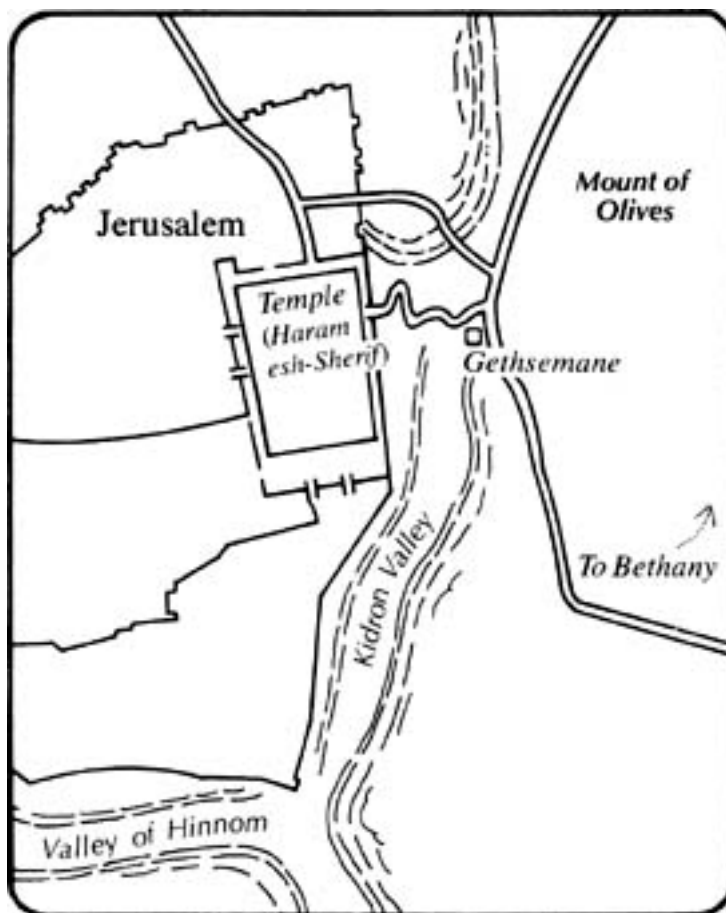


Olives, Mount of (מַעְלֵה הַזַּיְתִּים, *ma'aleh hazzeithim*; τὸ ὄρος τῶν ἐλαιῶν, *to oros tōn elaiōn*). Mountain with olive groves east of ancient Jerusalem, adjacent to the Temple Mount. The site of significant biblical events, including the triumphal entry, arrest, and ascension of Christ.



Physical Features

The Mount of Olives is a single peak of a two-mile long ridge that borders eastern Jerusalem, forming a barrier between the city and the Judaeen wilderness to the east. (Walker, *In the Steps of Jesus*, 116). Sometimes “Mount of Olives” refers to this entire range, including two other peaks. Most of the time, however, it refers to the highest center peak directly across from the eastern side of the Temple Mount (Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament*, 155).

The mile-long Mount of Olives proper is approximately 2,700 feet above sea level; it stands about 300 feet over the city, past the edge of the Temple Mount where the terrain dips into the Kidron Valley. From this perspective, the Mount seems much higher than it actually is. From the top, there is an impressive panoramic view. The Dead Sea lies 15 miles to the east—beyond the Judaeen desert with the mountains of Moab on the horizon (Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament*, 170). To the west lies the city of Jerusalem with the Temple Mount. The Mount’s height is relative to the vicinity, and its position around the city made it a natural bulwark—doubling as a watchtower against eastern invaders, and a token of protection (Psa 125:2) (Walker, *In the Steps of Jesus*,

116). Josephus records the distance from the Mount to Jerusalem as approximately 3,300 feet in *Antiquities* 20.169, and as approximately 3,960 feet in *Jewish War* 5.70.

Although it is known as a “Mount,” its scale probably does not match that of the common conception of a mountain. However, the distinction between a “hill” and a “mountain” is hazy, and the original terms *הַר* (*har*) and *ὄρος* (*oros*) do not necessarily denote giant projections of land. Indeed, an *ὄρος* (*oros*) is defined as an area which is only higher than a *βουνός* (*bounos*)—a minor elevation (Danker, *A Greek—English Lexicon*, 724).

The Mount of Olives sits on the eastern edge of a lengthy stretch of limestone soil which gives rise to the numerous olive groves that cover its surface (Mare, *The Archaeology of the Jerusalem Area*, 23). The Mount would probably not have been named for its olive groves if there were not noticeably more than elsewhere in the region. The olives would have also been economically significant for Jerusalem during the Second Temple period, when they were cultivated and harvested, as is evident in the Mishnah in *Pesah*. 14a. Olive oil was also probably the only export from Jerusalem (Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 7).

Biblical Relevance

Old Testament

The Mount of Olives is first mentioned in 2 Sam 15:30. When David flees from Jerusalem to escape Absalom’s invasion, he crosses the Wadi Kidron (i.e. the Kidron Valley) and goes up weeping to the *מַעְלֵה הַזַּיְתִּים* (*ma’aleh hazzeithim*), literally “the ascent of the olive trees.” He reaches the summit (called the place “where God is bowed down to”) and meets Hushai the Archite, gaining his help against Absalom (15:32). Past the summit is where David meets Ziba and turns over to him all of Mephibosheth’s belongings (16:1–4). Josephus adds that when David reaches the summit, he weeps and prays when he is able to gain a broad view of the city—as if the kingdom he beholds has been lost (*Antiquities* 7.203).

The Mount of Olives is also mentioned in Zech 14:4. This prophecy to postexilic Israel describes a time when Yahweh will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to pillage it. Half of the city will be exiled before Yahweh then battles the nations. Yahweh’s feet will stand on “mountain of olive trees” (*הַר הַזַּיְתִּים*, *har hazzeithim*), which “lies before Jerusalem on the east.” The Mount will split, forming a valley by which the people will flee (14:5). With its plain description of the “mountain of olive trees” being east of Jerusalem, it is evident that this is the Mount of Olives. However, it may be that this occurs not on the Mount of Olives proper but on the southernmost peak of the entire range (Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament*, 155).

Other points in the Old Testament may refer to the Mount, even if it is not explicitly named. The first of these is 1 Kgs 11:7, when Solomon turns from Yahweh and builds places on “the mountain (*הַר*, *har*) east of Jerusalem” to worship foreign gods (Mare, *The Archaeology of the Jerusalem Area*, 113). Later, in 2 Kgs 23:13–14, King Josiah destroys Solomon’s idolatrous constructions “east of Jerusalem” during his campaign to rid Jerusalem of apostasy.

In Ezekiel 11:23, Yahweh announces His judgment on Israel for their unfaithfulness, while promising to bring them into a right relationship with Him once again (11:1–21). In Ezekiel’s vision, the glory of Yahweh ascends from the middle of the city and “stood on the mountain (*הַר*, *har*) east of the city.” It is noteworthy that the glory of Yahweh does not go far but remains in a position of prominence over the city. It is later in 43:1–5 that His glory returns through the eastern gate, i.e. from the direction of the Mount of Olives.

New Testament

In several episodes, the Mount is clearly the setting of the narrative. The first is the so-called triumphal entry in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 21:1–9; Mark 11:1–10; Luke 19:29–38). Jesus and the disciples approach Jerusalem and stop on the Mount of Olives (τὸ ὄρος τῶν ἐλαιῶν, *to oros tōn elaiōn*, literally “the mount of the olive trees”; τὸ ὄρος τὸ καλούμενον ἐλαιῶν, *to oros to kaloumenon elaiōn*, “the mount which is called of olive trees” in Luke 19:29). They stop near the villages of Bethany and Bethphage. Bethany is known to have been on the eastern slope near the base. Though the location of Bethphage is still disputed, it is widely believed to be near Bethany on this slope (Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament*, 162–63). Jesus instructs them to go into the village to retrieve the colt (Matthew has a donkey and a colt) on which Jesus rides into Jerusalem. John 12:1–13 is a roughly parallel story to the Synoptics’ accounts of the triumphal entry which features Bethany, but the Mount of Olives is not explicitly mentioned.

Jesus’ teaching of the disciples about eschatological events after He tells them the temple would be destroyed takes place here (Matt 24:3–46; Mark 13:3–37; Luke 21:7–38). From the Mount of Olives they would have been able to look on the Temple Mount and the surrounding area. It also may have been inspired by the prophecy of Zech 14:4 (Walker, *In the Steps of Jesus*, 122). Matthew and Mark begin with the statement that they are on τὸ ὄρος τῶν ἐλαιῶν (*to oros tōn elaiōn*). Luke mentions after the discourse that Jesus was on τὸ ὄρος τὸ καλούμενον ἐλαιῶν (*to oros to kaloumenon elaiōn*), spending the night there every day He was teaching in the temple. Indeed, since there were not many villages on the Mount besides Bethany and Bethphage, the olive groves would be where many visitors would sleep—especially at Passover, when Jerusalem’s population more than tripled (Walker, *In the Steps of Jesus*, 118).

Jesus’ arrest by officers of the high priest takes place on the Mount (Matt 26:30–56; Mark 14:26–50; Luke 22:39–54). After their last meal together, Jesus and the disciples go out to the Mount of Olives (τὸ ὄρος τῶν ἐλαιῶν, *to oros tōn elaiōn*). Only Matthew and Mark specify that they settle in a place called Gethsemane (which means “oil press”) at the base of the Mount, facing Jerusalem. Once more, the parallel in John does not mention the Mount explicitly, but says that after His discourses at the last meal, Jesus and the disciples go out across the Valley of Kidron to a garden where He is arrested. Because Gethsemane is directly across Kidron at the base of the Mount of Olives, this is most likely the setting in all accounts.

The last clear appearance of the Mount of Olives in the New Testament is the ascension of Christ, narrated by Luke at the very end of his Gospel and the beginning of Acts. In Luke 24:50–53, after the resurrected Jesus has appeared to the disciples, He leads them out as far as Bethany. While blessing them, He withdraws from them and is “carried up into heaven” (24:51; some manuscripts do not include “and was carried up into heaven,” see Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 162–63). In Acts 1:6–11, Jesus offers His final instructions to the disciples. They then watch as He is lifted up and a cloud takes Him out of their sight. While they watch Him go, two men dressed in white robes tell them that He will come again in the same way they watched Him go into heaven, implying that Jesus may return on the Mount of Olives. No indication is given of where this takes place until 1:12, which indicates that the disciples return to Jerusalem from ὄρος τὸ καλούμενον ἐλαιῶνος (*oros to kaloumenon elaiōnos*), literally “mount which is called of olive grove.” Luke adds that this place is “near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away” (NRSV). This is the length the Law allowed travel on the Sabbath (Exod 16:29). As in Zech 14:4, the connection of the Mount of Olives with the departure and return of God’s glory makes it suitable literarily and theologically for the ascension and return of Jesus.

Finally, the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11) may not be original to the Gospel of John (see Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 187–89), but many believe that it is based on real events. This passage begins with the detail that “each of them went

home, while Jesus went to τὸ ὄρος τῶν ἐλαιῶν (*to oros tōn elaiōn*)” (7:53–8:1). Little significance seems to exist in the following story that Jesus had come from the Mount, other than the fact that He would have already been close to the temple when He returns there and encounters the scribes, the Pharisees, and the woman.

Having established the points in the New Testament where the Mount of Olives is clearly a part of the scene, there are several points in which it is possibly part of the scene, though not plainly stated. The first is the cursing of the fig tree (Matt 21:18–22; Mark 11:12–14, 20–25). This likely takes place on the Mount as Jesus and the disciples make their way back into Jerusalem. Not finding any fruit on a fig tree when He is hungry, Jesus curses it that no fruit would ever come from it again; it withers. Jesus takes the opportunity to teach the disciples about faith, telling them that even if they were to say to “this mountain (ὄρος, *oros*)” to be lifted and thrown into the sea, it would happen. If they were standing on it, He may have been referring to the Mount of Olives, though Wright claims He was speaking of the Temple Mount (Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 422).

The final text to be discussed does not feature the Mount of Olives as a setting, but Jesus may be alluding to it in Matt 23:27–28. Here He criticizes the scribes and Pharisees for being like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filthy on the inside. Jews were buried in tombs that sit on top of the ground on the lower western slope of the Mount of Olives (Mare, *The Archeology of the New Testament*, 194), partially because burial is forbidden inside the city, but also probably because of the connection of the Mount with end-time expectations.

Jewish Tradition

Jewish tradition holds that the olive leaf which the dove returned to Noah with in Gen 8:11 was from the Mount (*Gen. Rab.* 33:6). *Parah* 3:6–7, from the Mishnah, indicates that the burning of the red heifer instituted for Israelite observance in Num 19:1–10—that was to be done outside of the camp during the Tabernacle period—was done on the Mount of Olives during the Temple period. Jewish rabbinic tradition also holds that once the glory of God departed from the temple in Ezek 11:23, it remained on the Mount for three and a half years waiting for Israel to repent (*Lam. Rab.* Proem 25). Eschatological expectation associated with the Mount is seen in the tradition that it would be the place where the resurrection begins. The remains of faithful Jews who had been buried away from the city would travel through underground passageways to be raised on the Mount (*Targums of the Prophets*; Zech 14:4–5). This belief has led to many Jewish burials on the Mount that continues to this day.

Archaeological Significance

The Jerusalem area has long been settled, and sherd and vessel finds at the Dominus Flevit Franciscan chapel on the western slope of the Mount of Olives attest to a continued settlement outside the city during the Late Bronze Age (16th–13th centuries bc). Many of these objects have been found to originate from Cyprus, the Aegean, and Egypt, which indicates foreign influences in the area (Mare, *The Archaeology of the Jerusalem Area*, 25–26). Many ossuaries have also been excavated at the Dominus Flevit site, some inscribed with biblical names such as Martha, Mary, Salome, Sapphira, Simeon, Jonah, John, Joseph, and Zechariah (Mare, *The Archaeology of the Jerusalem Area*, 197–98).

Significant archaeological finds have also been uncovered at the village of Bethany on the eastern slope. Excavations during 1951–53 unveiled coins, clay lamps, and other vessels from the time when Jesus would set foot in the village, and coins from the reigns of Herod the Great and Pontius Pilate (Mare, *The Archaeology of the Jerusalem Area*, 200).

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Nathan Brasfield

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