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**I**F JESUS HAD A FAVORITE PLACE in Judea during His earthly life, it was the Mount of Olives (also known as Mount Olivet, from the Latin *olivatum*, meaning “olive grove”).<sup>1</sup> This scenic mountain ridge, receiving its name due to the presence of a multitude of olive groves, lies just east of Jerusalem and stretches two miles north to south.<sup>2</sup> It is a part of the central mountain range that runs through the central and southern portions of Palestine. To the east of the range lay Jericho, the Jordan Valley, and the Dead Sea, and to the south and southeast lies the expansive wilderness of Judea. Bethany (the modern city of el-‘Azariyeh) is about two miles from Jerusalem on the eastern slope of Mount Olivet. Silwan is to the southwest. On the mount’s lower slopes is Gethsemane (from the Hebrew “oil press”; compare Matt. 26:36; Mark 14:32).<sup>3</sup>

The Mount of Olives has three main summits. The first, the northern section, which probably had association with the Old Testament city of Nob (Isa. 10:32) and Mount Scopus (that is, the mountain of the “lookout”).<sup>4</sup> The Mount of Olives is the highest of the three peaks,

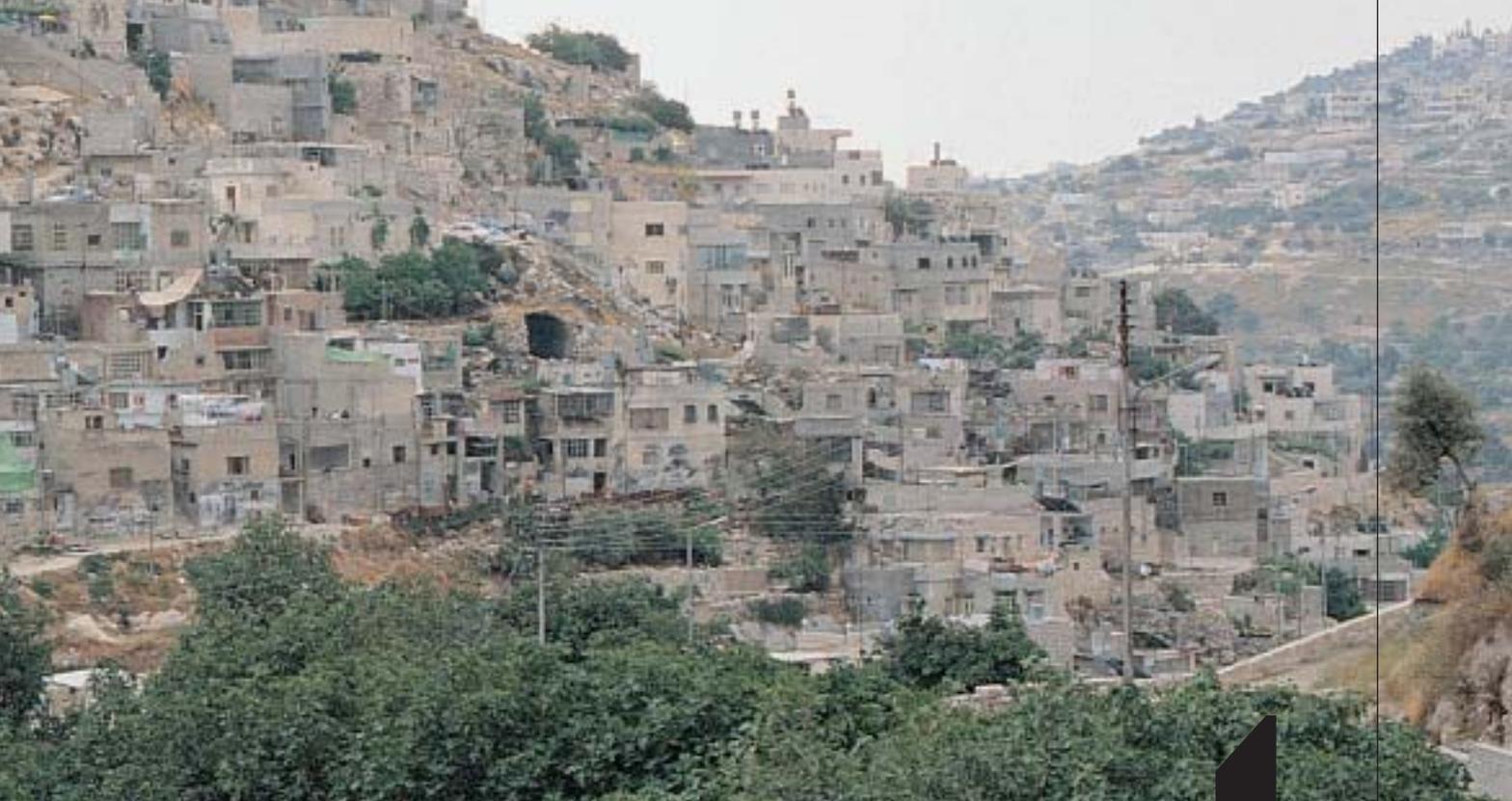
about 2,700 feet above sea level, and is today called Ras el-Mesharif. The second, the central peak (variously called Jebel et-Tur, “the mountain of the tower”; Jebel ez-Zait, “the mountain of the mount of olives”; and Jebel ez-Zaitun, “the mountain of the olive trees”), is directly across from the Kidron Valley (also known as the Valley of Jehoshaphat), the city of Jerusalem, and the temple. This section is the Mount of Olives proper and is about 100 feet above the city of Jerusalem. The third, the southern section (Jebel Batn el-Hawa, “the mountain of the womb of the wind”), is the lowest of the three summits and is usually identified as the “Mount of Offense/Corruption.”

#### In the Old Testament

The Old Testament has three main references to the Mount of Olives. Second Samuel 15:30 states that David,

#### LESSON REFERENCE

ETBS: Luke 19:1-48; 21:1-38; 22:1-71



# Mount of Olives

**Above: The village of Silwan, southwest of the Mount of Olives, near the old city of David.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (9/38/1)

**Right: Alabaster bottle found at Israel. Such a bottle would hold only a small amount of oil, for personal use.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KEN TOUCHTON/ ROCKEFELLER MUSEUM, JERUSALEM (65/96)



being forced to flee after a revolt led by his son Absalom, was going up the “Ascent of Olives” (literally, “the ascent of the olive trees”) weeping as he went. Second Samuel 15:32 indicates that this was a place where people used to worship God. First Kings 11:7 says Solomon built a high place for Chemosh, the god of Moab, and for Molech, the god of Ammon “on a hill east of Jerusalem” (NIV). In connection with Solomon’s idolatry, 2 Kings 23:13 states that Josiah destroyed the high places that were “east of Jerusalem on the south of the Hill of Corruption—the ones Solomon king of Israel had built for Ashtoreth the vile goddess of the Sidonians, for Chemosh the vile god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the people of Ammon” (NIV). This name “Hill of Corruption” appears to be a word play: *har hammisha*, meaning “mountain of anointing oil” and *har hammashit*, meaning “mountain of destruction/corruption.”<sup>5</sup> An explicit reference to the Mount of Olives is in Zechariah 14:4, which states that YHWH, the God of Israel, will make an appearance on the “Mount of Olives” (literally, “the mountain of the olive trees”),<sup>6</sup> east of Jerusalem, splitting it “in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south” (NIV). This theophany appears to be a reversal Ezekiel’s description of when the “glory of the Lord went up from within the city of Jerusalem and stopped above the mountain east of it” (11:23, NIV).

### In the New Testament

The majority of the references to the Mount of Olives (literally, “the mountain of the olive trees”) in the New Testament refer to events in the last week of Jesus’ earthly life (that is, “Passion Week”). The two texts not connected to this week are John 8:1 and Acts 1:12. Without a doubt, Jesus traversed this mountain on several occasions, specifically during the times of the Jewish feasts and festivals in Jerusalem.

On the Mount of Olives in the town of Bethany, Jesus visited the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1) and miraculously raised Lazarus from the dead (vv. 38-44). From the Mount of Olives (that is, from Bethphage and Bethany), Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:28-38).<sup>7</sup> Coming in sight of Jerusalem, from the path on the Mount of Olives, Jesus wept over the city (vv. 41-44). This remarkable scene in Luke’s account marks a sharp shift in mood from rejoicing to lament and serves as a “transition from the triumphal entry of the king to the cleansing of the temple with profound pathos.”<sup>8</sup>

After His days of ministering in Jerusalem, Jesus spent His nights on the Mount of Olives at Bethany (compare Matt. 21:17; Mark 11:11; Luke 21:37-38). Jesus must have taken great comfort in the solitude of the mountain, away from the noise, the bustle, and the pressures of the overcrowded city of Jerusalem.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ (8/37/15)

Jesus cursed the fig tree on the Mount of Olives (Matt. 21:18-19; Mark 11:20-21) and delivered His prophecies on the ruin of Jerusalem, echoing the words of Zechariah 14:1-5. Bible students have commonly called this sermon the Olivet Discourse (compare Matt. 24:3-25:46; Mark 13:3-37). On this mountain, Jesus spoke the parables of the ten virgins and the five talents (Matt. 25). Additionally, while Jesus was staying in the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of expensive perfume and anointed His head (Matt. 26:6-7; Mark 14:3).

The Mount of Olives also played an important role in the events following the Last Supper. After the final Passover celebration, when it was evening, Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn and went to the Mount of Olives. There Jesus had predicted His capture and Peter’s denial, suffered excruciating agony at Gethsemane, was betrayed, and was subsequently arrested (Matt. 26:30-56; Mark 14:26-52; Luke 22:39-53; John 18:1-11). The final textual reference to the Mount of Olives is in Acts 1:12, which speaks of the disciples returning to Jerusalem from the mount after Jesus’ ascension.

### In the Present Day

Today, Jews, Christians, and Muslims each consider the Mount of Olives to be a vital element in their religious



**Left: The garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives.**

**Above: Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem.**

**Right: A reconstructed olive press from the 4th century A.D.**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: JAMES MCLEMORE (130017)

history. Jewish tradition upholds that the dove that Noah released plucked an olive leaf from this mount. The ritual of the burning of the red heifer (compare Num. 19:2) supposedly occurred on this summit. In the Christian tradition, Constantine built a basilica as a memorial to his mother, Helena, marking the supposed spot of Jesus' ascension. The Chapel of the Ascension, at the summit of the mountain, was built in 1834 near the earlier Church of the Ascension that had been turned into a mosque in 1187. Also for Christian tradition, a Franciscan complex that includes a garden with its olive trees and the Church of All Nations with the Stone of Agony in front of the altar currently mark the site of Gethsemane. Muslim tradition teaches that the final judgment of all humankind will take place in the Kidron Valley between the Dome of the Rock and the Mount of Olives.<sup>9</sup>

For centuries events on the Mount of Olives helped shape the religious life of the faithful. That which forever hallows its ground, however, is Jesus' ministry on and around the mount and His final decision there before His arrest—to be “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8, NASB). **B**

1. In Jewish usage, it has been called “the mountain of lights,” since it was the place of signal fires that announced the appearance of the new moon. In the Talmud, it is called the “Mount of the Ointment,” and in Christian usage, it is also known by the name of “the mount of the Ascension.” See W. S. LaSor, “Olives, Mount of” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 589.

2. Unfortunately, the mount was denuded of trees during the time of Titus, and today

it contains only a fraction of the tree population of ancient times. See Warren J. Heard, Jr., “Olives, Mount of” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 13.

3. Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 482, note 1, states that the name “Bethany” not only applied to the village but also to the entire southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives. Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St. Luke's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 311, states that some interpret the name “Bethany” as “house of the poor” or “house of the afflicted.” Today, it is called “Azariyeh or Lazaiyeh, ‘the place of Lazarus.’”

4. See “Olives, Mount of” in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, rev. ed. Allen C. Myers (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 779-780.

5. See John Briggs Curtis, “An Investigation of the Mount of Olives in the Judaean-Christian Tradition,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 28 (1957): 140-42. Compare LaSor, “Olives, Mount of,” ISBE, 589.

6. This is the only occurrence of the name “Mount of Olives” (*har hazzetim*) in the Old Testament.

7. Danker, 311, notes that “the village of Bethphage (‘house of unripe figs’) has disappeared. It was located on the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives.” I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke, The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 711, states that Bethphage was a “hamlet between Jerusalem and Bethany.”

8. Compare Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 284; David L. Tiede, *Luke, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 331.

9. LaSor, ISBE, 591.

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