



“On That Day, His Feet Will Stand on the Mount of Olives”: The Mount of Olives and Its Hero between Jews, Christians, and Muslims

EYAL BEN-ELIYAHU

University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel
E-mail: eyalb@univ.haifa.ac.il

Abstract This article examines the changing Jewish attitudes toward the Mount of Olives, and toward the identification of its “hero” to come in the last days, in relation to the mount’s changing jurisdiction under Roman, Byzantine, and Muslim authority. It illustrates how the Christian appropriation of biblical ideas about the mountain—transforming the ascent and future descent of the Shekhinah into the ascent and future descent of Jesus—led the Jews to abandon those notions, and how the Muslim conquest then brought about a reinvigoration and expansion of the mountain’s original associations among Jews by relocating the appearance of the Messiah as well as apocalyptic scenes on the mount. In the first of these developments, the Byzantine prohibition against Jews approaching Jerusalem led to a distancing of the Jewish people from the biblical and postbiblical traditions that had been connected with the Mount of Olives and its environs during the Second Temple period. Subsequently, the Muslim occupation of the area neutralized that tension, allowing Jews to return to the mountain and restoring the traditions associated with it to the Jewish consciousness. The reaffirmation of the Jewish connection with the Mount of Olives and its ancient association with the future hero may be seen in two developments that took place under Muslim rule: its choice as the location for a yearly Hoshana Rabbah ceremony and its renewed identification as the site for the resurrection of the dead at the End of Days.

Keywords Mount of Olives · Ascension · Resurrection of the dead · Hoshana Rabbah · Yanai · Hakalir · Hadutahu · Book of Zerubbabel · Muslim conquest

Introduction

The Mount of Olives rises above Jerusalem to the east, where it is situated between a desert and the populated area. The height of the mountain relative to its surroundings, particularly to the west, the east, and the south, gives one who is standing on its summit the feeling of being in an elevated and prominent place.¹ Verses from the books of Samuel and Kings, which characterize

¹ A place that evokes a feeling of liminality—a sense of transitional status that undermines the conventional structure of everyday life—is a setting that is fit to become a holy place. On the liminality of a space, see Bjorn Thomassen, “The Uses and Meaning of Liminality,” *International Political Anthropology* 2 (2009): 5–28. On the motif of a “high mountain” as an

it as a place of worship, support its distinctive status in the Jewish and Christian traditions.² The Mount of Olives is also an important element in two prophetic texts. Ezekiel relates that upon the mountain “which is to the east of the city,” that is, the Mount of Olives, the glory of the Lord was revealed just prior to the destruction of the First Temple (Ezek. 11:23). Zechariah’s prophecy describes it as the place where the great victory over the gentiles will begin on the Day of Judgment at the End of Days (Zech. 14:4).

Based on biblical references, during the Second Temple period the Mount of Olives was part of the “sacred geography” of Jerusalem (Enoch 26:1–3). According to later traditions contained in rabbinic literature, it was part of the area where the religious rituals of the Temple, such as the burning of the Red Heifer, were performed. The positioning of the mountain provides a direct sight line to the entrance of the holy place of the Temple,³ and the ramp of the heifer connected the two sites, stretching from the Temple Mount to the place on the mountain where the heifer was burned.⁴ The announcement of the Sanctification of the New Moon created an additional relationship between them. According to the Mishnah, when the Sanhedrin accepted witnesses’ testimony that the moon had reappeared, they proclaimed Rosh Hodesh (the first day of the month); this announcement of the new month was transmitted from the Temple Mount to the Mount of Anointing—that is, the Mount of

axis mundi connecting heaven and earth and serving as a site for revelation, see Mircea Eliade, “Sacred Places: Temple, Palace, ‘Center of the World,’” in *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London, 1979), 367–87, and “Axis Mundi,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York, 1982), 2:20–21, and “Mountains,” in *ibid.*, 10:130–34. For the use of Eliade’s models to interpret the role of the sacred place (mainly the high mountain) in the Bible, see Robert L. Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space: Four Biblical Studies* (Chico, CA, 1981). Regarding the notion of a high mountain as a holy place in Mediterranean society, see Nicholas Purcell and Peregrine Horden, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Malden, MA, 2000), 413–14, 625. For my claim that the rabbis expressed their disapproval of the holiness of high mountains, see Eyal Ben-Eliyahu, “The Role of the ‘Holy Place’ in Rabbinic Literature,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 40 (2009): 260–80. For evidence that the mountain was an ancient site for prayer, see Hugo Gressmann, “Ein Praehistorische Grab auf dem Grundftüct der Kaiserin Auguste Viktoria Stiftung bei Jerusalem,” *Palästina Jahrbuch des Deutschen Evangelischen Instituts für Altertumswissenschaft des Heiligen Landes zu Jerusalem* 3 (1907): 72–75.

²When David left Jerusalem because his son, Abshalom, had taken control there, he went up to the summit of the Mount of Olives, where he worshipped God (2 Sam. 15:32). Later, Solomon erected high places (i.e., altars) for his foreign wives there (1 Kings 11:7), which Isaiah destroyed (2 Kings 23:12).

³Mishnah Middot 4:2.

⁴Mishnah Parah 3:4. See Eyal Ben-Eliyahu, “The Ramp of the Red Heifer” [in Hebrew], *Cathedra* 107 (2003): 183–86.

Olives—and then circulated to other areas both in the land of Israel and in the diaspora.⁵

The villages of Bethpage and Bethany on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, as the writers of the Gospels report, served as lodging places for pilgrims such as Jesus (Matt. 21:17; Mark 11:11). In addition, the rabbinic text *Sifre Numbers* mentions Bethpage as the nearest place to Jerusalem where pilgrims could find accommodations when the Temple existed.⁶ Flavius Josephus offers further insight into the significance of the Mount of Olives in Jewish eschatology at the close of the Second Temple period. He recounts a story about one of the false messiahs active in Jerusalem just before the destruction of the Second Temple who took his adherents up to the Mount of Olives to show them how the walls of the city would fall.⁷ The eschatological vision in Zechariah 14:4 mentioned above provides the background for this event.

The goal of this article is to examine the changing Jewish attitudes toward the Mount of Olives, and toward the identification of the “hero” due to come from the mountain in the last days, in relation to its changing jurisdiction under Roman, Byzantine, and Muslim authority. Jews were prohibited from even approaching the city of Jerusalem under the Romans, and they were banned from the city during the Byzantine period as well; the magnitude of the distress this separation caused the Jewish people is revealed in the literature of the era. This proscription reinforced the disruption created by the concurrent Christian appropriation of biblical concepts associated with the mountain, as when the Christian transformation of the ascent and future descent of the Shekhinah into the ascent and future descent of Jesus led the Jews to abandon that notion. Yet after the Muslim conquest, the Jews reappropriated their original concepts, reinvigorating and expanding them by relocating apocalyptic scenes and the arrival of the Messiah on the mount. I will argue that while the circumstances under Roman and Byzantine rule led to a distancing of the Jewish people from the biblical and postbiblical traditions that

⁵Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 2:4; Tosefta Rosh Hashanah 1:15. For additional tannaitic traditions regarding the connection between the service of the Temple and the summit of the Mount of Olives, see Eyal Ben-Eliyahu, “The Mount of Olives between Jews and Christians” [in Hebrew], *Proceedings of the 4th Conference on Renovations in Israel Inquiries* (Ramat Gan, 1999): 56.

⁶Haym S. Horowitz, ed., *Sifre Numbers* (Jerusalem, 1917), 151. Concerning the location of Bethpage according to gentile texts and rabbinic literature and the relationship between the different sources, see Eyal Ben-Eliyahu, “On the Location of Beit-Pagi Referred to in Rabbinic Literature” [in Hebrew], *Al Atar* 6 (2000): 51–62.

⁷Josephus, *The Jewish War*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, MA, 1927), vol. 1, bk. 2, 261–62, and *Jewish Antiquities*, trans. Louis H. Feldman (Cambridge, MA, 1965), vol. 9, bk. 20, 167–72.

had been connected with the Mount of Olives and its environs during the Second Temple period, the subsequent Muslim occupation of the area neutralized that tension, allowing the Jewish people to return to the mountain and restoring the traditions associated with it to the Jewish consciousness. This reaffirmation of the Jewish connection with the Mount of Olives and of its ancient association with the future hero may be seen in two developments that took place under Muslim rule: its choice as the location for a yearly Hoshana Rabbah ceremony and its renewed identification as the site for the resurrection of the dead at the End of Days.

The Jewish People and the Mountain in the Roman-Byzantine Period

The aforementioned Roman prohibition against Jews entering Jerusalem was the initial impetus for the changing status of the Mount of Olives in the Jewish sensibilities of the time. As a result of the Bar Kokhba rebellion (132–35 CE), Jews were barred from entering Jerusalem and “any place that is seen from it,” which also prevented them from going to the Mount of Olives.⁸ Later, during the reign of Constantine in the fourth century, this sanction acquired a Christian religious flavor with anti-Jewish overtones.⁹

Christianity’s more forceful presence in the area in that century also resulted in the installation of a cross, representing Jesus and his resurrection, on the mountain’s summit. New Testament narratives report that Jesus ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives, and this was the most prominent Christian association with the mountain. The cross raised on the summit was visible from the city below, and it symbolized both the revitalization of Christianity and the degraded condition of the Jewish people, who were still contending with the loss of their Temple. Jerome discusses the matter in his commentary on Zephaniah:

Until this very day the two-faced tenant farmers who murdered the prophets, the last one being the Son of God, are forbidden to come to Jerusalem, unless they come to cry when permission is

⁸Eusebius, *Church History*, ed. Eduard Schwartz (Leipzig, 1903–8), 308. “The emperor, Hadrian, issued a decree against the entire people from even coming near Jerusalem and the surrounding area, so that even from a distance they could not see the Land of their Fathers” (ibid.).

⁹Jean Juster, *Les Juifs dans l’Empire romain: Leur condition juridique, économique et sociale* (Paris, 1914), 2:172; Amnon Linder, “The Roman Imperial Government and the Jews under Constantine” [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 44 (1975): 136–37; Oded Irshai, “Constantine and the Jews: The Prohibition against Entering Jerusalem; History and Hagiography” [in Hebrew], *Zion* 60 (1995): 129–78.

given to them to deliver a eulogy about the ruins of the city, in exchange for payment. . . . While the wood of the crucifixion of the Lord makes clear, illuminates, and celebrates his resurrection, and the sign of the cross is hoisted above the Mount of Olives, the children of this miserable people mourn over the ruins of their Temple without being worthy of mercy.¹⁰

The discomfort of the Jews over the apparent Christian conquest of the mount symbolized by the wooden cross caused them to distance themselves from it. As I have shown previously, one can see from rabbinic sources how the sages ceased to regard the Mount of Olives as a sacred place connecting heaven and earth.¹¹ I suggest that this development is associated directly with the fact that, according to Christian belief, the mountain is the setting for the ascension of Jesus and for his reappearance at the End of Days. The midrashic text *Esser Masa'ot* (Ten journeys) follows the biblical description of the journeys of the Shekhinah: the departure of the “glory of the God of Israel” from the Holy of Holies to the mountain that is on the east side of the city (Ezek. 11:23) and the ascension of the Shekhinah to heaven from there.¹² Other texts, which appear to be more recent, alter the biblical account and append another location, the desert to the east of the mountain.¹³ I would argue that this nonbiblical supplement is an attempt to undermine the accepted Jewish view of the Mount of Olives as the site of the linkage between heaven and earth in response to the Christian requisition of that site for Jesus. Similarly, a homily found in the Talmud contends, in its exegesis of the prophecy concerning the End of Days from Zechariah 14:4, that “the Shekhinah never descended”;¹⁴ this too may be a reaction to the Christian repackaging of Jewish traditions into a connection between Jesus and the

¹⁰Hieronymus, *Commentariorum in Sophoniam Prophetam*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 76A, ed. M. Adriaen (Turnhout, 1970), 673.

¹¹Ben-Eliyahu, “Mount of Olives,” 55–63.

¹²Bernard D. Mandelbaum, ed., *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* (New York, 1987), 234–35.

¹³BT (Babylonian Talmud) Rosh Hashanah 31a; Avot de-Rabbi Natan, recension A, chap. 34. One finds polemics against Christianity more frequently in the Babylonian Talmud than in Palestinian sources. This phenomenon has been discussed recently in Peter Schaefer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ, 2007), 116–29; Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisbis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia, 2006), 16–18; Daniel Boyarin, “Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte Fonrobert and Martin Jaffe (New York, 2007), 336–65. On the absence of Jesus from tannaitic literature except in Tosefta Hullin, see Adiel Schremer, “The Christianization of the Roman Empire and the Rabbinic Literature,” in *Jewish Identities in Antiquity* (Tubingen, 2009), 365 n. 65.

¹⁴BT Sukkah 5a according to the manuscript of the Babylonian Talmud in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod.hebr.140.

Mount of Olives. Jesus thus became the “antihero” of the Mount of Olives in the Jewish tradition.

The polemic was not limited to rabbinic thought. The hope for the elimination of a Christian presence on the mountain is also evident in the *piyyutim* of the Byzantine era. These compositions anticipate the elimination of Christian control, the removal from the Mount of Olives of the cross symbolizing the presence of Jesus, and the concomitant Jewish return. One of Yanai's works, which describes the fall of Edom, ends with these lines: “until a stone will hit and smite an idol and the feet of clay will be shattered in pieces . . . [until] there is . . . [upon] the Mount of Olives a place for pilgrims.”¹⁵ In his *piyyutim*, Yanai refers to the biblical vision of the image made from gold, silver, iron, and clay, symbolizing the “four kingdoms” (Daniel 2). He employs clay as a symbol of Christianity. The smiting of the idol and the shattering of the feet of clay thus represents a yearning for the obliteration of the cross and the name of Christ and for the establishment of a place for Jewish pilgrims on the Mount of Olives in their stead. In a work dated to the beginning of the seventh century, another *payyeta*, Hadutahu, describes the future battle on the mountain, which will be the site of the appearance of the redeemer of Israel: “That day one will know that there is no king in Edom. . . . All will know that He alone is the King. And He will split the Mount of Olives when He arises and they will answer and say, behold, the Lord goes out from His place. From His place He has gone out and He will fight against the enemies of His people. A man [the Messiah] who is called Tzemach will be similar to an angel.”¹⁶ Hadutahu expresses his hope for the removal of the “king of Edom,” referring to the earthly Byzantine rulers and the heavenly Jesus, and for the appearance on the mount of the real Messiah, a man similar to an angel, who will displace the false messiah Jesus. The result will be that all will know that God alone is the king and that Jesus is not, contrary to the Christians' claims. These texts display the fervent desire for the ultimate eradication of Christianity and the salvation of Israel, a victory that will occur on the Mount of Olives. An apocalyptic composition from the close of the Byzantine period, the Book of Zerubbabel, contains similar sentiments.¹⁷

I shall seek to show below how the Muslim occupation of the land of Israel facilitated the return of the Jews to Jerusalem and a revival of the traditional

¹⁵“עד יקלע אב(ן) ויכה צלם / וירוצצו רגלי חרס [עד] יש . . . [על] הר הזיתים [רגליו/ וית] . . . מעמד לבאי רגליו.” Zvi M. Rabinovich, *The Prayer Book of the Piyyutim of Yanai for Torah and the Festivals* (Jerusalem, 1987), 2:128–29.

¹⁶“היום ההוא י[ר]דע אין באדום מלך הכל ידעו כי הוא לבדו מלך . . . ויבקע הר הזיתים בקומו ויענו ויאמרו הנה” Ezra Fleischer, “Haduta-Hadutahu-Chedweta: Solving an Old Riddle” [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 54 (1984): 78–79.

¹⁷Ora Limor, “The Place of the End of Days: Eschatological Geography in Jerusalem,” *Jewish Art* 23/24 (1997/98): 13–24.

belief, dating from the days of the First and Second Temples, that the Mount of Olives was the setting for the ascension of the Shekhinah. This privileged status of the mount in Jewish consciousness had deteriorated markedly during the Roman-Byzantine era.

The Jewish People and the Mountain after the Muslim Conquest

The advent of Persian rule and the subsequent Muslim occupation of the land of Israel had far-reaching consequences. Louis Vincent and Felix Abel have discussed the decrease in the influence of churches and monasteries that accompanied the Persian takeover.¹⁸ The Persians demolished a large number of these structures, including some on the Mount of Olives. Although many others were not damaged and remained functional, the Christian character of the mountain was considerably reduced, and speculation flourished among many Jews that the “times of the Messiah” might be approaching.¹⁹

When the land of Israel passed into the hands of the Muslims, the prohibition against Jews entering Jerusalem and the surrounding area that had been in force for approximately five hundred years was rescinded.²⁰ As a result, Jews were once again allowed to approach the mountain that had been

¹⁸Louis H. Vincent and Felix M. Abel, *Jérusalem: Recherches de Topographie, d'archéologie et d'histoire*, vol. 2, *Jérusalem nouvelle* (Paris, 1916), 398. See also the comprehensive survey of research concerning the implications of the Persian conquest for the monasteries and the churches on the Mount of Olives in Robert Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule* (Princeton, NJ, 1995), 350–59. Schick wishes to point out the continuity between the Byzantine and the ancient Muslim periods, but one cannot overlook the instructive evidence he collected about the damage or destruction of many churches on the mount. In addition, the evidence he cites regarding the churches and monasteries in operation during that time does not demonstrate continuity. For sources on the destruction of the churches, see Zvi Baras et al., eds., *The Persian Conquest and the End of Byzantine Rule: The Land of Israel from the Destruction of the Second Temple until the Muslim Conquest* (Jerusalem, 1992), 338. For a discussion of the eighth-century traveler Willibald and his report of a total of two churches on the Mount of Olives at that time, see Gil, *Land of Israel*, 1:360. Concerning the relationship of the Jews to the churches that remained on the Mount of Olives, it is revealing that the author of the Jerusalem guidebook from the Cairo Genizah identifies the churches with the altars that King Solomon erected to Chemosh. See Gil, *Land of Israel*, 1:5.

¹⁹The *piyyutim* of Hakalir and the essence of the Book of Zerubbabel attest to these ideas.

²⁰Moshe Gil, *The Land of Israel in the First Muslim Period (634–1099)* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1993), 1:58–59. See also the letters of the Karaites of Jerusalem, including Daniel al-Kumisi's interpretation of Daniel 11:12, discussed in Jacob Mann, “Early Karaite Bible Commentaries,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 12 (1921): 518. In his Arabic commentary on Psalm 30, Salman ben Yeruchim related that “when the Romans left by the grace of the God of Israel, the Kingdom of Ishmael triumphed, and they allowed Israel to come and to live”; quoted in Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (Cincinnati and Philadelphia, 1931–35),

a sacred site in their tradition. The Mount of Olives is also one of “the holy mountains” in ancient Muslim traditions, appearing in commentary on the Qur’an and in the hadith literature.²¹ Safiyya, the wife of the prophet, is reported to have stood at its peak and said, “here all men will be divided on the Day of the Resurrection to heaven and to the fire of hell.”²² According to the Chronicle of Theophanes, the Mount of Olives played a role as well in the construction of a Muslim shrine on the Temple Mount by the second caliph, Omar. The shrine collapsed repeatedly until the Jews of Jerusalem advised Omar to remove the cross from the peak of the Mount of Olives. Theophanes describes how the Jews viewed the cross as a thorn in their side and eagerly anticipated its removal. Omar followed their advice, and only then did the shrine remain intact on the Temple Mount.²³ While this story undoubtedly expresses primarily the iconoclastic tendencies of Theophanes, its historically accurate kernel is Omar’s elimination of the cross from the Church of the Ascension at the summit of the Mount of Olives. The powerful effect that the story attributes to the cross’s removal offers insight into the intensity of the theological relief that the Persian and Muslim conquests brought to the Jews in diminishing the Byzantine-Christian control of the mountain.

The Jews of Jerusalem took advantage of this opportune moment and “acquired the Mount of Olives on which the Shekhinah stood.”²⁴ Documents from the Cairo Genizah indicate that it was possible to purchase land on the mountain during the time of Muslim control.²⁵ During the early Muslim period Jews assembled on the mountaintop, and the site once again became a principal destination for pilgrimages, as Yanai had desired.²⁶ The most

2:18. See also Adolf Jellinek, “The Secrets of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai,” *Beit Ha-Midrash* (Leipzig, 1852), 3:79.

²¹Ofer Livne-Kafri, *Studies in the Status of Jerusalem in Ancient Islam* (Jerusalem, 2000), 54–55. For a discussion of ancient Muslim traditions related to the Mount of Olives, see Amikam Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship: Holy Places, Ceremonies, and Pilgrimage* (Leiden, 1995), 141–46.

²²Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship*, 144.

²³Cyril Mango and Roger Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* (Oxford, 1997), 476; Samuel Krauss, “The Mount of Olives in the History of Jesus” [in Hebrew], *Melilah* 1 (1954): 171–72. A similar story appears in Shahal ben Mazliach’s introduction to his *Book of Commandments*; see Avraham Eliyahu Harkavi, *Maasef Nidachim* (St. Petersburg, 1879; repr., Jerusalem, 1970), 13:197–204; Gil, *Land of Israel*, 1:61 n. 87.

²⁴Joseph Braslavi (Braslavsky), “A Topography of Jerusalem from the Cairo Genizah,” *Eretz-Israel* 7 (1964), 64–65.

²⁵Joseph Braslavi, “Pilgrimages to the Mount of Olives in the Middle Ages,” *Jerusalem through the Ages: The Twenty-Fifth Archaeological Convention, October 1967*, ed. Yosef Aviram (Jerusalem 1968), 28.

²⁶Elchanan Reiner, “Pilgrims and Pilgrimage to Eretz Israel, 1099–1517” [in Hebrew] (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1988), 183, 189. The annual ceremony on the Mount

important ceremonies took place during the Sukkot holiday, especially on Hoshana Rabbah, when worshippers would circle the Stone of the Presence of the Shekhinah seven times while calling out “hoshana.”²⁷ They would also excommunicate Karaites on that occasion and announce the appointment of the Gaon and the titles of honor that the Academy of the Land of Israel awarded to those it recognized in the diaspora.

Yosef Braslavy claims that the Mount of Olives was the site for all these activities because the Muslims had forced the Jewish pilgrims out of Jerusalem and away from the Temple Mount. Moshe Gil observes, however, that while the prohibition against Jews settling in Jerusalem does appear in the Pact of Omar, numerous Karaite, rabbinic, and Muslim sources testify that a short time after the Muslim conquest Jews received permission to reside in Jerusalem and even to participate in cleaning the Temple Mount. They preferred, however, to hold ceremonies and carry out rituals on the Mount of Olives because of the importance it enjoyed in the days of the Second Temple when it was inextricably linked to the Temple and its service,²⁸ as well as its location overlooking the Temple Mount and the special prestige that Jewish biblical tradition bestowed upon it.

The midrash *Esser Masa'ot* identifies the mountain as the dwelling place of the Shekhinah before it went into exile from Jerusalem and describes how the Shekhinah waits to return there.²⁹ The tradition of the ascension of the Shekhinah also appears in the Jerusalem guidebook found among the Genizah documents, which was written prior to the conquest of the Crusaders. The author discusses a stone called “the seat of the superintendents” and its tradition: “It is set in the place in which the Glory of God stood for 31/2 years upon the Mount of Olives until the destruction of Jerusalem, as it is written in the Scriptures: ‘and [it] stood upon the mountain that is east of the city,’ and the Glory will return there as it is written, ‘and his feet will stand on that

of Olives was held from the time that the Jewish population of the land of Israel moved from Tiberias to Jerusalem, apparently after the earthquake in 748. See Mark Hirshman, “The Gate of HaCohen and the Ascension of Eliyahu the Son of Menachem” [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 45 (1996): 217–27, for an important description of this ceremony.

²⁷Zechariah 14, which deals with the revelation of God at the End of Days on the Mount of Olives, is the haftarah read on the Shabbat of the intermediate days of the Sukkot holiday; it is a reasonable assumption that this led to the choice of the mount as the site for the ceremonies associated with Sukkot, and especially Hoshana Rabbah.

²⁸Gil, *Land of Israel*, 1:58–61. Elchanan Reiner argues that the religious rituals held on the Mount of Olives “imitated the rituals of the Temple as much as possible”; Reiner, “Pilgrims and Pilgrimage,” 184. The evidence that Reiner presents also supports my claim that during the Second Temple Period, the Mount of Olives was a part of the entirety of the Temple service.

²⁹Simcha Assaf and Leo Ary Meir, eds., *Sefer HaYishuv* (Jerusalem, 1947), 2:18, para. 14. The midrash parallels the reading found in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, reported in with the name of R. Yochanan, as it appears in the Babylonian Talmud.

day on the Mount of Olives' etc."³⁰ This section of the guidebook features a return to the biblical notion that the mountain is the place from which the Shekhinah was exiled and to which it will return, and also reflects the assertion in *Esser Masa'ot* that the Shekhinah arose to heaven from that site. It appears to represent normative Jewish thought in this respect.

Elchanan Reiner concurs with this thinking, as he proposes that "the myth of the exile of the Shekhinah to the Mount of Olives, along with its ascension to heaven and its expected descent [in the future], was placed at the foundation of the sanctification of the site. . . . [It] bestowed a religious status of its own upon the mountain and made it into 'the Temple of the Shekhinah exiled from its place.'"³¹ This consecration came about, however, only after Christian control was interrupted by the Muslim conquest; then Zechariah's vision that the revelation and manifestation of God at the End of Days would be on the Mount of Olives could be reestablished.³²

During the time when Christianity controlled the mountain and shaped its character as the site of the ascension of Jesus to heaven, and when the ban against going there was still in force, the Jews consciously distanced themselves from the mountain and its new religious baggage. The declining Christian dominance after the land came under Muslim control and the waning of the demeaning association of Christ with the mountain enabled a Jewish return to the place and a restoration of the tradition of the Shekhinah's ascension and its reappearance at the End of Days. It is true that some Muslim traditions incorporated the belief that Jesus had risen from the Mount of Olives, and Muslims even visited the Church of the Ascension.³³ Yet while this idea had been viewed as degrading to Jews and Judaism when it was associated with Christianity, it no longer carried that negative valence after being absorbed into what was now seen as a Muslim tradition. Moreover, in the Muslim context it was no longer accompanied by the Christian proscription against traveling to the mountain. The problem, then, was not with the co-option of the notion of ascension to heaven, but with Christianity per se. The Muslim conquest reversed Christian dominance over both the mountain

³⁰Gil, *Land of Israel*, 1:6.

³¹Reiner, "Pilgrims and Pilgrimage," 179.

³²See Jehuda Visnetszki and Jacob Friedman, eds., *Sefer Hasidim* (Jerusalem, 1969). This text makes a clear connection between the Mount of Olives and the appearance of the Messiah: "I asked him when the Messiah would come and he said to me, 'when they encircle the Mount of Olives with the cohanim'" (169). It also describes how Rav Hai Gaon would travel to the land of Israel every year to arrange the encirclements of Hoshana Rabbah on the Mount of Olives. For additional sources about the coming of the Messiah, see Hirshman, "Gate of HaCohen," 223–24, esp. n. 26.

³³Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship*, 145–46.

and the concept of ascension, enabling the Jews to return not only to the place itself but also to the biblical and postbiblical traditions associated with it.

The Mount of Olives thus became the primary place for Jewish assembly and prayer in the Muslim period. Under Muslim rule the Jews felt free to restore their ancient traditions concerning the mountain, especially those that featured the exile of the Shekhinah, its ascension to heaven, and the return of the Jewish Messiah on the Mount of Olives at the End of Days. It was fitting, then, that at this time the mountain—the home of the Glory of God in Ezekiel’s prophecy and the site of the great victory over the gentiles according to Zechariah—would be the primary location where Jews would mark their distance from the Temple and its service. At the same time, the position of the mountain, which affords a clear view of the Temple Mount, allowed them to express their deepest longing to return there.

The Resurrection of the Dead on the Mount of Olives among Jews, Christians, and Muslims

A number of traditional Jewish beliefs concerning the resurrection of the dead on the Mount of Olives at the End of Days arose only after the Muslim conquest of the land of Israel. The Mount of Olives was part of the periphery of the city in ancient times, and it functioned in that era as a burial ground; yet in the days of the First and Second Temples, the side of the mountain that was east of the city and nearest the Temple Mount was not used as a cemetery any more often than the other sides.³⁴ Moreover, in the first millennium BCE no tradition exists that links the resurrection of the dead to the Mount of Olives.

The traditional belief that the dead who were buried outside of Israel will roll through underground passages in order to arise in the land of Israel is found in the Babylonian Talmud.³⁵ That text, however, does not connect the event to the Mount of Olives. The ancient poets Yanai, Hakalir, and Hadutahu refer in their *piyyutim* to the mountain in its eschatological relationship to the redemption, but they do not allude to the resurrection of the dead. The Book of Zerubbabel, written in the Persian period just prior to the Muslim conquest, expands upon traditions related to both the resurrection of the dead

³⁴See Amos Kloner and Boaz Zissu, *The Necropolis of Jerusalem in the Second Temple Period* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2003), 9–10. The cemetery that exists today on the mountain originated at the end of the medieval period and the beginning of modern times, when the Jewish population in Jerusalem was expanding. Its oldest section is located in the southern portion of the western slope of the mountain, which faces the Temple Mount.

³⁵BT Ketubot 111a-b. One finds there, e.g., “R. Hiyya bar Yosef says the righteous will break through (the ground) and arise in Jerusalem.”

and the Mount of Olives but does not connect the two. It does, however, indicate that the mountain will play a major role in the events that will occur at the End of Days. There is a comparable relationship to the great victory over the gentiles at the End of Days in *piyyutim* from the seventh century, but they too make no mention of the resurrection of the dead on the Mount of Olives. Thus, the connection between the two apparently took shape only after the Muslims gained control in Israel.

One may conclude, then, that no relationship between the resurrection of the dead and the Mount of Olives existed either during the years when rabbinic literature was codified or at the time of the composition of the *piyyutim*. This same is true of midrashic literature. The midrashic texts that were redacted before Muslim rule contain no reference to the resurrection of the dead on the Mount of Olives, even in sections that discuss the mountain. Only the midrashim that are later than the Muslim occupation link the resurrection of the dead and the mountain. For example, *Pesikta Rabbati*, Piska 31 states: "As for those swallowed up in Riblah, the Holy One, blessed be He, will make passageway after passageway for them, until they arrive under the Mount of Olives, which is in Jerusalem. And the Holy One, blessed be He, will stand upon the mount, and after it is cleaved open for the exiles, they will come up out of it. As Zechariah says, 'and his feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives.'"³⁶ While older material is certainly integrated into this work, the genesis of the concept that the resurrection of the dead would be connected to the mountain apparently derives from the influence of the later midrashim, such as the Book of Zerubbabel. As mentioned above, the notion of the underground rolling of the dead and the resurrection of the dead do indeed appear in the Talmud, but there they bear no association with the Mount of Olives. This absence testifies further to the later development of this motif.

The linkage between the Mount of Olives and the resurrection of the dead at the End of Days is not evident in Jewish consciousness prior to the seventh century and the advent of Muslim rule in Israel. Traditional descriptions of the events on the mountain at the End of Days would seem to support the pairing of two such striking eschatological motifs, however. An association between the two would also have been encouraged by the messianic atmosphere that surrounded the image of the mountain in Jewish tradition at the close of the Byzantine period and the outset of the Muslim era. "The Vision of Daniel," written in Byzantium at the beginning of the ninth century, illustrates this idea clearly: the author mentions the Mount of Olives as the place

³⁶William G. Braude, trans., *Pesikta Rabbati* (New Haven, CT, 1968), 617.

where the prophet Elijah—an “old-new” hero whom the author now attaches to the mount—will blow the shofar and the dead will live.³⁷

Early Christian writers took up the biblical motif of the return of the Shekhinah on the Mount of Olives at the End of Days and attached it to the resurrection of the dead. This development is readily apparent in the Christian account of the resurrection of Lazarus, which occupies a significant place in early Christian ideology: Christian pilgrims identify Bethany, located on the eastern slope of the mountain, as the site where Jesus performed this miracle.³⁸ And when the Muslims assumed control in Jerusalem, they too adopted the motif of resurrection on the Mount of Olives at the End of Days.³⁹

During the period when the Mount of Olives was under Christian control and the decree was in force that forbade the Jews from even seeing the site where the Shekhinah went into exile, there was no place for works (such as the Book of Zerubbabel) connecting the resurrection of the dead and the Mount of Olives. The relationship between the mount and the resurrection of the dead emerged in the Jewish tradition only after the decline of the connection between Christianity and the Mount of Olives. It was specifically the Muslim conquest that alleviated the interreligious tension between Christians and Jews and provided a foundation for the Jewish adoption of the association between the resurrection of the dead and the Mount of Olives.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The genesis of traditions about hero figures and their relationships to specific places is often uncertain. My discussion of the status of the Mount of Olives in Jewish biblical consciousness reveals how the traditions associated with

³⁷Reuven Bonfil, “The Vision of Daniel as a Historical and a Literary Document” [in Hebrew], *Zion* 44 (1979): 113; Yehuda Even-Shmuel, *Midrashim of the Redemption* (Jerusalem, 1954), 225.

³⁸The New Testament records this miracle only in John 11–12, but it is considered the last and greatest miracle that Jesus performed, and in the fourth century a holiday was instituted a week before Easter to commemorate it.

³⁹Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship*, 141–42.

⁴⁰Reiner, “Pilgrims and Pilgrimage,” 188–89. Reiner points to a similar phenomenon during the period of the Crusades, when there was a halt in regular Jewish worship on the mountain and customary places of prayer were no longer fixed, as they had been in the Muslim period. The situation changed when the Ayyubid dynasty took control of the area. The process that Reiner delineates corresponds to the one outlined in this article, in which Christian roadblocks that had been erected against the Jews were eliminated with the onset of Muslim rule, allowing a return to Jewish traditions and Jewish worship on the mountain.

the mount evolved as a consequence of their encounter with Christian traditions and later with Islamic ones. The vision of Zechariah concerning the appearance of God on the mountain at the End of Days furnishes the foundation for the traditions that surfaced in the Second Temple Period. Later, Christianity adopted these prophetic traditions and attached them to the ascension of Jesus from the Mount of Olives, creating great consternation among the Jews and causing them to distance themselves from a concept that they themselves had originated. This development coincided with the proscription against Jews entering the area around the mountain, which also influenced them to ignore or alter their biblical traditions. Thus, the Jews moved the ascension of the Shekhinah from the Mount of Olives to the desert; similarly, they ignored the Christian connection between the Mount of Olives and the place of resurrection at the End of Days. The *piyyutim* of the Byzantine era express hope for the appearance of the real Messiah on the mount, whereas the Christian traditions concerned the appearance of Jesus on the mount at the End of Days.

The principal tradition concerning the ascension of the Shekhinah to heaven regained its prominent status in Jewish thought after the Muslims assumed control of the land of Israel. The end of Christian control of the area, and the removal of the cross from the top of the mount, came to symbolize the end of Christian domination of the mountain. This, together with the lifting of the prohibition against Jews approaching the mount and its surroundings, enabled the Jews to express and reaffirm their biblical traditions concerning the Mount of Olives: the ascent of the Shekhinah from the mountain and the appearance of the real Messiah there at the End of Days. At the same time, the linkage between the mountain and the resurrection of the dead at the End of Days began to appear in Jewish literature. Only in the post-Byzantine period, when the Muslims had risen to power, were the Jewish people able to reclaim the former tradition and accept the latter. Muslim rule brought about a diminution of the association between Christianity and the Mount of Olives and deemphasized the Christian characterization of the mountain as the setting for both Jesus's miraculous resurrection of Lazarus and his ascension to heaven. Only then could the Jews replace the Christian traditions about Jesus on the Mount of Olives with their own biblical traditions: hope for the appearance of their Messiah and for the resurrection of the dead on the mountain according to the prophecy of Zechariah.