can be contextualized and evaluated.

The selection of Sukkot is also methodologically justified by both his political trajectory and his close association with issues central to the present study. Following Smotrich's resignation from the Knesset under the Norwegian Law in 2023, Sukkot assumes his parliamentary seat and entered the Knesset as a representative of the party. Beyond this institutional connection, Sukkot has long been associated with the settlement movement and with activism in "Judea and Samaria". Prior to his parliamentary career in the party, he was

²³⁰ The Religious Zionism Party Led by Bezael Smotrich, "Members of the Knesset: Bezael Smotrich," ZionutDatit (Religious Zionism Party), <https://zionutdatit.org.il/en/-/smotrich-2/>.

publicly identified with the so-called “hilltop youth” milieu and later emerged as a prominent activist within the settlement movement, advocating for the expansion and strengthening of Jewish communities in the West Bank.²³¹ His relevance to the subject matter of this thesis was further reinforced when in November 2023, he was appointed as chairman of the Knesset Subcommittee for Judea and Samaria, a body responsible for oversight of security and civilian affairs in the territory.²³² Upon assuming the position, Sukkot explicitly stated that his objective was both to ensure the security of the settlers but also to develop as many settlements as possible in the region.²³³ Sukkot’s appointment generated substantial political controversy with critics citing his longstanding association with the settlement movement, his previous involvement in activist campaigns, and his reputation as a prominent representative of the movement’s more hardline currents.²³⁴

5. 2.2. Temporal Scope of the Study: 2021-2025

The temporal scope of the study spans from the period from 2021 to 2025, corresponding to a phase of inner party restructuring, political consolidation, and increasing executive influence for Bezalel Smotrich²³⁵. This timeframe begins with Smotrich’s active role as MK following the 24th Knesset elections in 2021 and continues through his subsequent political trajectory. In 2022, Smotrich assumed the role of Finance Minister, and later in 2023 resigned as MK during the 25th Knesset, under Norwegian Law, which allows ministers to step from parliamentary duties while retaining executive office and their seat taken by another candidate from the party. Following his resignation, Smotrich assumed a second role as additional Minister in the Ministry of Defense. Both positions are particularly relevant for policies related to territorial governance and settlement expansion. While this transition alters his formal parliamentary presence, it does not diminish his political centrality; rather, it marks a shift from legislative to executive influence.

The period also encompasses important organizational developments within the party structure. During the 24th Knesset, *Religious Zionism* parliamentary group split into two separate parliamentary groups – *Religious Zionism* (with five MKs) and *Noam* (with one

²³¹ Naomi Zeveloff, *The Radical New Face of the Jewish Settler Movement*, January 11, 2016, <https://forward.com/news/328981/the-radical-new-face-of-the-jewish-settler-movement/>.

²³² Jeremy Sharon, *Ultrationalist MK Tzvi Succot Appointed Head of Knesset West Bank Subcommittee*, November 1, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ultrationalist-mk-tzvi-succot-appointed-head-of-knesset-west-bank-subcommittee/>.

²³³ Sharon, *Ultrationalist MK Tzvi Succot Appointed Head of Knesset West Bank Subcommittee*.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ The Knesset, “All Past and Present MKs: Bezalel Smotrich,” Government, The Knesset, 2023, <https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/mk/apps/mk/mk-personal-details/936>.

MK). Since November 2022, when the 25th Knesset was formed, the “old” *Religious Zionism* party became inactive, instead the “new” *Religious Zionism* parliamentary group split into three separate parliamentary groups – *Religious Zionism Chaired by Bezalel Smotrich* (with seven MKs), *Otzma Yehudit Chaired by MK Itamar Ben Gvir* (with six MKs), and *Noam Chaired by MK Avi Maoz* (with one MK). Despite all this, rather confusing restructuring, Bezalel Smotrich has remained the leader of the *Religious Zionism* party.

As such, the study treats these formal transformations not as moments of ideological discontinuity, but as developments occurring within a stable, and, in certain respects, intensified ideological trajectory.

5.3. Methodology

The study employs *deductive thematic analysis* as its primary analytical method in order to examine how theological narratives are mobilized within institutional political discourse. A deductive approach is adopted in that the analysis is guided by theoretically informed expectations, derived from existing literature on religion, politics, religion-politics nexus, and narrative construction. Rather than allowing themes to emerge purely inductively from the data, the study begins with a predefined analytical set. The goal is to systematically examine whether, how, and to what extent these narratives are present within the empirical material.

The analytical process follows a structured, top-down logic. First, a corpus of plenary sessions transcripts is compiled from the official Knesset database by filtering sessions according to actor(s) (Bezalel Smotrich and Zvi Sukkot) and temporal scope (2021-2025). All sessions in which the respective actors spoke are included automatically in the dataset. The transcripts are then systematically organized in folders, chronologically and by speaker. In the case of Smotrich, the dataset is further divided into two phases – his period as a Member of Knesset (2021-2023) and his subsequent role as Minister (2023-2025) – in order to assess potential shifts in activity and rhetorical patterns following his transition to executive office.

Following the data collection, the study proceeds to *thematic coding* through which relevant segments of text are identified and categorized. References are coded as instances of theological narratives, where they include explicit or implicit invocations of biblical scripture, divine promise, or religiously grounded claims to the land. Each identified instance is systematically labeled, allowing for the consistent identification of patterns across the dataset. This includes not only direct references, but also related expressions such as

“Eretz Israel” and/or “Judea and Samaria” etc., where these function as part of a broader theological framing.

In order to operationalize the central concept of “extent”, the study incorporates a limited *quantitative* component alongside qualitative interpretation. In this context, “extent” is understood not only in terms of frequency, but also in relation to the contextual function and discursive role of the references. Empirically, this is captured through the recording of the distribution of coded references across the dataset, including their occurrence per year, and where relevant, across shorter time intervals. These patterns may be examined in relation to broader political contexts and are further illustrated through visual representations, such as frequency distributions and temporal graphs. The latter serve to support and clarify the qualitative analysis without introducing a fully quantitative approach.

In addition to frequency, the analysis examines the *contextual deployment* of theological narratives. Particular attention is given to discursive settings in which such references appear, including whether they are used in the justification of policy oppositions, in response to criticism, or generally as part of a broader ideological framing. This allows the study to move beyond mere presence of narratives, toward a true assessment of the functional role of these narratives.

A limited *within-case comparison* is also conducted through the inclusion of Zvi Sukkot as a secondary actor. While not the primary focus of the study, this comparison provides a supplementary point of reference within the same political and ideological environment, enabling a distinction between leadership driven rhetoric and non-leading actors.

Overall, this methodological approach directly reflects the central research question, allowing for the systematic identification, measurement, and interpretation of how and to what extent theological narratives are mobilized in parliamentary discourse.

5. 4. Evidence Base and Source Collection

5. 4.1. Primary Empirical Sources

The empirical foundation of this study is based on a corpus of official Knesset plenary session transcripts, drawn from the publicly available database of the Israeli Knesset. These transcripts constitute formal records of parliamentary debates and speeches, providing a reliable source of institutionally sanctioned political discourse.

The dataset covers the period from 2021 to 2025 and comprises a total of 129 plenary session transcripts in which the actor(s) under examination participated. Of these, 77 tran-

scripts include contributions by Bezalel Smotrich, while 52 transcripts include contributions by Zvi Sukkot. Within the dataset, 1 plenary session contains interventions from both actors, reflecting their participation from distinct institutional positions – Smotrich in his capacity as Minister and Sukkot as a Member of Knesset.

The use of plenary session transcripts as primary sources is grounded in their status as official, verbatim records of parliamentary discourse, ensuring a very high degree of reliability and consistency. As institutionally documented speeches, these records capture political argumentation in its most sophisticated, formalized, and publicly accountable form. By relying exclusively on official plenary records, the study ensures a coherent and comparable dataset across the defined temporal scope.

5. 5. Challenges and Limitations

5. 5.1. Language and Translation Constraints

The primary corpus of the Knesset plenary sessions is delivered in Hebrew, and the researcher does not possess proficiency in that language. While this presents a limitation in capturing certain linguistic nuances, it does not preclude systematic analysis of the material itself. This challenge is mitigated through the use of official English translations where available, as well as supplementary materials such as party documents and official communication channels. In addition, Hebrew-language material is translated using the subscription-based software *DeepL*. This tool is selected for its strong performance and ability to preserve contextual meaning and semantic coherence. While AI-assisted translation tools provide a high level of accuracy, certain linguistic nuances, rhetorical subtleties, and culturally embedded meanings may not be fully preserved therefore the possibility of minor interpretative distortion remains.

5. 5.2. Analytical Scope and Case Selection

The study adopts an actor-centered approach, focusing exclusively on Bezalel Smotrich within the context of Knesset plenary discourse. While this enhances the scope of research and the analytical precision, allowing for a more focused examination of how ideological positioning is reflected within a formal institutional setting, it limits the scope of findings. The analysis does not incorporate rhetorical strategies employed in other arenas, such as media appearances or informal political communication channels. However, this is a deliberate methodological choice. Plenary sessions constitute official and institutionally sanctioned form of political speech, in which statements carry formal political weight and are

subject to public record. In contrast, informal or media-based communication lack the same degree of authority and consistency. Furthermore, the findings of this study are strictly limited to the selected case and do not extend to other religiously oriented political parties, leaders, or actors. As such, no broader generalizations are made beyond the scope of this analysis, and the conclusions should be understood as context-specific rather than representative of wider patterns within Israeli politics.

5. 5.3. Interpretive and Temporal Challenges

As a discourse-based study, the analysis involves a degree of subjective, interpretive judgment, particularly in identifying implicit references to theological narratives. To mitigate this, the analysis is informed by the researcher's prior academic training and sustained engagement with Israeli politics and decision-making process, including previous research conducted at the undergraduate level. Furthermore, the temporal scope (2021-2025) encompasses a period marked by evolving political and security dynamics, some of which remain active at the time of writing. While this allows for the observation of variation across different contexts, the study does not aim to provide a definitive account of future developments. Importantly, the study remains open to the possibility of limited use or absence of theological narratives, thereby reducing the risk of confirmation bias and ensuring that the findings are driven strictly by empirical observation rather than prior expectation.

Chapter 6: Empirical Analysis

6. 1. Introductory Mapping of the Discursive Landscape

6. 1.1. Corpus-Wide Distribution

The first step in operationalizing the present study was to identify key terms associated with the "Promised Land" narrative and examine how these terms appear across the entire corpus of Knesset plenary session transcripts between 2021 and 2025. To achieve this, twenty-six theological, territorial, and historically embedded terms linked to the narrative were systematically coded across the dataset using MAXQDA. The graph below presents the frequency distribution of these terms between 2021 and 2025, providing an initial overview of the broader discursive environment in the Knesset.

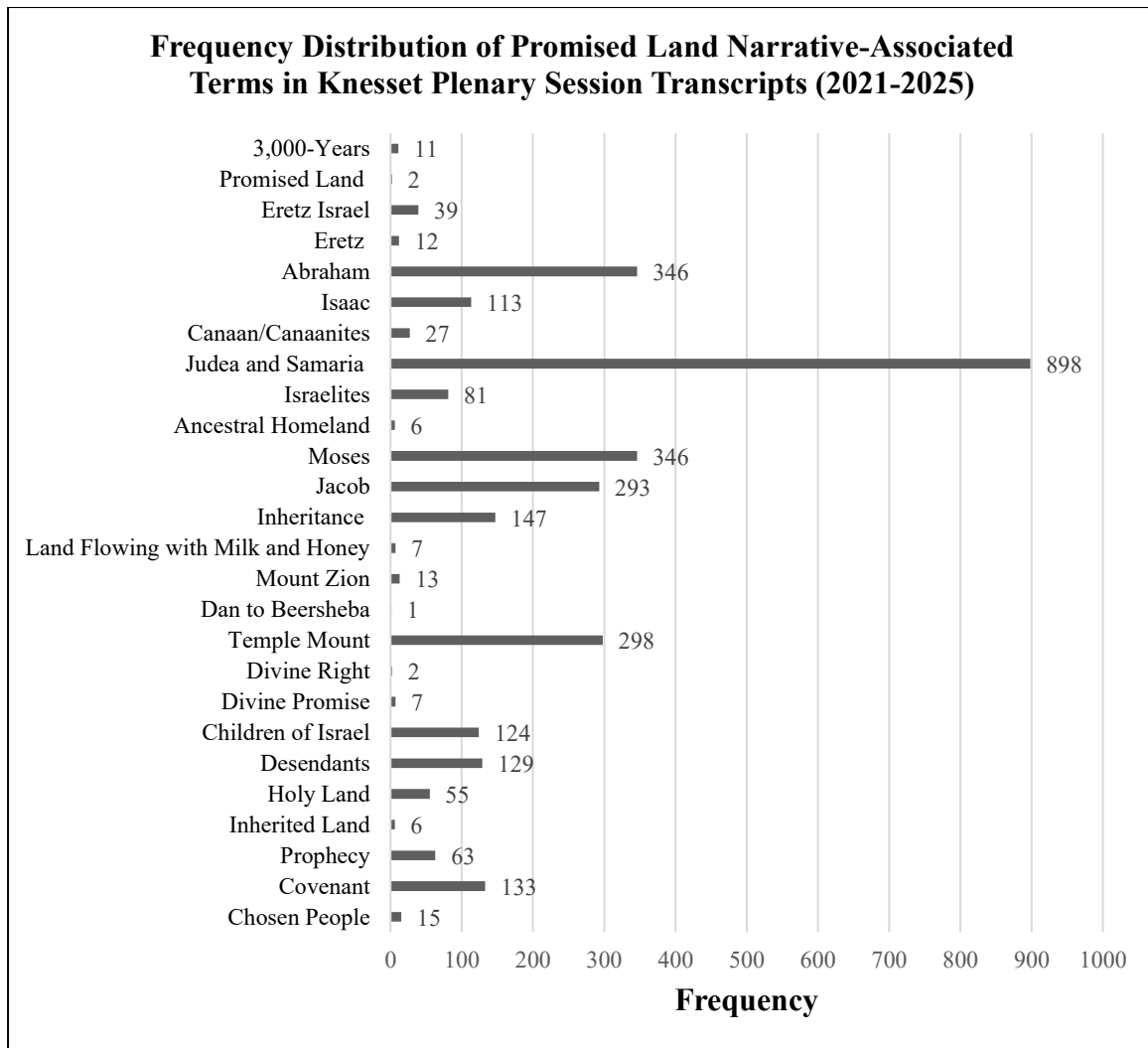


Figure 1.

Results

The selected twenty-six terms appeared a total of 3,174 times across the corpus of Knesset plenary session transcripts between 2021 and 2025. It is important to emphasize, however, that this figure reflects the entirety of the corpus rather than the rhetoric of the *Religious Zionism Party* or Bezalel Smotrich alone. As the plenary sessions incorporate speeches and interventions from multiple political parties, ministers, opposition ministers, and other parliamentary actors, the number 3,174 represents the total appearance of the coded terms throughout all sessions included in the dataset.

The initial frequency distribution of the coded terminology reveals several notable patterns within the broader parliamentary discourse. Most prominently, the term “Judea and Samaria” appears with the highest frequency by a substantial margin, occurring 898 times. This is followed by references to biblical figures such as “Abraham” and “Moses” each appearing, surprisingly – 346 times, as well as “Jacob” (293) and “Temple Mount” (298).

Terms such as “Inheritance” (147), “Covenant” (133), “Descendants” (129), “Children of Israel” (124), and “Isaac” (113) also appear with considerable frequency. By contrast, explicitly theological formulations including “Promised Land” (2), “Divine Right” (2), “Inheritance of the Lord” (2) and “Dan to Beersheba” (1) appear only marginally within the dataset.

The distribution itself produces several important preliminary observations. One particular finding is that terms that one might intuitively expect to dominate the discourse such as “Promised Land” or “Chosen People” or even broader formulations associated with divine election and entitlement – appear far less frequently. Rather than relying heavily on overt theological slogans, the discourse appears to anchor itself more consistently in biblical geography, ancestral continuity, and scriptural language. In this sense, the first finding is that narrative of the “Promised Land” itself is not *that* explicit as expected.

The prevalence of terms such as “Judea and Samaria” and “Temple Mount”, as well as references to patriarchal and prophetic figures suggests that parliamentary rhetoric derives from a continuous embedding of territorial claims within a biblical framework. Manual contextual review of the coded material, additionally revealed that parliamentary speeches frequently incorporated direct quotations from scripture, often extending across multiple sentences, passages, and even pages for that matter.

Clarifications

At the same time, the coding process revealed important contextual and methodological limitations inherent to automated textual analysis. Several of the selected terms carry double or multiple connotations within Israeli political and social discourse. For example, “Jacob”, “Isaac”, “Abraham”, and “Moses” may refer either to biblical figures or public governmental names. Similarly, “Israel” may denote the biblical figure Jacob following his renaming in the Hebrew Bible, but may also simply refer to the modern State of Israel. The term “Abraham” additionally appears in contemporary political formulations such as the “Abraham Accords”. Furthermore, the Hebrew term “Eretz” meaning “land”, may appear independently in ordinary linguistic usage or as part of the theological-biblical formulation “Eretz Israel”. Similar contextual ambiguity was also observed with terms such as “Children of Israel”, “Descendants”, “Inheritance”. While “Children of Israel” may function as a direct biblical reference to the Israelites within scriptural tradition, the term may also refer more broadly to the contemporary population or youth of Israel in contemporary times.

Likewise, “Descendants” and “Inheritance” may denote biblical lineage and covenantal ancestry, but also in reference to familial continuity, generational inheritance. Because MAXQDA operates through textual recognition rather than human contextual understanding, the software coded all appearances of these terms according to the predetermined coding instructions irrespective of contextual meaning.

Consequently, the automated coding process constituted only the preliminary stage of analysis. In order to establish contextual relevance and rhetorical significance, all 3,029 coded appearances were subsequently reviewed manually. This step was necessary to distinguish between genuinely theological references and instances in which the same terminology merely reflected personal names, governmental references, or unrelated political contexts, in order to eliminate false-positives.

The selection of terminology was not arbitrary, but contextually grounded in the theological-territorial discourse examined through this study. Terms such as “Canaan/Canaanites” and “Dan to Beersheba” are directly associated with sacred geography and territorial imagination within the Torah and biblical tradition. “Judea and Samaria” similarly reflects a theological-historical framing of territory. Expressions such as “land flowing with milk and honey”, “children of Israel”, “covenant” are verbatim biblical expressions discussed earlier in this thesis. “Temple Mount” likewise occupies a central symbolic and political position within Religious Zionist rhetoric and territorial discourse. Additional terms, including “ancestral homeland”, “inheritance of the Lord”, “inherited land”, “chosen people”, “prophecy”, “divine right”, and “3,000-years” were selected due to their recurrent association with narratives of historical continuity, sacred entitlement, divine legitimacy, and ancestral connection to the land.

6. 1.2. Party-Wide Distribution

The second step in operationalizing the study was to narrow the analytical focus specifically to the *Religious Zionism Party*, chaired by Bezalel Smotrich. In other words, the analysis moves from the wider parliamentary discursive environment toward the specific political party to which the actor in question belongs to. This step is particularly important, as parliamentary discourse does not occur in an ideological vacuum. A member of parliament operates within a certain structure which provides ideological orientations and political objectives which may in turn shape the content and character of their public rhetoric. Examining the party context serves as an intermediary analytical step between the broader parliamentary arena and the detailed discourse analysis of individual speakers.

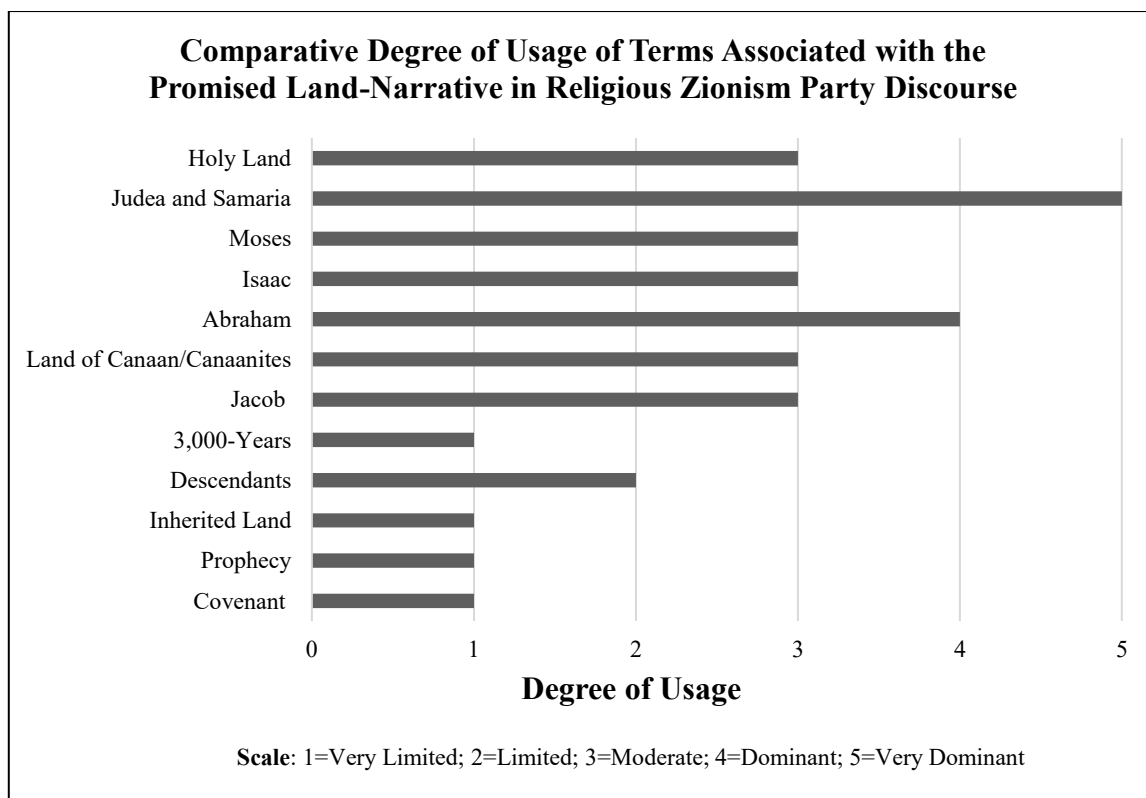


Figure 2.

Results

Out of the original twenty-six coded terms, only twelve appeared with meaningful rhetorical relevance within party discourse following an initial manual contextual overview. This indicates that while the broader parliamentary environment contains a wide range of theological-territorial terminology, the *Religious Zionism Party* itself relies on a more concentrated and internally consistent discursive vocabulary.

Most notably, the term “Judea and Samaria” emerges as the most dominant expression within the party’s rhetoric, receiving the highest comparative degree of usage (5). At the same time, references to biblical figures such as “Abraham”, “Moses”, “Isaac”, and “Jacob” maintain a consistently moderate (3) to dominant (4) presence. Their repeated invocation suggests the importance of ancestral continuity, covenantal lineage, and historical attachment. The graph additionally demonstrates that certain concepts associated with covenant and inheritance, including “Covenant,” “Inherited Land”, “Prophecy”, and “3,000-Years” appear only with limited rhetorical prominence. However, this does not necessarily imply their absence from the ideological framework itself. Rather, these ideas frequently appear embedded indirectly within broader scriptural quotations and historical references instead of as isolated conceptual terminology.

Clarifications

Due to the extensive size of the plenary corpus (129 transcripts), the inclusion of multiple speakers within each parliamentary session, and the limitations of automated coding within MAXQDA, the study did not seek to establish fixed quantitative frequencies for every term identified in the discourse. Although MAXQDA's autocoding greatly facilitated the initial identification of relevant terms and patterns, the software did not consistently capture all contextual references throughout the entirety of the corpus, requiring substantial manual verification and interpretive coding. As a result, the analysis prioritizes qualitative discursive prominence over exact lexical quantification. Rather than relying on precise statistical frequency counts, the study employed a qualitative intensity scale (Fig.2). These categories were not intended to represent mathematically fixed measurements, but rather to function as heuristic indicators of rhetorical prominence across the analyzed material.

While the initial coding framework was constructed around twenty-six predefined terms associated with the broader "Promised Land" narrative, the process of manual contextual review remained open to the identification of additional relevant expressions and discursive formulations emerging from the corpus itself. Given the interpretive nature of discourse analysis, the coding process was therefore not treated as entirely static or exhaustive from the outset. Rather, the preliminary coding scheme functioned as an analytical entry point intended to structure the broader dataset. This approach was particularly important in light of the fluid, symbolic, and often indirect ways in which narratives were articulated within parliamentary rhetoric.

6. 2. Bezalel Smotrich's Parliamentary Rhetoric

6. 2.1. Introductory Rhetorical Mappings

Before proceeding to the qualitative analysis of Smotrich's parliamentary rhetoric, it is first necessary to establish the broader scope and intensity of his parliamentary activity between 2021 and 2025. The graph below presents the frequency of Smotrich's parliamentary interventions across the examined period, including speeches, responses, debates, and other forms of participation within Knesset plenary sessions. Due to the structure of the plenary transcripts and the manner in which the interventions appear within the records, the identification and counting process was conducted manually through close examination.

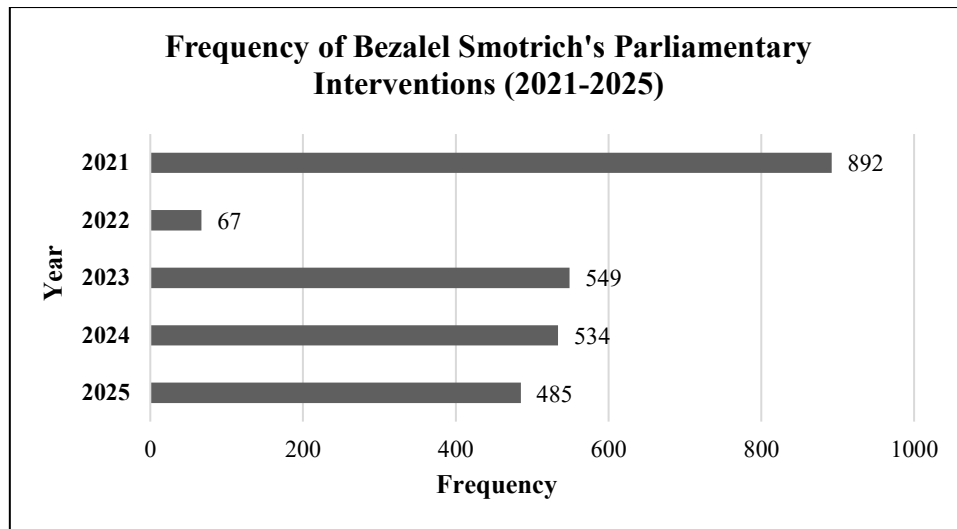


Figure 3.

Results

The graph demonstrates that Smotrich maintained a high level of parliamentary activity, intervening a total of 2,527 times between 2021 and 2025. The highest frequency of interventions occurred in 2021, with 892 recorded speaking instances, while 2022 represents the lowest level of parliamentary activity with only 67 interventions. Following this sharp decline, Smotrich's parliamentary participation increased considerably again in 2023 (549) and remained relatively stable in both 2024 (534) and 2025 (485).

In order to further narrow down the analysis from Smotrich's broader parliamentary activity toward the potential deployment of theological-territorial logic, the following graph compares the total number of Smotrich-related plenary session transcripts (77) per year (2021-2025) with the total number of transcripts containing theological and/or biblical vocabulary.

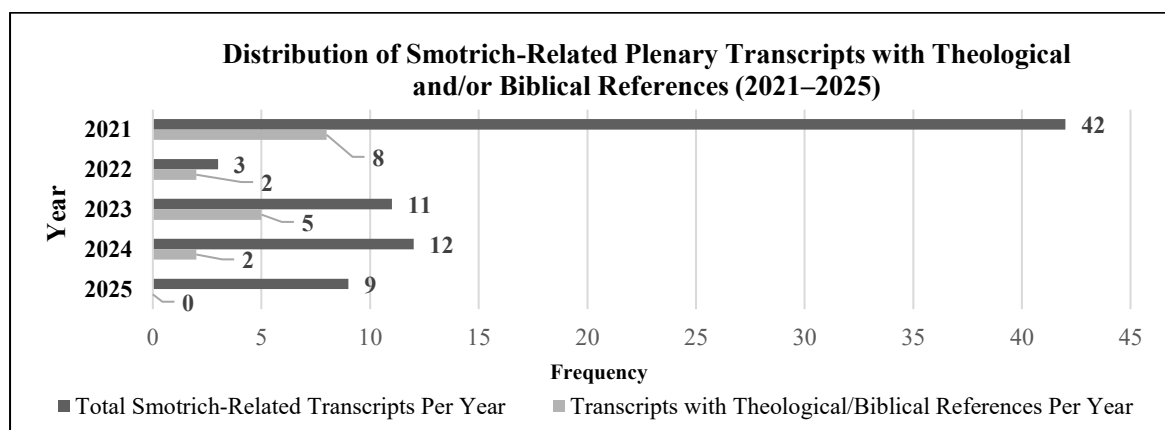


Figure 4.

Results

The graph demonstrates that although Smotrich appeared consistently throughout the parliamentary corpus between 2021 and 2025, theological and/or biblical references were deployed only selectively, appearing in 17 transcripts in total. The highest concentration occurred in 2021, where 8 of the 42 analyzed plenary session transcripts contained identifiable language. While the number of available transcripts for 2022 is considerably smaller than the previous year, the presence of references in 2 of the 3 sessions examined indicates a high frequency of deployment. The limited number of observations should not be interpreted as a decline, but rather as a reflection of the reduced size of parliamentary corpus for that year. In 2023, limited deployment is observed with 5 of the 11 transcripts, and in 2024 – 2 of 12 transcripts. Most notably, 0 of the 9 Smotrich-related transcripts analyzed for 2023 contained such references.

Having established the broader distribution of theological rhetoric across Smotrich-related plenary session transcripts, the analysis further narrows down toward the specific terminology deployed within the 25 transcripts (out of 77 in total) identified in *Figure 4*. The following graph examines which of the original 26 terms introduced in *Figure 1* remained present within the reduced corpus.

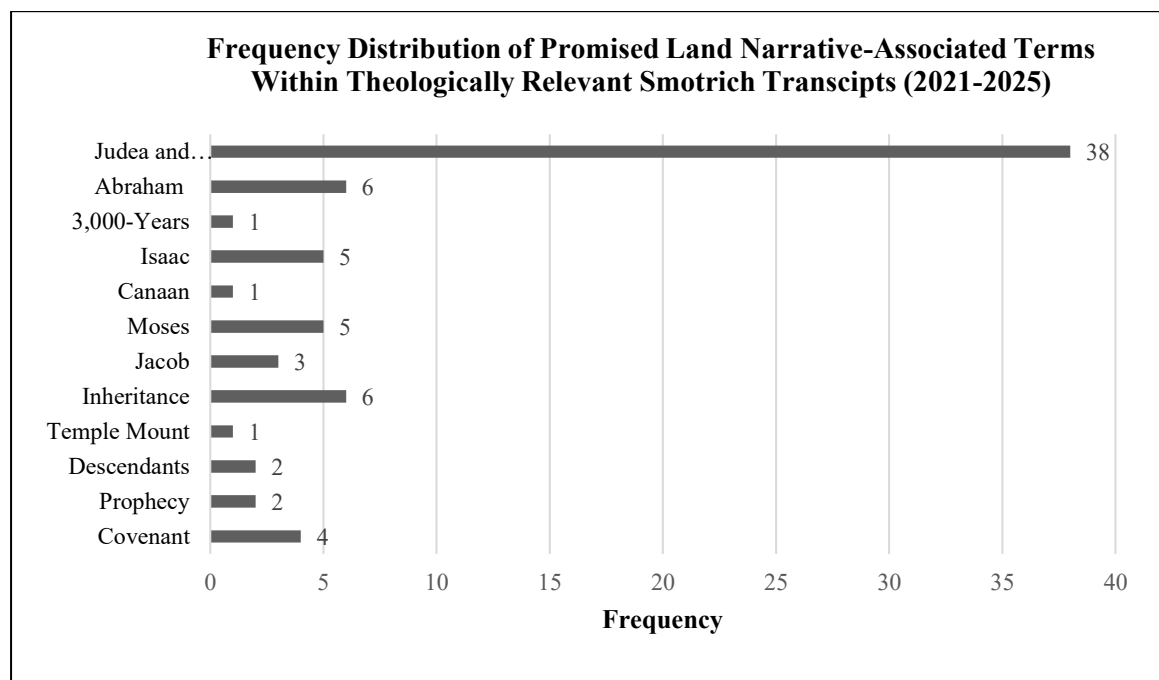


Figure 5.

Results

From the broader corpus of 129 plenary session transcripts, 77 were associated with Bezalel Smotrich, of which only 25 contained theological references. Across the entirety of the parliamentary corpus, the original 26 terms appeared a total of 3,174 times (*Figure 1*). However, within the reduced Smotrich-specific theological corpus, only 12 of the original 26 remained present, appearing a combined total of 74 times. Unlike the broader corpus-wide mapping presented earlier, the graph above reflects only terms explicitly articulated by Smotrich himself within the examined parliamentary transcripts.

As demonstrated in both *Figure 1* and the earlier examining the comparative usage of terms within Religious Zionist discourse, “Judea and Samaria” again emerges as the overwhelmingly dominant rhetorical formulation within Smotrich’s parliamentary discourse. This consistency across multiple stages of analysis reinforces the centrality of territorial-biblical geography within the broader rhetorical framework examined throughout this study. Similarly, references to “Abraham”, “Moses”, “Inheritance”, “Covenant” maintain comparatively higher frequencies relative to the remaining terms, further emphasizing themes of ancestral continuity, sacred lineage, and historical legitimacy. However as clarified previously in relation to *Figure 1*, a number of terms require further manual contextual interpretation due to their binary significance (e.g. biblical references versus contemporary personal names).

6. 2.2. Actor-Level Analysis I

a. Smotrich as Member of Knesset and Party Leader (2021-2022)

▪ Year 2021

The 14th Session of the 24th Knesset – 10 May 2021

The 10 May is the first session plenary of the 24th Knesset and the first recorded Smotrich intervention identified within the 2021 Knesset transcript corpus. The session immediately demonstrates the extent to which theological-territorial narratives surrounding settlement expansion and territorial legitimization are embedded within Smotrich’s rhetoric. The session takes place during the discussion of the *Bill on Settlements and Neighborhoods in the Process of Regulation (2021)*, submitted by several MKs with Smotrich included, centering around the legalization and formalization of young Israeli settlements. This session openly fuses religion, settlement expansion, territorial claims, nationalism, and redemption into a single coherent ideological framework.

From the very beginning of the speech, Smotrich leads with a deep theological tone by opening the debate with a full recitation of *Psalm 121 (Songs of Ascents)* – “I lift up my eyes to the mountains—from where my help shall come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip; He who watches over you will not slumber. Behold, He who watches over you will neither slumber nor sleep Guardian of Israel. The Lord is your guardian; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will guard you from all evil; He will guard your life. The Lord will guard your going out and your coming in, from now until forever.” The initial *Psalm* quotation is immediately followed by an additional biblical-style invocation – “He who blessed our forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, may He bless the soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces”. Smotrich dedicates the *Psalm* toward the IDF, portraying the latter not merely as a state security apparatus, but as the protectors of the sacred homeland – “who stand guard over the land the cities of our God”. The land is therefore not an ordinary sovereign territory, but a divinely connected homeland to God, entrusted to the Jewish people, and safeguarded by its chosen defenders. The theological dimension is even more pronounced through geographical framing – “[...] from Lebanon to the Desert of Egypt and from the Great Sea to the edge of the wilderness, on land, in the air, and at sea.” Smotrich deviates from using the modern internationally recognized borders, instead making use of biblical territorial imagery.

The emphasis on territory intensifies once Smotrich begins discussing settlement legalization, in what, he calls – “Judea and Samaria.” Before proceeding further, it should be noted that the usage of the term “Judea and Samaria” itself reveals an implicit theological-territorial significance. As discussed in the literature review, this term carries a biblical connotation associated with ancient Israelites territories, in negation to the politically neutral geographical terminology. Hence, Smotrich declares: “We make no secret of it; we want to strengthen our hold on Judea and Samaria just as we do everywhere else—in the Negev, the Galilee, the Golan Heights, and Jerusalem”. Smotrich further legitimizes settlement expansion through explicitly redemptive language, asserting that “This is our land, to which we returned after two thousand years of exile and wandering.” The theological dimension reaches its peak when Smotrich firmly states: “the Holy One, blessed be He brings His Presence back to Zion and gathers His children to His home” and later: “the destiny and mission of the State of Israel as a magnificent process of redemption; the beginning — and with God’s help, already much more than the beginning—of the growth of our redemption. And we are facing an enemy who is still unable to come to terms with our return

home”. These formulations are exceptionally important as they demonstrate how Smotrich explicitly mobilizes theological narratives in order to legitimize territorial belonging. Thus, politics, territory, and theology become inseparable.

The speech also demonstrates how Smotrich constructs the territorial conflict through layered theological categories that may remain largely invisible to audiences unfamiliar with biblical scripture (e.g. Psalms) and Hebrew Bible-based terminology (e.g. Judea and Samaria). Discussing Palestinian opposition, Smotrich argues: “[The enemy] is trying to delay the return of the Shechinah²³⁶ and our return home”. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not framed as a geopolitical or security-based issue but as a resistance against divine redemption itself. The “return home” is simultaneously territorial, national, and theological in nature.

The 38th Session of the 24th Knesset – 5 July 2021

The session takes the form of an extended public “Question Time” during which Smotrich answers questions concerning, namely, about settlement governance, sovereignty in “Judea and Samaria”, and Jewish identity.

Smotrich frames Zionism not simply a political ideology, but as a civilizational and spiritual project rooted in “love of the people, the land, and the Torah”. This formulation places peoplehood, territory, and religion within a single inseparable framework. The territorial dimension becomes evident once Smotrich addresses the status of Israeli settlers in “Judea and Samaria” – “[...] settlers can be fired, because the law does not apply [there] [...] The real solution, in the end, is to extend sovereignty over the entire West Bank so that these areas become sovereign state territories just like any other [and] improve the lives of the settlers [...] and strengthen the settlements.” Smotrich links settlement normalization with sovereign expansion. The territorial project centers on the continuation of a broader national-historical-biblical mission aimed at integrating “Judea and Samaria” fully into the secular Israeli state structure. Even when congratulating Yoel Tzur, an Israeli architect, Smotrich praises him as “a settler through and through”, later blessing him with “may you continue to build, plant, and increase Torah study and the fulfillment [...] of settling in the Land of Israel”.

²³⁶ “Shechinah” refers to the manifestation or presence of God within the world according to Jewish theological understanding. See Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Shechinah,” in *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Shechinah>.

Smotrich explicitly quotes a section of the seminal philosophical work by Rabbi Kook, stating that “[T]eshuvah²³⁷ is [...] the hardest of things”. This reference, seemingly unimportant, is actually quite significant, as Rabbi Kook occupies a foundational role within Religious Zionist thought. Furthermore, Smotrich defines the political divide in Israel from the stance of the political right versus that of the left as “the right is Jewish connection to our roots, tradition, love of the land, settlement, Zionism”. Hence, territory and settlement expansion are not treated as secondary political issues, but as foundational components of a specific political spectrum devoted to the Jewish national identity. The clearest expression of theological-territorial rhetoric appears during the discussion concerning Bedouin land claims in the Negev²³⁸, asserting “this is our land, and because the claim that ‘we were here before you’ is a fictitious claim – we were here two thousand years before them”. Territorial legitimacy is framed not as the product of modern political negotiation, but as the continuation of a sacred covenantal relationship between the Jewish people, God, and the land across centuries of exile and return.

The 49th Session of the 24th Knesset – 2 August 2021

The plenary session centers around debates concerning, but not limited to, national unity and the broader ideological direction of the State of Israel. Despite formally discussing political cohesion and governance, Smotrich once again frames politics through a broader historical and ideological narrative deeply connected to the land.

From the very beginning of the speech, Smotrich argues that true unity cannot exist without a shared ideological foundation, arguing that “For unity to exist, it must be built around something – around substance”. He then defines this “substance” through “identity, culture, heritage, history, and shared agreements”, before explicitly locating the foundation of Israeli unity within “the founding ethos of Zionism, of Judaism, and of the desire to build, develop, and strengthen a Jewish and democratic state”. Smotrich does not construct unity through a purely civic lens, but rather through a shared ethno-national and historical framework tied to both Zionism and Judaism. According to Smotrich, the “founding ethos”

²³⁷ In Hebrew, “Teshuvah” literally translates to “return” as in “return to God”, also translated as “repentance”. See My Jewish Learning, “Teshuvah, or Repentance,” in *My Jewish Learning*, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/repentance/>.

²³⁸ The “Negev” is a semiarid region located in Southern Israel, covering a substantial portion of the territory west of the Jordan River and nearly 60 percent of Israel’s territory within its pre-1967 borders. The term “Negev” derives from the Hebrew root meaning “dry” reflecting the region’s climate. It has also been referenced in biblical scripture, including Psalm 126:4 (““Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb”). See Encyclopedia Britannica, “Negev,” in *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Negev>.

of the Jewish state as “the return of the Jewish people to their land after two thousand years of exile and wandering, and the establishment of renewed and independent Jewish sovereignty”. Therefore, the understanding of land is one of exile, return, ancestry, and restored sovereignty. Although Smotrich does not explicitly reference biblical scripture, the rhetoric nevertheless carries strong theological undertones. The phrase “their land” frames territorial belonging as something inherited, restored, and historically continuous rather than something newly constructed. This logic becomes clearer when Smotrich discusses Israeli Arabs and argues that “[t]he fundamental discrimination against [them] is that they are not partners in the founding ethos of the Jewish state”. What Smotrich means by this statement is that belonging within the state is defined not primarily as something obtained through citizenship or civic participation, but through identification with the historical narrative of Jewish return.

The 50th Session of the 24th Knesset – 3 August 2021

The session formally centers around debates concerning the Ministry of Transportation’s budget, infrastructure development, and public spending. Despite the technocratic nature of the discussion, Smotrich transforms the debate into an ideological struggle concerning settlement and demographic preservation.

Smotrich criticizes the government for neglecting “the settlements in Judea and Samaria” and that “not a single shekel was allocated for roads [there]”. Infrastructure is framed not as an economic or administrative issue, but as part of an ideological clash over territorial growth and state commitment to the general settlement project. Roads, connectivity, and public investment become mechanisms through which sovereignty, and especially territory are materially reinforced within an already contested land.

Another significant aspect in Smotrich’s rhetoric is the concern over demography warning that government policies “undermine the Jewish demographic majority of the State of Israel”. The statement demonstrates how demographic issues are intertwined with territorial and national questions. The preservation of a Jewish majority is framed as essential in order to maintain Jewish sovereignty, Jewish identity, and the continuation of the Zionist-national project. Consequently, governance, population, settlement, and transportation infrastructure politics are all part of the same domino structure. Toward the conclusion of Smotrich’s speech, he directly warns other members by stating that “construction in Judea and Samaria is frozen”, framed as a threat to the preservation of Jewish sovereignty and territorial consolidation.

The 51st Session of the 24th Knesset – 4 August 2021

The 4 August plenary session is particularly interesting because it is almost identical in terms of rhetoric and ideological content to the 5 July session analyzed earlier. This occurrence is analytically important, as it demonstrates the persistence and consistency of Smotrich's theological-territorial discourse across parliamentary interventions within a relatively short period of time. Given the substantial overlap, this session is examined more briefly.

The territorial dimension appears, yet again, concerning the illegal construction of structures (e.g. homes) in the Negev by the Bedouin population, considered as “nonexistent” in the eyes of the Israeli legal and planning laws due to their unrecognized status. Smotrich urges to “restore the sovereignty to the Negev” by dismantling such constructions and as a result handling “the crime, delinquency, theft, drug cultivation, as well as the smuggling of weapons and drugs”.

The most significant aspect of the session emerges during Smotrich's response to MK Ayman Odeh (*Joint List* Party) concerning the establishment of Jewish settlements within the State of Israel. Responding to criticism that hundreds of Jewish settlements had been established while Arab settlements had not, Smotrich states that “The State of Israel was established to be the homeland of the Jewish people, who returned to their homeland after two thousand years of exile and wandering”.²³⁹ This statement carries a strong monopolizing theological-territorial logic as the land is presented as inherently Jewish, with sovereignty framed as the natural restoration of an original and rightful order. The tone is highly declarative and absolute, leaving little room for competing narratives. The rhetoric therefore presents Jewish presence and sovereignty in the land as historically inevitable and morally unquestionable.

The 56th Session of the 24th Knesset – 4 – 6 October 2021²⁴⁰

This double plenary session represents one of the clearest and most explicit examples within the analyzed corpus of Smotrich mobilizing theological narratives in order to

²³⁹ The same formulation appears identical in the 2 August 2021 plenary session analyzed earlier.

²⁴⁰ The Knesset archive lists the plenary sessions of 4 October 2021 and 6 October 2021 as separate official records. Although the relevant speech by Bezalel Smotrich appears verbatim in both transcripts, both sessions were retained in the corpus due to their distinct archival status, while the speech itself was analyzed only once to avoid double-counting as to not inflating the frequency of theological references.

legitimize territorial claims to the Land of Israel. The debates openly focus on divine ownership of the land, biblical inheritance, covenantal continuity, and Jewish *Chosenness*²⁴¹.

Th rhetoric emerges during a parliamentary discussion related to the IDF, seemingly unrelated to settlement policy itself. However, Smotrich deliberately shifts the debate toward questions concerning the meaning of the “Land of Israel”, Jewish identity, and the relationship between the Torah and territorial legitimacy. Smotrich introduces the opening commentary of Rabbi Yitzchak (Rashi) on the *Book of Genesis*²⁴²: “[Rashi] said [...] the Torah should have begun with “This month shall be unto you the beginning of months”. Smotrich introduces a classical theological debate concerning why the Torah begins with the story of creation rather than directly with the *Ten Commandments*. This allows him to initiate the conversation on contemporary territorial disputes through biblical theology and history. Afterwards, Smotrich continues by quoting Rashi’s explanation: “He told His people of the power of His deeds to give them the inheritance of the nations.” In this sense, legitimacy flows downward from divine authority. God is presented as the ultimate owner and creator of the world, possessing the sovereign right to allocate territory according to His will. The Jewish people, in turn, receive the land not as conquerors but as inheritors of a divine grant – a rightful transfer rather than acquisition, since one does not purchase an inheritance but receives it through a pre-existing relationship. Essentially, divine sovereignty precedes human sovereignty.

This appears fittingly well in Smotrich’s rhetoric when answering accusation that Jews are “thieves who have conquered the land.” Smotrich, aware of the contested territorially legitimacy, responds not through secular political arguments, but through *Genesis* itself. Furthermore, Smotrich argues that “[a]nyone who wants to understand what it means that the Land of Israel belongs to the people of Israel needs to know what the people of Israel are.” This formulation monopolizes interpretive authority by positioning Jewish sacred history as the primary lens through which territorial legitimacy must be understood. Rather than treating ownership of the “Land of Israel” as a matter open to universal political debate, Smotrich presents it as a question whose meaning can only be properly understood through a particular experience of knowledge of the Jewish people.

²⁴¹ Meaning “election” of the Jewish people by God to enter into a sacred covenant.

²⁴² Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040–1105) was a medieval French rabbi and biblical commentator whose interpretations of the Hebrew Bible remain among the most influential in Jewish scholarship and are traditionally included alongside the biblical text in most printed editions of the Hebrew Bible. See Sefaria Library, “Rashi on Genesis: Commentary,” in *Sefaria*, https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis?tab=contents.

The land may also not simply belong to any population inhabiting it as it belongs specifically to the people whose historical and theological identity was shaped through “Abraham”, “Isaac”, “Jacob”, “Exodus”, “Sinai”, and the giving of the Torah. This recounting of biblical genealogy is central to Smotrich’s rhetoric asserting that “Abraham our forefather [...] Isaac and Jacob, and the 12 tribes, and they enter into Egyptian bondage, and leave Egypt, and become a people redeemed by the Lord of the Universe” and that “with God’s help, we will be worthy to inherit the Land of Israel.” Overall, unlike other plenary sessions where theology remains implicit beneath political language, Smotrich here openly constructs contemporary territorial legitimacy in theological terms.

The 68th Session of the 24th Knesset – 1 November 2021

Given the substantial overlap with themes already identified in the previous sessions, the session’s transcript is examined more briefly, with emphasis placed only on those elements that contribute as additional insight to this thesis.

While criticizing the government policies affecting *yeshiva*²⁴³ students and their families, Smotrich moves beyond the immediate policy debate and raises a broader question concerning Jewish legitimacy in the land. He asks, “What right do we have to be here – yes, even at the expense of others who may have been here before us – if not for the Book of Books and the divine decree, which you so vehemently deny?” First, Smotrich makes a surprisingly explicit acknowledgment that other may have inhabited the land before the Jewish people. This is crucial because he does not deny the existence of competing historical claims, instead he sidesteps them. The legitimacy of Jewish presence is not defended by arguing that nobody else lived there, but by asserting that divine authorization superseded alternative claims. Second, for Smotrich the debate is not merely territorial but also epistemological. He effectively accuses his opponents of rejecting the very source from which he derives legitimacy, calling them a “[...] secular left-wing government, progressive, despising everything sacred, despising anyone who thinks differently from you—with such condescension, such arrogance.” This statement holds a richer value than a simple attack on the political left. Smotrich constructs a binary opposition between two competing worldviews: religious versus secular; sacred versus profane; tradition versus progressivism; faith versus ideological secularism. Furthermore, he attempts to delegitimize his opponents

²⁴³ A “yeshiva” is an Orthodox Jewish institution of higher religious learning where students engage primarily in the study of Torah, Talmud, and other foundational rabbinic texts. See Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Yeshiva,” in *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/yeshiva>.

through moral framing, portraying them not simply as mistaken but as actively hostile toward the religious foundations of the very state they represent. By characterizing the government as dismissive of sacred values, Smotrich implicitly constructs a boundary between the authentic guardians versus those who pretend to be one. The rhetoric functions as a mechanism through which the public is invited to view political competition not merely as a contest between policies or bills, but as a struggle over who truly represents the Jewish people and their covenantal relationship to the state.

▪ Year 2022

The 106th Session of the 24th Knesset – 31 January 2022

Smotrich's rhetoric in this sessions centers around the death of Esther Pollard (wife) and the symbolic significance of the Pollard case²⁴⁴ within Israeli nationalist discourse. However, rather than framing Esther Pollard's death as a private tragedy, Smotrich elevates the event into a national and moral issue tied to collective responsibility, Jewish identity, and the "Land of Israel". Throughout the speech, Smotrich repeatedly argues that the state has failed the Pollards and presents their suffering as a source of collective shame and moral death borne by the Jewish people as a whole. The territorial dimension of the rhetoric appears most clearly in Smotrich's emphasis on the Pollard's return back "home": "Ultimately bring about his and her return, their return, home, to the Land of Israel that they loved so dearly and for which they paid such a heavy price." The use of "Land of Israel" rather than "State of Israel" is extremely significant for this thesis. Unlike the latter which denotes a modern political entity, the term "Land of Israel" carries deeply rooted religious-historical implications associated with Jewish theological understandings of history and belonging. Even though the speech is not explicitly centered on settlements or territorial governance in the conventional sense, the territorial framing remains embedded with a broader religious conception of the land. This theological dimension is reinforced through Smotrich's invocation of divine judgment by the phrase "God forbid" on multiple occasions: "I am not qualified to judge divine matters, God forbid..."; "God forbid, have befallen us had we not rectified the sin of our generation's betrayal of Joseph..."; "What severity, God forbid, would have been upon us from Heaven. We were fortunate, we were fortunate that Esther kept him alive, as I said, with her great embrace, and ultimately forced

²⁴⁴ Jonathan Pollard was an American intelligence analyst convicted in the United States in 1987 for spying on behalf of Israel. In 2015, Pollard was released from prison and immigrated to Israel. See Encyclopedia Britannica, "Jonathan Pollard," in *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jonathan-Pollard>.

us to get involved; she saved us from the disgrace that would have been our lot had Jonathan, God forbid, not survived or not ultimately been released alive to come to the Land of Israel.” Recognizing such language in the speech is important because it frames the Pollard’s suffering and delayed return not merely as a political failure, but as a moral-spiritual failing carrying consequences before God himself. Hence, the rhetoric moves beyond ordinary nationalist commemoration into explicit theological framing. The “Land of Israel” is presented not simply as geographical space, but as a spiritually charged homeland connected to collective Jewish responsibility.

The 134th Session of the 24th Knesset – 25 May 2022

The plenary session centers around the *Counter-terrorism Bill Amendment (Amendment – Non-Return of Terrorists Bodies 2022*, proposed by Member of Knesset Smotrich and a group of other Knesset members. Formally, the debate focuses on anti-terrorism measures and national security. However, throughout the discussion, Smotrich transforms the debate into a broader ideological discussion concerning Zionism, Jewish sovereignty, and the Jewish people’s relationship to the land. One of the clearest examples appears at the very beginning of the speech, where he frames terrorism not only as violence against Israeli citizens, but specifically as violence directed against Jews living in the “Land of Israel”: “The deeds of that despicable individual who took lives or sought to take the life of a Jew simply because he is a Jew who wishes to live here in the Land of Israel, in a Jewish state, independent and sovereign.” Once again, the use of “Land of Israel” instead of “Israel” or “State of Israel” is analytically significant. Even within a debate centered on counter-terrorism legislation, Smotrich successfully embeds the discussion within a broader territorial discourse tied to the Jewish land. Smotrich directly defines Zionism through attachment to territory and settlement: “Zionism is a belief in our right to this land.”; “Zionism is the connection of our roots [...] and the settlement of this land.” These statements are particularly significant because when examined beyond their immediate political wording, they reflect core theological assumptions. The notion of a Jewish “right to the land” extends beyond secular nationalism and can be understood as reflecting the idea of a divinely sanctioned connection. Similarly, the emphasis on “roots” evokes the biblical-historical narrative of “Abraham” and his descendants, through which the land becomes tied to collective covenantal ancestry. Finally, the emphasis on “settlement” functions as the end product, the modern political manifestation of this broader religious narrative, transforming theological understandings of rightful belonging to contemporary territorial

practice. Understanding Smotrich's rhetoric requires looking beyond the surface level of his speech and recognizing the deeper meanings within seemingly normal formulations. Once again, throughout the speech, Smotrich employs religious language such as "with the help of God", "God forbid", and "God willing". The usage of such expressions coupled with Smotrich redirecting the debate toward questions of Zionism and Jewish attachment to the land signal an underlying motive. References to "Judea and Samaria", the "Temple Mount", and Arab opposition parties further support the claim of a wider territorial discourse.

b. Smotrich as Minister and Party Leader (2023-2025)

▪ Year 2023

The 30th Session of the 25th Knesset – 18 January 2023

The plenary session is of particular importance for this thesis since it represents the first recorded parliamentary speech delivered by Smotrich in his capacity as Finance Minister following the formation of the new government. However, rather than focusing on economics, budgeting, or fiscal policy as one would expect, the speech almost entirely hovers around fellow Religious Zionism MK Ohad Tal, his family, his ideological mission, and broader questions of Jewish unity, religious identity, and political morality. This session is analytically significant because it demonstrates that even after assuming one of the most economically and administratively important positions within the Israeli government, Smotrich's rhetoric remains deeply embedded within religious and ideological language rather than shifting toward purely technocratic or financial discourse. Throughout the speech, Smotrich repeatedly invokes explicit religious terminology: "with God's help"; or "for the sake of Heaven". The transcript remains highly relevant for this thesis because it demonstrates ideological continuity. Smotrich's transition into a senior ministerial role did not diminish for the time being, the centrality of religious language within his rhetoric.

The 46th Session of the 25th Knesset – 28 February 2023

The plenary session centers on the commemoration of late former Knesset member and prominent Religious Zionist Rabbi Chaim Meir Druckman. At first glance, the debate does not directly concern territorial sovereignty or settlement expansions in the conventional sense. However, the session reveals an underlying theological tone in Smotrich's

rhetoric. He frames political and national revival through explicit religious language, stating that “everything begins and ends with the Torah”, later describing the State of Israel as part of a “divine enterprise of redemption, of the national revival that we are privileged to experience here [...] in our generation”. Such formulations move beyond ordinary nationalist rhetoric and instead sacralize politics itself – Israel is the faith, the Torah itself. The theological dimension becomes even clearer when Smotrich discusses Rabbi Druckman’s legacy as “an engine of Torah, an engine of the Land of Israel, an engine of love for Israel”. The metaphor of the “engine” implies movement, activation, continuity. In this context, Rabbi Druckman is presented by Smotrich not purely as a religious figure, but as a driving force capable of translating Torah into lived political reality. The Torah itself is portrayed as the foundational source from which the “Land of Israel” derives meaning and direction. A theological chain is forming in which one’s faith activates attachment to one’s land, which is then transmitted outward into the population. Although the speech does not explicitly focus on territorial claims or settlement expansion, traces of this ideological framework remain constantly present beneath the surface of the rhetoric. Precisely because such references are less direct, they become analytically significant, as they demonstrate how theological-territorial assumptions may operate subtly rather than through overt territorial argumentation alone.

The 47th Session of the 25th Knesset – 28 February 2023

The plenary session centers on the commemoration of the *National Day for Contribution and Activities of the Druze*²⁴⁵ Community with the debate focusing on Druze integration into Israeli society, military service, and state development programs. However, even within this context, Smotrich frames the discussion through theological territorial language tied to the Jewish character of the state and the “Land of Israel”. One example of such occurrence is when Smotrich discusses the relationship between the Druze community and the State of Israel, stating “A shared destiny – we often speak of a covenant of blood”. The phrase illuminates the Druze-Israeli relationship not merely as civic coexistence, but as a deeper national and binding partnership. Smotrich further expands this when describing the partnership with “the State of Israel and the Land of Israel and all its inhabitants”.

²⁴⁵ The Druze are an Arabic-speaking ethnoreligious minority primarily located in Lebanon, Syria, and Israel, emerging in the 11th century as a distinct religious community. See Encyclopedia Britannica, “Druze,” in *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Druze>.

Importantly, he does not treat the “State of Israel” and the “Land of Israel” as interchangeable concepts. Instead, he deliberately distinguishes between them, signaling an ideological understanding, resembling the separation of the Church and State. Later, Smotrich states, “This magnificent enterprise – the Zionist enterprise in the Land of Israel and in the State of Israel”. Here again, Smotrich rhetorically advances different versions of Israel, suggesting a secular Israel versus an ancestral Israel. What makes this session deserving of being analyzed is that a discussion centered on Druze community bares no practical necessity of covenantal framing and Zionist territorial language. The persistent presence of such vocabulary suggests that Smotrich’s rhetoric is deeply embedded within a subjective biblical-historical worldview.

The 55th Session of the 25th Knesset – 21 March 2023

The plenary session is consequential as it coincides with the maiden speech of Zvi Sikkot, who enters the Knesset as an MK from the *Religious Zionism Party*, after assuming the parliamentary seat vacated by Smotrich following his appointment as Finance Minister. The session therefore represents not merely a ceremonial parliamentary transition, but an important moment of ideological crisscrossing between two actors. Rather than delivering a conventional congratulatory speech, Smotrich frames Sikkot’s arrival in deeply theological and redemptive terms, almost as if he had come on religious mission. Throughout the speech, politics are interpreted through concepts of holiness, redemption, divine guidance, and biblical scripture. Smotrich’s invocation of a late Rabbi’s discussion concerning “the footsteps in the Messianic era” is quite telling as the theological framework is immediately projected onto Sikkot himself. Rather than merely quoting the Rabbi abstractly, Smotrich praises Sikkot as embodying the exact qualities associated with this generation of redemption: courage, ideological persistence, “holy audacity”, and unwavering faith. Smotrich states: “And as I sat here in my chair watching Zvi speak, that, I think, is exactly the description, Zvi”. It is therefore strongly suggested that Smotrich views Sikkot as embodying the type of ideological actor needed for advancing what Religious Zionist thought stands for in the process of Jewish national revival. For Smotrich, human effort is portrayed as meaningful only when connected to divine will and redemption purposes. The references to “Moses”, the “Tabernacle”²⁴⁶, and “Divine Presence” frame contemporary political lob-

²⁴⁶ The “Tabernacle” refers to the portable sanctuary constructed by the Israelites under the leadership of Moses during their journey from Egypt to Canaan, found in the Book of Exodus. According to the Hebrew

bying within a biblical-historical continuum. The theological dimension is further emphasized upon by describing political responsibility through religious obligation: “[W]e know that the Lord of the Universe ultimately directs reality [...] He demands this of us” and “[T]here is clear belief that the Lord of the Universe runs the world and leads is to good places”. Hence, politics ceases to appear as something crafted solely by human hands and instead emerges as part of a sacred historical trajectory guided by divine will. Although the transcript contains limited direct territorial discussions, traces of such rhetoric remain constantly present on the surface: “[T]hat wonderful process of the return of the people of Israel to their land” – which coincides as the last statement made by Smotrich in this session. Consequently, the session is particularly valuable for the comparative dimension of the thesis because it illustrates the broader theological environment shared both by Smotrich and Sukkot. The parliamentary replacement is framed less as an ordinary political succession and more as a proud continuation of a collective religious-national project associated with understandings of redemption and Jewish return to the rightful land.

The 59th Session of the 25th Knesset – 27 March 2023

The plenary session centers primarily about the state budget, inflation, housing policy, infrastructure investment, and the broader fiscal governance following the first reading of the *Basic Law: The State Economy (Amendment No. 13)*. Smotrich speaks overwhelmingly in his institutional role as Finance Minister, adopting a more administrative tone. However, despite the predominantly economic character of the debate, important traces of theological-territorial rhetoric emerge. Smotrich discusses the foundation of Zionism claiming that “[it] has always rested on three pillars: settlement, security, and immigration”. This statement introduces ideological vocabulary directly into budgetary and economic discussion. Even when speaking about fiscal policies, Smotrich is able to integrate discussion of settlements within this triad, demonstrating how territorial ideas continue to remain inseparable from the parliamentary discourse. Expressions such as “with God’s help” are not foreign to Smotrich’s rhetoric. Individually, they could potentially be dismissed as rhetorical habit or culturally embedded language. However, within the specific context of the session, their persistent usage becomes analytically important. Weaving divine language with economic governance is not accidental, but premeditated for a reason. Smotrich states:

Bible, it was built following divine instructions and functioned as the central place of worship and religious life for the Israelite community. See Jim Greene, “Tabernacle,” in *EBSCO*, 2023, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/tabernacle>.

“As water reflects so is the heart if man to man”, a quotation derived from the *Book of Proverbs*. This is a rhetorical strategy designed to legitimize policies by framing them as moral or cosmic imperatives rather than bureaucratic decisions. By invoking such scriptural quotations, it suggests that one’s external actions are a direct manifestation of their inner moral character and righteousness. Furthermore, this quotation acts as a mirror metaphor – just as water reflects a face, one person’s heart reflects and responds to the heart of another. In this context, Smotrich frames parliamentary dialogue as reciprocal – if the opposition approaches his debates sincerely, he will mirror that sincerity back. Political negotiation goes beyond procedure, toward a test of intention, character, and moral reflection grounded in biblical wisdom. Consequently, the session demonstrates that theological language permeates ordinary parliamentary governance, where biblical concepts continue to structure political meaning, legitimacy, and interaction between actors.

▪ Year 2024

The 175th Session of the 25th Knesset – 29 May 2024

The plenary session takes place during the ongoing post-October 7 wartime period and centers on the *Bill to Freeze Funds Paid by the Palestinian Authority in Connection with Terrorism from Funds Transferred to It by the Government of Israel*. The broader parliamentary debate focuses on terrorism financing, the Palestinian authority, wartime governance, and the future of the political order in Gaza and the West Bank. Within this context, Smotrich employs territorial rhetoric through the repeated use of the term “Judea and Samaria” in opposition to Palestinian statehood and explicit support for Jewish settlement expansion. Although the session contains limited direct biblical quotation and overt theological references, the territorial framing remains closely aligned with the understandings of the land as inherently connected to Judaism. The clearest example appears when Smotrich repeatedly refers to “Judea and Samaria”, a term analytically significant as it is derived from biblical-historical regions corresponding to the ancient Israelite territory. The usage therefore carries an implicit theological connotation that extends beyond a neutral geographical description. The territorial rhetoric becomes more explicit during Smotrich’s discussion of settlement expansion: “We will take these funds and allocate them to the state budget; we will invest them in the rehabilitation of the settlements in the Gaza Envelope, we will establish new communities [...] We will double and triple the number of Jews who will settle in this region.” Here, territorial control is framed not merely as a security neces-

sity, but as a process of demographic and national consolidation in which settlement expansion is present as a self-evidently justified necessity. The territorial dimension of the rhetoric is further reinforced through the rejection of Palestinian sovereignty and the framing of territorial withdrawal as existentially dangerous: “God forbid that Kfar Saba should become Kfar Aza...Tel Aviv, and Petah Tikva.” Particularly significant is the fusion between financial governance and territorial expansion, as Smotrich directly links state budgeting and confiscated funds to the expansion of Jewish settlements and communities. In this sense, the session reflects an implicit merger between state and religion, where financial mechanisms of the state are rhetorically mobilized in support of territorially charged ideological objectives associated with religious understandings of the land.

The 203rd Session of the 25th Knesset – 9 September 2024

The plenary session takes place again during the ongoing post-October 7 wartime period, focusing on discussions surrounding the revised 2024 war budget and state wartime expenditures. Within this context, Smotrich explicitly connects questions of territorial control to religious interpretations of land and Israeli security, sovereignty, and most of all – survival. Again, the territorial rhetoric appears most clearly through Smotrich’s repeated invocation of “Judea and Samaria” with the usage of the term remaining analytically significant. Smotrich argues: “I think that consolidating our hold in Judea and Samaria, certainly after October 7, is about safeguarding Israel’s security.” Here, territorial control is framed simultaneously as national-security necessity and as a legitimate Israeli presence that must be strengthened rather than negotiated. The territorial rhetoric is further reinforced through explicit opposition to Palestinian statehood: “The overwhelming majority of the Israeli public understands that a Palestinian state will not be established. Period.” Within this context, Smotrich constructs territorial withdrawal and Palestinian sovereignty as existential threats to the State of Israel. This territorial framing becomes even more explicit in the following statement: “Where there are settlements, there is an army, there is security, and there is intelligence. Judea and Samaria is the security buffer zone of the State of Israel.” Hence, Jewish settlement presence in “Judea and Samaria” is not merely a demographic expansion but an essential mechanism of national defense. Expansion is rhetorically integrated into state security infrastructure itself, essentially blurring the lines between who counts as civilian and who counts as military. However, the most significant aspect of the transcript emerges in Smotrich’s remarks regarding the budget itself: “No Judea and Samaria, no Torah, no Jewish identity, things we are proud of.” This statement

is particularly important for this thesis because Smotrich explicitly links “Judea and Samaria” (territory) “Torah” (religion) and “Jewish identity” (nationalism) within the same discussion while criticizing their exclusion from the wartime budget. Smotrich presents all three components as interconnected and indispensable to the State of Israel. Although the speech does not contain direct biblical quotations or explicit references to divine promise, Smotrich’s direct invocation of “Torah” remains highly significant to the focus of this thesis. The Hebrew Bible is not merely a neutral reference but the foundational religious text of Judaism. Its inclusion is not accidental; rather it is emphasized as something intrinsically connected to questions of territory. In ordinary parliamentary budget discourse, one would not typically expect references to the Hebrew Bible to appear alongside discussion of finance and fiscal allocation. Therefore, Smotrich’s decision to invoke it demonstrates the extent to which religious considerations remain personally and ideologically intertwined with the state.

▪ Year 2025

The 2025 plenary sessions reveal the most significant transformation in Smotrich’s parliamentary discourse. Initially, 9 plenary session transcripts containing direct parliamentary interventions by Smotrich were identified. However, following the manual contextual review, none of these 9 transcripts were found to contain explicit or implicit theological-territorial rhetoric associated with the “Promised Land” narrative framework established in this thesis. This absence is analytically significant, particularly when contrasted with previous years. The decision to briefly discuss all 9 sessions despite their limited relevance to the research question was deliberate. Including the full set of identified interventions ensures a comprehensive account of Smotrich’s parliamentary activity during the period under review. It also helps to contextualize the issues that dominated his contributions in 2025 and facilitates comparison with patterns observed in the previous four years. The dominant themes shift towards wartime governance, fiscal management, coalition politics, and national crisis administration. While religious, theological, and Zionist language continue to circulate within the broader parliamentary environment, particularly among members of *Shas* and *Otzma Yehudit*, Smotrich himself does not deploy such rhetoric. Instead, his discourse reflects his consolidated role as Finance Minister and senior government official.

The 248th Session of the 25th Knesset – 22 January 2025

The first session of 2025 demonstrates a notable shift in Smotrich's parliamentary rhetoric toward themes of national resilience, wartime unity, and identity-based nationalism. His interventions primarily focus on defending the government's wartime economic policies in his capacity as Finance Minister, while emphasizing the need to preserve social cohesion during the ongoing war in Gaza. Political and economic debates are framed through the lens of national endurance, collective responsibility, and the long-term strength of the State of Israel. Educational policies are presented not merely as administrative matters, but as instruments for sustaining and developing the nation during a crisis. At the same time, Smotrich strongly defends the ultra-Orthodox and religious sectors against criticism, portraying them as integral components of national fabric rather than burdens on the state.

The 258th Session of the 25th Knesset – 17 February 2025

Smotrich's rhetoric in this session is characterized by a predominantly security-oriented and nationalist discourse. The debate unfolds in the context of motions of no confidence concerning the hostage crisis, the ongoing war in Gaza, and the government's handling of negotiations with Hamas. Throughout his interventions, Smotrich rejects the proposed hostage deal and argues that Israel must avoid any course of action that could be interpreted as capitulation to Hamas. A central rhetorical pattern is the emphasis on deterrence, with Smotrich insisting that the war must end with the complete destruction of Hamas in order to prevent future hostage-taking and restore Israeli security. The speech also incorporates historical references, particularly to the Oslo Accords, which are evoked as cautionary examples of past policy failures. In addition, Smotrich employs a highly confrontational parliamentary style aimed at discrediting political opponents and challenging the legitimacy of alternative approaches to the conflict.

The 267th Session of the 25th Knesset – 10 March 2025

During the plenary session, Smotrich is formally and physically present however his participation is extremely limited and does not count as a substantive intervention within the parliamentary debate. His contribution is negligible, lacking any identifiable rhetorical framework, providing insufficient material for meaningful analysis. Nevertheless, the absence is itself an important finding, demonstrating that even within a debate directly touching upon issues of Torah study and religious identity, Smotrich refrains from employing

theological rhetoric. This suggests that such deployment is highly selective and context-dependent rather than an automatic response to a religiously charged discussion.

The 274th Session of the 25th Knesset – 24 March 2025

The plenary session unfolds within a highly polarized political climate, particularly concerning debates over military conscription, budget allocations, funding, and the relationship between the ultra-Orthodox sector and the state. Although Smotrich is a central figure throughout the debate and is repeatedly referenced by opposition members, especially regarding government spending and financial priorities, his own parliamentary interventions remain limited, focusing on economic policy, coalition legitimacy, and the maintenance of governance stability.

The 306th Session of the 25th Knesset – 9 July 2025

Smotrich is present during the session but largely absent from the substantive parliamentary debate, contributing neither extensively nor in a manner that offers significant analytical insight. The session itself is shaped by wartime discourse and debates over collective-burden sharing, yet despite Smotrich's political relevance to these issues, his own rhetoric remains limited in scope. As a result, the transcript provides insufficient material for a detailed analysis of Smotrich's personal discourse, particularly with regard to the theological-territorial dimensions that form the central focus of this thesis.

The 311th Session of the 25th Knesset – 4 August 2025

This session features Smotrich operating fully in his capacity as Finance Minister, particularly during discussions surrounding the *Bill to Amend the Income Tax Ordinance (Tax Credit for Reserve Duty as a Combatant)*. His rhetoric is considerably more administrative and policy-oriented. As the debate is primarily concerned with economic policy and fiscal management, explicit theological or biblical rhetoric remains largely absent.

The 318th Session of the 25th Knesset – 29 September 2025

The parliamentary debate centers on the *Deficit Reduction and Budgetary Expenditure Limitation Bill* and the *Supplementary Budget Bill for Fiscal Year 2025*, both introduced in response to rising military expenditures and the broader economic consequences of the prolonged conflict. Within this context, much like the preceding plenary session, Smotrich operates primarily in his institutional capacity as Finance Minister.

The 332nd Session of the 25th Knesset – 17 November 2025

Throughout this session, Smotrich remains a central political figure, although he is not the primary speaker. Opposition members repeatedly invoke his name in connection to government spending, economic policy, and his role within the government. A notable characteristic of the debate is its highly confrontational tone, with government representatives and opposition members, engaging in frequent verbal clashes marked by interruptions, accusations, and personal attacks. Despite references to the Oslo Accords, Judea and Samaria, and the withdrawal of settlements, Smotrich's own rhetoric remains largely secular, political, and administrative in nature.

The 347th Session of the 25th Knesset – 23 December 2025

The final session of 2025 further illustrates that although Smotrich is formally present and participating in the proceedings, he does not emerge as a dominant rhetorical actor. His contributions remain relatively limited and conversational in nature. As a result, this plenary session reinforces the broader pattern identified throughout the year. While Smotrich thrived and operated within a highly ideological parliamentary environment characterized by religious-national themes, his own contributions remained administrative, technical, and institutionally focused.

6. 3. Zvi Sukkot's Parliamentary Rhetoric (2023-2025)

6. 3.1. Introductory Rhetorical Mappings

Before proceeding to the qualitative analysis of Zvi Yedidya Sukkot's parliamentary rhetoric, it is first necessary to establish the frequency and scope of his parliamentary activity between 2023 and 2025. Unlike Smotrich, who constitutes the primary actor within this study, Sukkot serves as a secondary comparative case. Sukkot is included in order to assess whether similar theological and or/biblical narratives related to territorial claims and settlement expansion emerge elsewhere within the *Religious Zionism Party* environment.

The graph below presents the frequency of Sukkot's parliamentary interventions during the period between 2023 and 2025, including speeches, responses, debates, and other forms of participation within Knesset plenary sessions. Due to the structure of the parliamentary transcripts and the manner in which interventions appear within the official records, the identification and counting process was conducted manually through close examination.

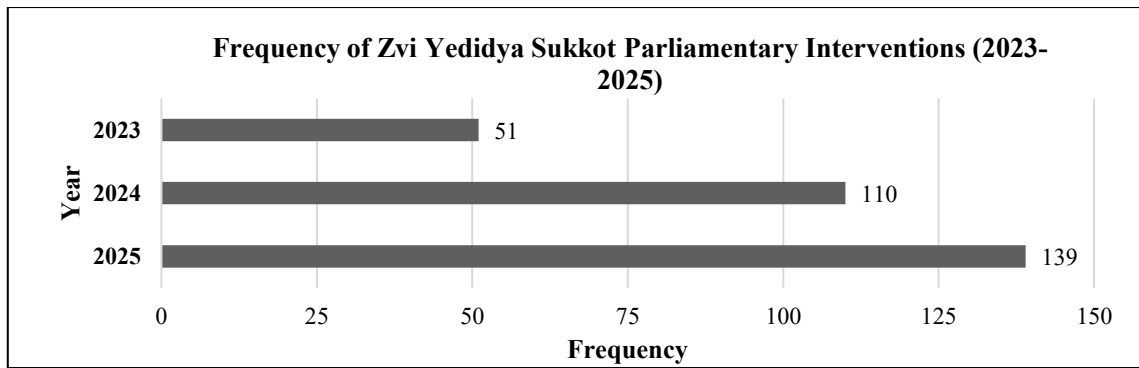


Figure 6.

Results

The graph demonstrates a clear upward trend in Sukkot's parliamentary activity over the observed period, intervening a total of 300 times between 2023 and 2025. In 2023, Sukkot recorded 51 interventions, which increased substantially to 110 interventions in 2024. The trajectory continued in 2024, reaching 139 interventions – the highest level observed during the period under examination. Overall, the graph indicates that Sukkot became progressively more active within parliamentary debates and proceedings, with the frequency of his interventions increasing by approximately 172% between 2023 and 2025.

In order to further narrow down the analysis from Sukkot's broader parliamentary activity toward the potential deployment of theological-territorial logic within his own discourse as well, the following graph compares the total number of Sukkot-related plenary session transcripts (52) per year (2023-2025) with the total number of transcripts containing theological vocabulary.

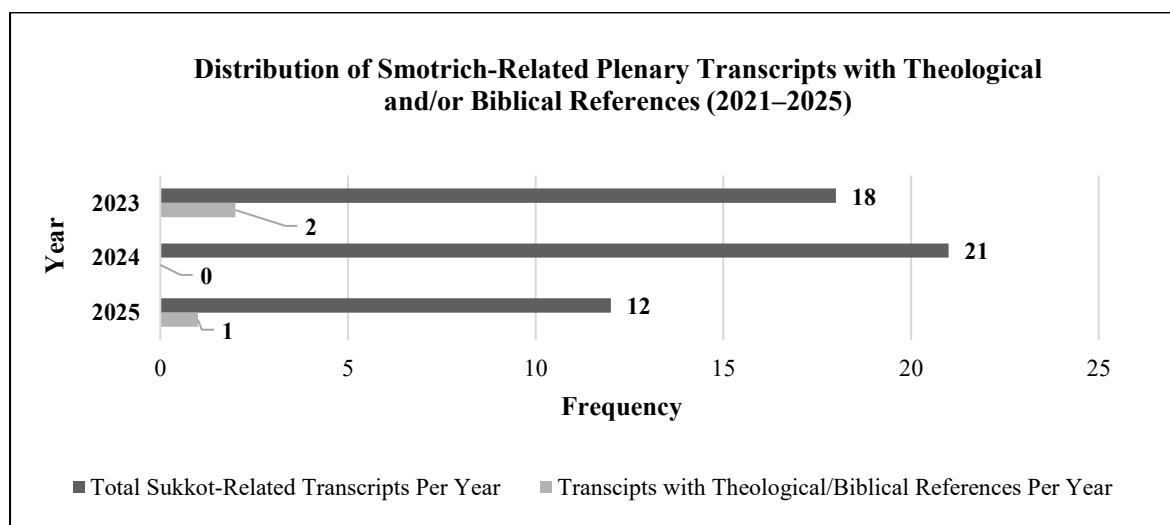


Figure 7.

Results

The graph demonstrates that theological and/or biblical references are quite scarce throughout Sukkot's parliamentary discourse between 2023 and 2025. Across the 51 transcripts in total, only 5 were found to contain references relevant to the study. For 2023, 2 of the 18 analyzed transcripts were found to be pertinent. For 2024, none out of 21 analyzed transcripts contained any theological and or/biblical references tied specifically to territory and land. For 2025, 1 out of 12 in total. Overall, the number of relevant transcripts remains extremely low (3) compared to the total number (51).

6. 3.2. Actor-Level Analysis II

a. Sukkot as Member of Knesset (2023-2025)

▪ Year 2023

The 55th Session of the 25th Knesset – 21 March 2023

The 21 March plenary session is paramount because it contains Sukkot's maiden speech upon entering the Knesset as an MK for the *Religious Zionism Party*. This is also significant because Sukkot entered the Knesset after Smotrich left his parliamentary seat, meaning that his intervention symbolically places him within the same political and ideological space previously occupied by Smotrich. The speech is important on two levels; first, as an individual self-introduction, and second, as a statement of ideological positioning within the broader parliamentary environment.

Sukkot opens his speech through a personal family story of immigration. He recalls his grandfather leaving the United States despite being urged to remain there, stating "I'm getting on the plane to the Land of Israel." Significantly, the destination is not described as the "State" of Israel but as the "Land" of Israel. The terminology evokes a sense of inter-generational belonging that transcends contemporary political and ideological structures, presenting attachment to the land as the fulfillment of a longstanding aspiration shared across a generation of Jewish people. Sukkot declares, "*This is the story of the entire Jewish people: All of them have gathered and come to you.*" Actually, this quote, seemingly conversational carries deep symbolism. It comes from *Isaiah 49:18 (NRSV)*, and in the biblical context the *you* is Jerusalem (also known as "Zion") in which the Land of Israel is personified as a mother witnessing the return of her long-lost exiled children. Immigration is not merely a movement toward a modern state, but a collective homecoming and reunification to the ancestral homeland.

The theological dimension becomes more pronounced when Sukkot invokes Rabbi Saadia Gaon's statement: "*Our nation is a nation only through its Torah.*" This formulation places the Torah at the center of Jewish collective identity with the Jewish people defined not only through citizenship but through a sacred textual and religious foundation. Hence, Sukkot's understanding of peoplehood is inseparable from the religious tradition that later grounds belonging to the Land of Israel. Furthermore, Sukkot directly connects Jewish return to biblical prophecy by quoting *Isaiah 49:21 (NRSV)*: "*And you will say in your heart 'Who has borne me these, when I am bereaved and desolate, exiled and forsaken? And who has raised them?'*" Again, incorporating the imagery of a mother, Sukkot frames modern Jewish return through prophetic language. Treating the return to the land as a simple political achievement or victory would therefore constitute an understatement. Instead, it is presented as the fulfillment of a long-awaited prophetic vision of "*2,700 years ago.*"

What is equally important is the fact that Sukkot evokes Rabbi Kook, calling him the "*First Chief Rabbi of Israel*", the central figure in Religious Zionist thought, declaring: "*I belong to a party that has made it its mission to follow in the footsteps of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, of blessed memory.*" Sukkot argues the importance of Rabbi Kook's belief, by emphasizing that Kook saw the many Jewish communities arriving to the land as different "*shades and colors*" capable of "*forming a perfect creation.*" By choosing to invoke Rabbi Kook in his very first speech as MK, Sukkot is essentially doing much more than merely citing a thinker or an influential historical figure for the Jewish people. Rather, he identifies Kook as a foundational source of inspiration and ideological guidance, signaling his own alignment with the Religious Zionist worldview.

One of the strongest territorial references appears when Sukkot invokes a slightly modified version of the biblical verse from *Deuteronomy 27:9 (NRSV)*²⁴⁷, stating: "*Today you have become a nation*", serving as a set of explicit instructions given by Moses to the Jewish people to perform a ceremony at Mount Ebal, Samaria. This is highly relevant because Sukkot combines biblical scripture, peoplehood, and a concrete biblical geography. Although scriptural origins of the phrase are not explicitly identified, they would likely be recognizable to many members of the Knesset, familiar with Jewish religious tradition. For external audiences, however, the biblical dimension may remain less immediately apparent without additional contextualization.

²⁴⁷ The original verse states: "Keep silence and hear, O Israel! This very day you have become the people of the Lord your God." (Deuteronomy 27:9, NRSV)

Toward the end of the speech, Sukkot personally extends his gratitude toward Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, acknowledging him as *“a true leader in public life, who brought me into the Religious Zionist faction in the Knesset.”* The acknowledgment extends beyond personal gratitude, as this statement suggests that Sukkot did not enter the Knesset independently. Rather, his appointment was made possible through Smotrich vacating his parliamentary seat. In his sense, Sukkot’s acknowledgment implicitly recognizes that his presence in the Knesset stems from Smotrich’s confidence in him as a suitable representative of the party’s political and ideological objectives.

The 84th Session of the 25th Knesset – 21 June 2023

The 21 June is the second relevant session which occurs following a terrorist attack in the West Bank. Unlike Sukkot’s maiden speech, which contained explicit references to biblical figures, religious authorities, and theological conceptions of Jewish return, this intervention is situated within a security-oriented and highly emotional parliamentary context. Having arrived personally at the scene of the attack shortly after it happened, Sukkot recounts witnessing “bodies lying on the ground, a great deal of blood” and describes this event as “one of the darkest and most terrible periods of Jewish history.” The dominant theme that runs throughout the speech is terrorism, however also settlement security and right of belonging.

At first glance, the intervention appears largely devoid of explicit theological and/or biblical rhetoric. Sukkot does not invoke scripture, nor covenantal language, or divine promise, or even direct biblical justification of Jewish territorial claims. Instead, the effectiveness of rhetoric lies precisely in its apparent ordinariness. Because biblical geographical terminology is presented as a natural and self-evident description of space, its underlying theological assumptions often remain unstated. Theology has become so normalized that it no longer needs to be spoken. Most notably, Sukkot declares: “I bring here the voice of the settlements in Judea and Samaria”, and later reiterates his position as both a representative and a “flesh-and-blood member of the settlement movement.” The significance of these references lies in the fact that the terminology of “Judea and Samaria” is itself deeply rooted within the Hebrew Bible and forms an integral component of the “Promised Land”. Sukkot does not actively seek to justify Jewish presence in these territories through scripture or sacred-historical argumentation. Rather, the legitimacy of settlements is assumed rather than defended.

- **Year 2024**

The parliamentary interventions by Sukkot for 2024 deal with issues associated with the ongoing Gaza War and national security. Throughout the year, Sukkot's rhetoric is primarily centered on security threats facing the State of Israel, including Hamas and Hezbollah, counterterrorism measures, the condition of Israeli hostages held in Gaza, and the broader conduct of the war. Considerable attention is also devoted to the role of international actors and institutions, including criticism of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and allegation regarding United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) support for, or facilitation, of terrorist activities. In addition, Sukkot frequently engages with questions of media and public communication channels, particularly speaking against and advocating on Al Jazeera's operations within Israel. The welfare and operational conditions of IDF soldiers likewise constitute a recurring theme throughout the year.

- **Year 2025**

The 331th Session of the 25th Knesset - 12 November 2025

The final relevant intervention occurs during deliberations on a bill proposed by Sukkot himself, concerning tax benefits for communities located in areas exposed to security threats. This intervention places questions of settlements, territory, and the future of "Judea and Samaria" at the very center of the parliamentary debate.

From the outset, Sukkot presents "Judea and Samaria" not merely as a geographical region but as the focal point of Israel's most consequential political struggle – "at the center of the greatest debate in the world today regarding the State." He argues that international pressure on Israel steams from the belief that "one day the Jews will be driven out of Judea and Samaria, and a Palestinian state will be established here – a terrorist state at the heart of the Land of Israel." Again, biblical geography and territorial permanence are at the core of Sukkot's rhetoric.

A particular feature of the speech is the manner in which settlement expansion is transformed from policy preference into national imperative. Sukkot repeatedly argues that the central obstacle to securing Israel's future is the insufficient Jewish presence in Judea and Samaria. Once a sufficient demographic presence is achieved, "it will be clear to the whole world that the Jewish people will remain in Judea and Samaria forever." The solution is therefore neither diplomatic, nor military in nature. Rather, Sukkot advances a demographic logic in which expansion of Jewish settlement is rooted in ancestral belonging to

a biblical region, serving as the primary mechanism through which territorial claims are consolidated and rendered irreversible.

The speech is equally notable for its invocation of biblical-geographical terminology. References to “Judea and Samaria”, “the heart of Samaria”, and “the Land of Israel” appear on multiple occasions throughout the session. Although Sukkot does not engage in direct scriptural exegesis or invoke covenantal passages, the use of such terminology remains highly significant.

Perhaps most importantly, the speech demonstrates that rather than attempting to justify Jewish presence in “Judea and Samaria” through direct appeals of divine promise, Sukkot treats their presence as self-evident. The debate is not about whether Jewish should inhabit or not these territories, the debate is about encouraging as many Jews to settle there. This is visible through Sukkot’s aspirations of bringing “as many people, businesses, and established communities as possible in Judea and Samaria” as “a national mission”. Later he expresses the desire to bring “millions more Jews” to what he calls “the heart of the Land of Israel.”

Consequently, this session represents one of the clearest examples within Sukkot’s parliamentary discourse of the mobilization of a theological-territorial narrative, placing settlement expansion and territorial endurance at the forefront of the argument.

6. 4. Discussion of Findings

6. 4.1. Expectation 1 (E1): Institutional Context

Expectation 1 proposed that greater institutional responsibility would be associated with a lower frequency of explicit theological rhetoric. More concretely, actors in executive or governmental positions are expected to use theological language less often and more sparingly than actors operating primarily within legislative settings. This expectation was very strongly supported by the empirical results.

A clear pattern was observed between 2021 and 2025. The theological rhetoric decreased progressively, rather than abruptly, as Bezalel Smotrich assumed greater institutional responsibility, moving from Member of Knesset to Finance Minister. This gradual change suggested an ongoing adaptation of rhetorical behavior to the institutional demands of an executive office position.

The strongest evidence for theological rhetoric was in 2021, where Smotrich often employed religious language, including direct scriptural quotations, references to biblical

figures such as “Abraham” and “Jacob”, and appeals to religious texts and traditions. Territorial claims were regularly advanced through overt theological language that connected temporary political issues to divine promise, biblical history, and religious authority. By contrast, in 2025, none of the analyzed Smotrich-related plenary sessions contained explicit theological references associated with the “Promised Land” narrative. Territorial issues continued to appear but they were discussed in a heavy administrative language. The sharp contrast between 2021 and 2025 was illustrative of the dramatic change in Smotrich’s rhetoric.

In 2022, theological-territorial rhetoric was still on display but its form began to change subtly. References to the “Land of Israel”, “Judea and Samaria”, and themes of historical and religious belonging continued to be present throughout the transcripts. Theological language was still there, but it was increasingly indirect, favoring symbolic language than overt biblical one.

This trend continued in 2023 after Smotrich’s formal transition from Member of Knesset to Finance Minister. While territorial questions continued to recur in his parliamentary discourse, there were no more direct appeals to scripture in the analyzed material. References to territory became increasingly political, historical, and security-related rather than explicitly theological. The findings suggested not an abandonment of territorial concerns, but rather a transformation in the rhetorical framework through which such concerns were expressed.

The pattern was even more pronounced in 2024, as issues of territory, settlements, and “Judea and Samaria” continued to be present within Smotrich’s parliamentary activity. However, these issues were largely addressed in an administrative, political, and policy-oriented tone. Although there were still occasional references, including to the Torah itself, they no longer served as the primary mechanism through which territorial claims were legitimized.

By 2025, explicit theological rhetoric had effectively disappeared. Additionally, Smotrich’s overall parliamentary presence became considerably more limited; he was either physically absent from the debates or participated only in a minimal way. On the occasions when he did intervene, his rhetoric was overwhelmingly administrative, focused on his responsibilities as Finance Minister. Discussions about territory did not disappear but they were framed predominantly through considerations of governance, taxation, security, instead through appeals to divine promise, scripture, or covenantal obligation.

The comparison with Zvi Sikkot provides additional context for interpreting these findings. Unlike Smotrich, Sikkot remained within the legislative sphere and did not experience a transition into executive office. Nevertheless, his use of theological-territorial rhetoric also varied between 2023 and 2025.

In 2023, Sikkot's maiden speech drew extensively upon scriptural references, employing overt theological language when answering questions and framing issues regarding Jewish belonging, nationhood, and territory. The speech revealed a strong integration of religious symbolism and territorial discourse, resembling a form of rhetoric characteristic to that Smotrich back in 2021.

By contrast, 2024 produced no comparable examples. While Sikkot remained active within parliamentary proceedings, none of the analyzed sessions contained theological rhetoric directly connected to territorial questions. The general themes of the proceedings during this period focused on state security, media outlets criticism, and other policy concerns.

In 2025, theological-territorial language reappeared, albeit in a modified form. During debates concerning settlement communities and tax benefits, Sikkot referred to the "Land of Israel", "Judea and Samaria, and the permanence of Jewish settlement. However, unlike 2023, such references were not accompanied by direct scriptural quotations. Instead, territorial claims were articulated primarily through biblical-geographical language.

Although the comparison remains limited, it suggests that institutional position alone cannot fully account for changes in theological rhetoric. While Smotrich's transition into executive office coincided with a pronounced and sustained decline in explicit theological language, Sikkot's rhetoric also evolved despite the absence of a comparable role change.

The findings therefore indicate that institutional context plays an important role in shaping the public expression of political beliefs, although it does not appear to be the sole factor influencing rhetorical behavior. Importantly, Bezalel Smotrich's transition from Member of Knesset to Finance Minister did not eliminate his engagement with territorial questions. Rather, it altered the manner in which such issues were publicly justified. Over time, explicit theological legitimization gave way to increasingly institutional, administrative, and policy-oriented forms of argumentation. The comparison with Zvi Sikkot suggest that rhetorical change may also occur in the absence of an institutional role transition, indicating that additional contextual factors likely contribute to such developments. Nevertheless, the considerably more pronounced and sustained decline observed in Smotrich's

discourse supports the expectation that executive responsibility influences how territorial claims and settlement expansion are justified and communicated within parliamentary settings.

6. 4.2. Expectation 2 (E2): Ideological Persistence

Expectation 2 proposed that because religious and ideological beliefs are deeply embedded within political worldviews, elements of the “Promised Land” narrative are expected to persist despite changes in institutional position and governmental responsibility. Unlike Expectation 1, which focused on changes in the frequency and explicitness of theological rhetoric, Expectation 2 concerns the durability of the underlying ideological framework associated with the “Promised Land” narrative. While the form and explicitness of theological rhetoric varied considerably across 2021-2025, the basic territorial concerns remained remarkably consistent. The findings provide strong support for this expectation.

At first glance, the sharp decline of explicit theological rhetoric following Smotrich’s transition from Member of Knesset to Finance Minister appeared to challenge the expectation of ideological persistence. Direct scriptural quotations, references to biblical figures, and overt appeals to divine promise became increasingly rare and eventually disappeared entirely. However, a close examination of the findings suggested that while the form of rhetoric changed substantially, the underlying territorial worldview remained considerably more stable.

Throughout the period between 2021 and 2025, Smotrich continued to engage with questions relating to territory, settlements, sovereignty, and the future of “Judea and Samaria”. These issues remained consistently present within his parliamentary discourse despite the substantial decline in explicit theological rhetoric. What changed was not the importance of territorial questions within his political worldview, but rather the manner through which they were justified. In the earlier years, territorial claims were frequently legitimized through direct references to biblical scripture, sacred history, and religious tradition. By contrast, following his transition into executive office, similar territorial positions were articulated through political, security, administrative, and policy-oriented arguments.

The findings suggest that the theological language associated with the “Promised Land” narrative declined more substantially than the territorial commitment connected to it. The disappearance of explicit scriptural references should not automatically be inter-

preted as evidence that the underlying worldview itself disappeared. Rather, both Smotrich's and Sukkot's parliamentary discourse indicate that core territorial concerns remained present despite considerable variation in the form of explicitness of theological rhetoric. Throughout the examined period, Smotrich continued to engage with questions relating to settlements, sovereignty, and the future of "Judea and Samaria", even as explicit theological references gradually disappeared from his parliamentary interventions.

A similar pattern can be observed in Sukkot's discourse. In his 2023 maiden speech, Sukkot employed scriptural quotations and overt theological language to discuss Jewish belonging, nationhood, and territory. By 2025, direct scriptural references had largely disappeared, yet references to the "Land of Israel", "Judea and Samaria", and the persuasion for establishing more permanent Jewish settlements remained central to his rhetoric. While the form of theological rhetoric varied across both actors over time, the broader territorial worldview associated with the Religious Zionist understanding of the "Promised Land" remained remarkably consistent.

These findings therefore indicate that institutional and political contexts appear to alter public expression of ideological commitments more than the commitments themselves. While explicit theological rhetoric declined substantially, elements of the broader worldview associated with the "Promised Land" narrative remained present in both Smotrich's and Sukkot's discourse. The findings provide strong support for this expectation and suggest that deeply embedded ideological beliefs display a considerable degree of resilience even when political actors adapt their rhetoric to changing institutional responsibilities and political circumstances.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The thesis set out to examine to what extent and how Bezalel Smotrich mobilized the theological narrative of the "Promised Land" in Knesset plenary sessions between 2021 and 2025 to legitimize territorial claims and settlement expansion. More broadly, it sought to explore how religious narratives function within formal political institutions and whether actors associated with strong religious ideologies continued to employ theological rhetoric after assuming positions of governmental responsibility. By focusing on parliamentary discourse rather than party platforms, ideological texts, or public perceptions, the study moved beyond assumptions about what Religious Zionist politicians are expected to say and instead examined what they actually said within the institutional setting of the Knesset.

The findings demonstrate that the “Promised Land” narrative remained present within the parliamentary discourse of the Religious Zionism Party, throughout the examined period, although its form, frequency, and mode of deployment varied considerably. One of the study’s most notable findings is that the explicit term “Promised Land” itself appeared only rarely within the analyzed corpus. Instead, political actors relied on a broader constellation of theological and biblical references through which similar territorial ideas were articulated and legitimized. References to the “Land of Israel”, “Judea and Samaria”, to biblical figures such as “Abraham”, “Jacob”, and “Moses”, as well as scriptural and covenantal language, proved far more prominent than direct invocations of the term “Promised Land”. This suggests that the narrative operates less as a fixed expression and more as a broader ideological framework that can be communicated through multiple linguistic and symbolic forms. The findings highlight the importance of examining wider theological vocabularies rather than focusing exclusively on a single, well-known phrase.

A second major finding concerns the substantial transformation of Smotrich’s theological-territorial rhetoric over time. The analysis identified a clear shift from explicit theological justifications toward increasingly political, administrative, and security-oriented forms of argumentation. In 2021, Smotrich regularly employed scriptural quotations, biblical references, and overt appeals to sacred history when discussing questions of territory, settlement, and sovereignty. Over the following years, explicit theological rhetoric had effectively disappeared from the analyzed parliamentary interventions. Importantly, this transformation did not correspond to a decline in discussions concerning territory itself. Rather, territorial claims continued to occupy a central place within Smotrich’s discourse, but were increasingly justified through institutional, administrative, and policy-oriented arguments.

These findings provide strong support for Expectation 1 (E1), which proposed that greater institutional responsibility would be associated with a lower frequency of theological rhetoric. The evidence suggests that Smotrich’s transition from Member of Knesset to Finance Minister coincided with a substantial transformation of his rhetorical behavior. Particularly noteworthy is the gradual nature of this development. Rather than occurring immediately upon assuming governmental office, the decline unfolded progressively between 2021 and 2025, suggesting a gradual adaptation to changing institutional responsibilities and political demands. At the same time, the comparison with Zvi Yedidya Sukkot indicates that institutional position alone cannot fully account for changes in rhetorical behavior, as variation in theological rhetoric was also observed within the legislative sphere.

Nevertheless, the considerably more pronounced and sustained decline observed in Smotrich's discourse support theoretical perspective that emphasize the influence of institutional roles and responsibilities on the public expression of political beliefs.

At the same time, the findings also provide support for Expectation 2 (E2), which proposed that because religious and ideological beliefs are deeply embedded within political worldviews, elements of the "Promised Land" narrative are expected to persist despite changes in institutional position and governmental responsibility. Although explicit theological rhetoric declined substantially between 2021 and 2025, territorial concerns did not disappear from Smotrich's parliamentary discourse. References to sovereignty, territory, settlement, and "Judea and Samaria" remained present throughout the examined period. Similarly, while the explicitness of theological rhetoric varied within Sukkot's parliamentary interventions, territorial claims continued to occupy an important place within his discourse. What changed was therefore not the underlying concern with territory, but the rhetorical framework through which it was justified and communicated. The findings suggest that institutional responsibilities and political contexts influenced public expression of ideological commitments more than the commitments themselves. This is particularly significant because it demonstrates that ideological continuity and institutional adaptation are not mutually exclusive processes. Political actors may remain committed to core ideological beliefs while simultaneously adjusting the language through which those beliefs are articulated.

Moving beyond the research question itself, the study contributes to several academic discussions. First, it contributes to scholarship on the relationship between religion and politics by providing an empirically grounded analysis of how religious narratives function within contemporary political institutions. Rather than treating religious beliefs as static ideological positions, the findings demonstrate how religious narratives are actively adapted, reformulated, and strategically articulated within parliamentary discourse. In doing so, the study highlights the importance of distinguishing between ideological commitments and their public expression.

Second, the study contributes to scholarship on Religious Zionism by examining how one of its most prominent contemporary representatives articulates territorial claims within a formal political institution. Existing literature characterizes Religious Zionism as inherently theological, messianic, and territorially maximalist. The findings support the existence of theological rhetoric within the movement, but they also reveal a more nuanced

reality. Subjective theological beliefs do not necessarily translate into constant, deep-seated, and uniform discourse.

Third, the study contributes to theoretical debates concerning the relationship between institutions and ideology. By combining perspectives on institutional adaptation with theories of ideological persistence, the findings demonstrate that political behavior cannot be fully explained by either institutional constraints or ideological commitments alone. Rather than operating as competing explanations, the two appear to interact in shaping political discourse. The findings suggest that institutional contexts influence how political actors communicate and justify their positions, while ideological commitments continue to shape which issues remains politically meaningful and worthy of defense.

Finally, the study contributes to broader discussions within International Relations and political science concerning the place of religion in contemporary political analysis. Although religion is increasingly acknowledged as a relevant factor in political life, it often remains underexplored in empirical studies of political discourse. By examining the mobilization of a religious narrative within a formal parliamentary institution, the thesis demonstrates the value of investigating religious ideas not only as systems of belief, but also as political and communicative phenomena. In doing so, it encourages further research at the intersection of religion, politics, ideology, and political communication.

Like all research, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the analysis focuses exclusively on actors associated with the Religious Zionism Party and therefore cannot be generalized to Israeli politics as a whole. Other political parties, whether religiously oriented or secular, may employ different rhetorical strategies and draw upon distinct ideological framework when discussing questions of territory, identity, and sovereignty. Second, although the broader corpus included multiple party representatives, the detailed analysis focused primarily on Bezalel Smotrich, and to a lesser extent, Zvi Yedidya Sukkot. While this actor-centered approach was appropriate for addressing the research question, future studies could expand the analysis to include a larger number of party members and political actors and allow for a broader comparative assessment. Finally, the study examined only Knesset plenary sessions, a highly institutionalized setting in which political speech is subject to formal procedures, expectations, and constraints. Political actors may articulate similar ideological commitments differently in less formal environments such as media interviews, election campaigns, social media communication, party events, or public demonstrations.

In terms of future research, one promising direction would be to adopt a comparative perspective by examining how Palestinian political actors conceptualize and legitimize territorial claims. Such studies could investigate whether territory is framed primarily through religious, national, historical, or anti-colonial narratives, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of competing claims of the same geographical space.

A second avenue for future research concerns the relationship between religious narratives and electoral support. While the present study focused on elite discourse, it remains unclear to what extent religious communities in Israel respond to, reproduce, sustain, prioritize, or reject theological narratives when supporting Religious Zionist parties.

A third possible direction would be to investigate the relationship between religious identity and political behavior among religious communities themselves. For example, future studies could examine the extent to which Jewish or Muslim communities in Europe support political parties that explicitly employ religious rhetoric, or whether electoral preferences are shaped primarily by non-religious considerations such as economic interests, security concerns, social values, or identity politics. Such research could contribute to a broader understanding of how religion influences political behavior in contemporary democratic societies.

Taken together, these avenues suggest that the relationship between religion and politics remains a fertile area for future inquiry. Expanding the analysis across different actors, audiences, and political contexts may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how religious beliefs, narratives, and identities continue to shape political behavior in contemporary societies.

Ultimately, the findings highlight importance of examining religion as a dynamic and context-dependent element of political life. Religious narratives do not operate in isolation; their public expression is shaped by changing political circumstances, institutional settings, and strategic considerations. At the same time, the study demonstrates that changes in rhetoric do not necessarily imply corresponding changes in underlying beliefs. Paying closer attention to this distinction can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how religious ideas are translated into political practice, not only Israel but in contemporary politics more broadly. In this respect, the central question is not simply whether God is spoken into power, but what becomes of that language once power has been attained.

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Appendix A: Retrieval and Processing of Knesset Plenary Sessions Transcripts

A.1. Official Source Database

The primary empirical material for this study was obtained through the official website and archival database of the Knesset (<https://www.knesset.gov.il/>). Accessing the material, however, proved significantly more complex than initially anticipated and required a multi-stage retrieval process.

In order to access the Knesset website in the first place, it was necessary to use a Virtual Private Network (VPN). For this purpose, the software *CyberGhost* VPN (Version 8) was downloaded and a paid subscription was purchased. The VPN was specifically selected as not all VPN providers offer Israeli server locations or stable enough connections for prolonged access to governmental websites and large-scale document retrieval. When attempting to access the Knesset website through an Austrian IP address for example, an access restriction appeared, preventing access all together. Browsing through an Israeli IP address enabled successful entry into the website.

The website itself provides several interface language options, including Hebrew, English, Arabic, and Russian. Initially, the English-language version of the website was explored. This interface contained general information regarding the Knesset institution, parliamentary groups, political actors, and historical background of the building. However, despite references to parliamentary records and plenary materials, no direct access to the plenary transcript archive was available through the English-language interface. Information provided on the website indicated that certain records could only be accessed on specific days while physically present within the Knesset itself.

Following this limitation, the website interface was changed from English to Hebrew. Once the Hebrew interface was activated, the structure and accessibility of the website changed substantially, revealing significantly more material and functionalities. Through the Hebrew-language version, direct access to the online plenary session archive became available. Since the researcher does not possess Hebrew-language proficiency, the interface was translated using the automatic translation function available through the *Google Chrome* browser. While functional, the translation process was imperfect and occasionally unstable, requiring a gradual familiarization with the website layout, navigation system, and search structure exclusively in Hebrew.

A.2. Actor-Based Filtering Procedure and Temporal Scope

Once access to the plenary archive was secured, transcripts were identified through the search and filtering system embedded within the Hebrew-language database. The archive allows filtering according to multiple variables, including speaker name, topic, date, and Knesset number.

Due to the Hebrew-language format of the database and the limitations of automated browser translation, identifying the relevant political actors required an additional verification process. The Hebrew spelling of Bezalel Smotrich and Zvi Sukkot was independently located through external online searches and manually compared against the list of political actors displayed within filter section. Once identified, both actors were selected individually within the search system.

The search process further required the manual selection of the relevant Knesset period and corresponding dates. Exact temporal filtering was conducted through the calendar system integrated into the website interface. The study focused specifically on the period between 2021 and 2025, corresponding to the 24th and 25th Knesset periods.

After applying the relevant filters: actor name, Knesset number, and temporal scope - a large number of plenary records became available. Each individual record had to be opened separately in order to access and download the corresponding transcript. To preserve the search filters and avoid losing the search progress, records were systematically opened in separate browser tabs. Accidentally opening records directly within the same browsing window redirected the user back to the main archive page, resulting in the loss of previously applied filters and requiring the search process to be repeated.

In total, 129 plenary session transcripts were retrieved. The dataset included all plenary sessions in which the selected political actors spoke during the defined timeframe.

One notable limitation of the archive was the inability to systematically search transcripts by substantive topic or keyword within the plenary database itself. Although attempts were made to identify topic-specific records, the database structure primarily supports actor and session-based retrieval rather than thematic filtering.

A.3. Transcript Collection and Organization

All plenary session transcripts were downloaded in *Microsoft Word* format directly from the Knesset archive and subsequently organized manually into a structured folder system on the researcher's computer. The material was categorized according to actor, year, polit-

ical role, and language version in order to facilitate later stages of analysis. As the translation software used in the study did not support Word files efficiently, each transcript was converted manually into *PDF* format prior to translation. Separate folders were therefore created for Hebrew-language Word documents and Hebrew-language PDF documents. The organization process became particularly important given the scale of the dataset and the substantial variation in transcript length. Certain plenary sessions extended to several hundred pages, while others exceeded one thousand pages in length.

A.4. Translation and Language Processing

To translate the plenary session transcripts from Hebrew into English, the software *DeepL* was installed and used throughout the research process. A paid Business subscription was purchased in order to enable large-scale document translation. However, due to the volume of the material, the document limit associated with the subscription plan was exceeded, requiring the creation of an additional account and the purchase of a second subscription plan to complete the remaining translations. Several transcripts exceeded the maximum file size limit permitted by the software. In such cases, documents had to be manually divided into smaller sections prior to translation. This meant that a single plenary session occasionally had to be processed as multiple translated documents. Following translation, an additional folder system was created for the English-language versions of the transcripts. By the conclusion of the collection and translation phase, the dataset consisted of three parallel archives: Hebrew-language Word documents; Hebrew-language PDF documents; English-language translated PDF documents.

A.5. Coding and Analysis: MAXQDA and Microsoft Excel

Following the retrieval and organization of the plenary session transcripts, the analytical preparation phase was conducted through the qualitative data analysis software *MAXQDA*. After acquiring the software, all 129 plenary session transcripts were imported as PDF documents and organized into the same chronological and speaker-based folder structure established during the earlier stages of corpus construction. Once imported into *MAXQDA*, all documents were activated simultaneously through the software's "Activate All Documents" function. The analysis then proceeded through the "Text Search & Auto-code" tool, which enabled the systematic identification of the previously 26 narrative-associated terms across the corpus. Each identified term was assigned its own individual code and color category in order to facilitate visual distinction and analytical organization

throughout the coding process. This procedure was repeated individually for all twenty-six selected terms. However, the automated retrieval process constituted only the initial stage of analysis. Following the coding procedure, each coded appearance was manually reviewed directly within MAXQDA in order to determine contextual relevance, speaker attribution, and rhetorical significance. This step was particularly important due to the contextual ambiguity surrounding several terms, as the software itself is unable to distinguish between biblical, political, historical, or unrelated usages without human interpretation.

Simultaneously, a *Microsoft Excel* spreadsheet was maintained throughout the process in order to document additional analytical observations relating to term frequency, contextual deployment, speaker usage, and broader rhetorical patterns emerging from the corpus. Through the manual review of all 3,174 coded appearances, it became possible to identify which references were substantively relevant to the research question and which represented contextual false positives or unrelated usages. The manually verified findings subsequently formed the basis for the construction of the empirical graphs and broader discourse analysis presented throughout the thesis. Excel spreadsheets were additionally used for the visual organization of the findings and the creation of frequency and usage-distribution graphs.

In order to isolate Smotrich-specific rhetorical patterns from the broader parliamentary corpus, an additional actor-centered analytical stage was conducted following the initial coding process. All 77 plenary session transcripts containing parliamentary interventions by Bezael Smotrich were manually read in their entirety. From these 77 transcripts, 25 were identified as containing explicit theological-territorial rhetoric, including biblical references, scriptural quotations, sacred-geographical terminology, and narrative-associated expressions linked to the broader “Promised Land” framework examined throughout this study. In order to construct a focused Smotrich-specific corpus, the relevant speech sections from these 25 were manually extracted and transferred into individual Microsoft Word documents. The documents were subsequently converted into PDF format and re-imported into MAXQDA for a second stage of focused coding and analysis. The same coding procedures described above were then repeated on this reduced actor-specific corpus. Through this second-stage analysis, 12 of the original 26 coded terms remained present.

Following the completion of this focused coding stage, the study proceeded toward the qualitative discourse analysis of the selected speeches.