

Chapter 13

ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND THE MOUNT OF OLIVES

While it became popular by the first century for many Jewish people to think that the spot of the Altar of Burnt Offering just east of the Holy Place in the Temple was the site where the ram was caught in the thicket at the time of Abraham, there are biblical reasons for believing that the spot was actually on the Mount of Olives. Since Isaac was recognized as a type of the Messiah (and Christians certainly considered him to be typical of Jesus who was actually allowed to be sacrificed by the Father, unlike Isaac whom Abraham received back without having to sacrifice him), it seems logical that the site of the crucifixion of Jesus would be at or near the same place that Abraham intended to sacrifice Isaac. This brings us again to the summit of the Mount of Olives.

One of the cardinal reasons that the Jewish authorities in the first century considered the place of the Second Temple to be the site where the altar for Isaac was built by his father Abraham was because the Book of Chronicles states the place was on a Mount Moriah (II Chronicles 3:1). Until 1994, I also sided with the early Jewish authorities in stating that this Mount Moriah was the site

where the Temples were built and also the place where Abraham sacrificed the ram caught in the thicket. But now, new research causes one to look for another mountain for that important event in world history. What we find is the fact that the term “Moriah” refers to a mountain range in which is located the Mount of Olives and the other mountains surrounding the immediate area of Jerusalem. We will find that the altar of Abraham was at the southern summit of the Mount of Olives, at the very area where Jesus was later crucified as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. It means that the Mount of Olives was also called Mount Moriah, but more accurately, it should be reckoned as Upper Moriah; while the Temple mount itself should be called Lower Moriah. This chapter will show the geographical distinction.

Where was the Land of Moriah?

When Abraham was about 130 years of age and living in Beersheba (in the desert region about 50 miles south and west of what was later to become Jerusalem), God came to him and told him to take his son Isaac with two young men and make a trip to the Land of Moriah, and offer him there for a burnt offering upon ONE of the MOUNTAINS in the region (Genesis 22:2).

The first thing to notice in regard to Genesis 22:2 is the fact that the word “Moriah” refers to a district of land and it had several mountains within its region because God told Abraham to go to *one of the mountains* in that district of Moriah. This geographical indication makes it clear that every mountain within that district of Moriah could be called a Mount of Moriah. Just like every mountain within the Alps range in Europe could be called an Alpine mountain (a mountain of the Alps), so likewise, all the mountains in the district of Moriah could be called the mounts (or mountains) of Moriah. But Abraham was told to go to *one* of the mountains, not simply to any or all of the various mountains in the Moriah district.

Abraham then saddled his donkey and took two of his young

men with him along with Isaac his son (Genesis 22:3). There is a major point to notice that is usually not observed by modern interpreters regarding this important event. We should carefully note that in Hebrew, the word which denotes “young men” is precisely the same word (though plural) of the Hebrew word for “lad” which described Isaac in Genesis 22:5. This shows that Isaac was no small child (or infant) when Abraham took him with the two young men on their journey to the Land of Moriah. Indeed, the same word for “lad” and “young men” was used to describe Joshua when he was 40 years of age (Exodus 33:11). Isaac could well have been in his 30’s when the event concerning his intended sacrifice took place. After all, the two young men who accompanied Abraham (to help Abraham who was a very old man at the time) would have been of little help if they were mere children. It would not be unreasonable to state that Isaac at the time of this great trial was in his early 30’s (as was Jesus when he was sacrificed on the Mount of Olives). It is important to realize the chronology of this event because it shows that Isaac was no mere child (or infant). Isaac was indeed a young man of vigorous age and he could well have resisted his father Abraham when Abraham took the knife to slay him.

Abraham Expected Isaac to be Resurrected

Another point needs to be made. Note that Abraham had been ordered by God to slay Isaac. He was his only begotten legal son through whom the promises of God that much glory would come from Isaac and not from other children that he had. But now, God was telling Abraham to slay his only legal son for inheritance. Since Abraham was well aware of God’s former promises to him that Abraham would have descendants to come from Isaac, the only conclusion Abraham could make if he did indeed kill Isaac was that God would have to resurrect Isaac from the dead for God’s promises to be fulfilled. This is why Abraham said to the two young men who went with them to wait at the bottom of the mount and that he and Isaac (both of them together) would soon come again to them

(Genesis 22:5). The author of the Book of Hebrews used this very verse in Genesis to show that Abraham believed that Isaac would have to be resurrected from the dead if he did indeed slay him on the mount. Hebrews said: “Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him [Isaac] in a figure” (Hebrews 11:19).

So, from the author’s point of view, Abraham (as a figure) did indeed slay his son when the substitute ram was offered in his place but he received his son Isaac back to life through a resurrection from the dead. Abraham was assured that this would certainly happen even in a literal way (had God not provided the substitute sacrifice) because he confidently told the two young men who waited at the bottom of the mountain that both he and Isaac would come [plural] again to you (Genesis 22:5). This trial of Abraham’s faith (and also the trial of Isaac’s faith as well, because Isaac was certainly around 30 years of age when this all happened) occurred on a mountain in the Land of Moriah. It was the Mount of Olives.

The Mountain of Moriah that Abraham Selected

We are given some good hints in Genesis 22 itself about the mountain where the ram was caught in the thicket. When we combine II Chronicles 3:1 with several other statements concerning the location of Zion (of which I will have more to say in a moment), we can know for a certainty the precise mountain in the region (or land) of Moriah where this event took place. The event was symbolically significant and highly important.

Note that it took Abraham and his group three days to reach the region of Moriah (which the Chronicler identified with the later area of Jerusalem). This journey of three days was from Beersheba (Genesis 22:4). This would accord well, in a strict geographical sense, with the later Jerusalem region. Once they got there, God told Abraham some geographical details that described the place God had in mind. The text says that Abraham was able to see the

place *afar off* (verse 4). It must have been quite a prominent mountain (among the mountains of Moriah) that Abraham could observe from a distance. When he got to the top of that particular mount, and he finally saw the ram caught in a thicket by its horns, he knew God was substituting the ram for Isaac. This could hardly have been the rocky outcrop area that made up the later place where the Temple was built because that was an area where a threshing floor was in evidence. Threshing floors in the region of Palestine are almost always associated with sites that are bare of trees or thickets. They are normally natural rock outcroppings without any vegetation around them to afford a chance for the free flow of the wind over their surfaces so that no impediments to the winnowing would be in the area. Besides this, it was common to place altars on the highest point of a high place (or mountain peak), and since the ram was caught in a thicket directly behind Abraham (a very short distance away), this clearly shows that the summit of this particular mountain was covered with much vegetation. This evidence alone leads a person to look in a different area than where the Temple was later built over an outcropping of rock which was a normal threshing floor.

There is, however, even greater evidence in the Bible to identify the spot where the altar was built for Isaac. When Ezra the priest wrote the Book of Chronicles he tells us that the Temple was built on Mount Moriah. In this single verse (if that is all we had) the impression left with the English reader is that Ezra is referring to a single mountain that is called Mount Moriah. But if one will simply continue reading the Book of Chronicles, Ezra states in II Chronicles 13:4 that King Abijah stood up upon "*mount Zemaraim, which is in mount Ephraim.*" The Hebrew word for *mount* in both cases is the same. Scholars have long recognized that Ezra is not stating that this "*mount Zemaraim*" was superimposed upon top of another mountain called "*mount Ephraim.*" In no way does Ezra mean such a thing. Most modern translators render (and rightly so) *the second mount* as "*the hill country*" (or the mountain range) of

Ephraim. Certainly, there were several score mountains (not one mount alone) located in the tribal area of Ephraim, and Ezra used the precise word for “mount” in II Chronicles 13:4 that he did in II Chronicles 3:1 when he referred to “mount Moriah.” Ezra was actually showing that the Temple was built in the mountain region of Moriah, not on a single mountain that alone had the name Mount Moriah. This means that the “Moriah” of Genesis 22 and the “Moriah” of the Book of Chronicles refer to a mountain region or a mountain district called the Land of Moriah. The word “Moriah” itself applies to the whole land or territory of that area. This is why in Genesis the region is simply called the Land of Moriah and it covered a wide area of land.

Abraham Selected a Mount in the Land of Moriah

It was on top of one of the mountains in this region called “Moriah” which later became known as Jerusalem that Abraham built the altar for Isaac. Normally, in such cases, it was the highest of the mountains in any region that was selected to raise up an altar to God. It would be like selecting Mount Blanc in the mountain range of the Alps, or Mount Whitney in the mountain range of the Sierra Nevadas in California. And in the region of Jerusalem, the highest mountain would have been the Mount of Olives. It would have been called, correctly, “Mount Moriah,” while the later Temple mount itself (located just to the west and across the Kidron valley) would also have been called “Mount Moriah,” or better yet “Lower Mount Moriah.” The higher mountain of the same name, however, would have been called Upper Mount Moriah. That would have been the southern summit of the Mount of Olives (the highest mount in the metropolitan area of Jerusalem). This is where the altar for Isaac was built by Abraham. And this is the same area where Jesus was in fact crucified (and later resurrected) for the sins of the world. He became to God, like the ram for Isaac, a substitute sacrifice for all human beings in the world and in all ages in which they would live.

Biblical Evidence Confirms these Matters

Let us see more evidence that confirms this. The next proof for this concerns the site of Zion, which later became identified with the mountain that became the City of David (located in the south-eastern part of what became Jerusalem) and by extension Zion came to be applied to the Temple mount itself. But the term Zion was far more extensive than the mount of the City of David and the later mount of the Temple.

The word Zion (which is sometimes spelled Sion in Christian circles) is a very familiar term to those who read the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments. Though the original meaning of the word is not clear to scholars, it no doubt denoted a geographical feature of some kind. When we first meet with the word we find it identifying an area where there was a citadel or fortress. It has been suggested by some scholars that its root meaning probably suggests a citadel of some kind. We are introduced to the word when David successfully captured the Jebusite stronghold which was called the fortress of Zion located on the southeast hill of Jerusalem (it was located directly south of Lower Moriah and between the Tyropaeon Valley on the west and the Kidron Valley on the east). After conquering that stronghold, David changed its official name to the City of David (II Samuel 5:7; I Chronicles 11:5). This is the spot to which David brought the Ark of the Covenant (the holiest piece of furniture in the Tabernacle). From the time the Ark came to rest in Zion (before it was moved to the new Temple built by Solomon on Lower Moriah), Zion was identified with the place on earth where God had his dwelling. So, that particular hill known as the Stronghold of Zion, became the place in the Jerusalem area which was officially designated the place for the House of God. The original Mount Zion on the southeast hill continued to be called that place for the House of God until the Ark was moved to the site of the new first Temple in the time of Solomon.

It is interesting that as soon as Solomon had the Ark moved to

the new first Temple, the name Zion (though originally associated only with the southeast hill) was moved northward to include Lower Mount Moriah in its designation. It then became fashionable to call either the original mountain of David by the name Zion, or to call Lower Mount Moriah of the Temple by the name Zion. This effectively meant, if one took God's word literally, that there were two Mount Zions in Jerusalem. But that does not end the matter. The word Zion began to take on even greater geographical significance.

The Designation of Zion became quite Extensive in Meaning

The word Zion came to denote the political capital of the nation of Judah (David made the Stronghold of Zion his headquarters in governing the nation), but it also came to identify the spiritual capital of the nation (when Solomon built the Temple on Lower Moriah). When Solomon did this, people in the Middle East then began to reckon the city of Jerusalem as housing the two Zions of God: the secular capital on the southeast hill and the religious capital on Lower Mount Moriah. There was even a further extension in the use of the name Zion. Besides the two mounts being called Zion, the whole city of Jerusalem itself, being the capital of Judah, became known as Zion. That still did not end the use of the name. Because the people of God were Israel and Judah and God was supposed to dwell among (or even within) them, we find that the people of Israel as a corporate body also, in a poetic sense, began to be denominated by the word Zion. There is yet even more expansiveness to the word. Since the original dwelling place for God was at his palace in heaven, we find that the heavenly throne of God also became known as the heavenly Zion (Hebrews 12:22). What we find in the Bible is the fact that there were several sites beginning to be called Zion. This is an important point to realize because we are going to find out that even the Mount of Olives began to be called Zion because of the significant events that occurred on that

mount which is the highest in the Jerusalem area.

A Variety of Places called Zion

Even from a geographical point of view regarding areas on earth, we find the word Zion being used in the Bible for a number of places. For example, the prophet Micah (4:10) said that Zion (as a metaphor for the people of Jerusalem) would one day leave Jerusalem and dwell outside the city gates. “You [Zion] shall go forth out of the city, and you shall dwell in the field” (Micah 4:10). Micah, however, said that Zion would not remain in that field for long. It was to be further removed, and far off from Jerusalem. “And you [Zion] shall go even to Babylon” (verse 10). That’s right. Micah stated quite categorically that Zion, because of her sins, would be removed from Jerusalem and be placed within the heathen area of Babylon. Indeed, Zion would stay in Babylon long enough to bear children to God before returning to Jerusalem (verse 10). The prophet Zechariah also confirmed this prophecy of Micah by stating that Zion would one day be located in Babylon, yet it would be given deliverance for her plight. Zechariah said: “Deliver yourself, O Zion, that dwells with the daughter of Babylon” (Zechariah 2:7).

The Bible shows the fact that the name Zion, as a geographical or spiritual designation, has moved around quite a bit in various contexts of the Holy Scriptures. While still retaining its name for the southeast hill, the name was extended to include Lower Mount Moriah of the Temple. From there it came to embrace the whole city of Jerusalem, and this also included the highest mountain in the Jerusalem area, the Mount of Olives (which could then be designated as Upper Mount Zion). What? Is it possible for the Mount of Olives to be called Zion just like the two western mountains across the Kidron Valley? That’s right. Look at the messages in the fifteen degree psalms which were collected and put into the Bible by King Hezekiah. In Psalm 125:2 we read: “As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about his people from hence-

forth.” Yes, God was prophesied to dwell (not only in one mountain in Jerusalem) but in all of the mountains surrounding the capital city. But to be more specific, in Psalm 133 (still one of the fifteen degree psalms of Hezekiah), we are told by the writer that the region of Zion is made up of several mountains, not just one mountain, or even two mountains. The psalmist said there were the “MOUNTAINS of Zion” (Psalm 133:3). This means that all the mountains that make up Jerusalem are called the mountains of Zion. But those mountains are also denominated as being the mountains of Moriah.

The Mountains of Moriah

The word “Moriah” itself means God sees, or the place to which God gives his utmost attention. Or, as Moses explained the word in Genesis 22:14, it signified “the Mount of the Lord,” and he added to that phrase the meaning that the Mount was where “it shall be seen.” It meant the region or the mountain that God would look upon as the place of his singular attention. And the highest mountain in the region of Moriah (where Abraham built the altar for Isaac) was the Mount of Olives. This is why the Mount of Olives should be called Upper Mount Moriah, and the place where the Temples were later built as Lower Mount Moriah. Also, these mountains in Jerusalem (the Zion of God) became known as the “mountains of Zion” (Psalm 133:3). And since the Mount of Olives was the highest, it could technically be called either Upper Mount Moriah or Upper Mount Zion.

Later Jewish Authorities Recognized the Importance of Olivet

There are good biblical reasons why the Mount of Olives could be called Upper Mount Moriah or Upper Mount Zion. The Jewish people were well acquainted with the scriptures regarding the use of the words “Moriah” and “Zion.” The region was intimately connected with the ritualistic ceremonies associated with the Temple at

Jerusalem. This is where the Third Altar of the Temple was located which was associated with the sacrifice of the Red Heifer. This is one reason why the Jewish authorities in the time of Jesus had the priestly village called Bethphage built on the Mount of Olives to attend to the holy places located on its summit. Recall that this village was even an important area of the Sanhedrin and we now know that this region became known by Jewish authorities after the time of Jesus as the place where God had placed his footstool on earth.

After the time of Islam, the Jewish authorities were well aware of the importance of the summit of the Mount of Olives as a place where God focused his special attention. There are Jewish records showing this. *The Encyclopaedia Judaica* under the article “Mount of Olives” has an important survey about the significance of Olivet in these later times. The encyclopaedia shows that by the end of the eighth century, when the Jews were no longer allowed to enter the Temple Mount, the Mount of Olives became the place (like in the time Bethphage was in operation in the period of Jesus) for proclaiming the beginning of the calendar years. This is the precise spot where the Jewish people raised up what the authorities called a Great Sanhedrin to regulate legal matters involving the people of Israel.

The Jewish authorities stated they had the right to pick this spot on the Mount of Olives because the Shekinah moved to this exact region after the fall of the Temple in A.D.70 (I will have more to say on this move of the Shekinah to the Mount of Olives in later chapters of this book). They even came to believe that this area on the Mount of Olives was the footstool of God because it stated in Zechariah 14 that God would certainly stand on the Mount of Olives. A rock outcropping was even shown in the summit area which was supposed to represent the footstool of God. They came to believe that this was the footstool of God (as mentioned in Isaiah 60:13; 66:1; also see Acts 7:49 and we should connect Isaiah with Zechariah 14). After the destruction of the Temple in A.D.70, the

Jewish authorities came to see that the Mount of Olives was the spot where God would teach his people his laws and his ways. They began to give it a status that made it to almost reach the significance of the dwelling place of God while the Temple remained in ruins. Let us see how this came to be understood.

The Footstool of God in later Jewish Interpretation

The Jewish authorities came to believe that the “footstool of God” as mentioned in Isaiah 60:13 and 66:1 should be connected with the Mount of Olives mentioned in Zechariah 14 which spoke of God’s feet standing on Olivet. They also had the teaching of Ezekiel 11:23 where the prophet Ezekiel saw the Shekinah Glory of God retreat from the Temple Mount (Lower Mount Moriah) and ascend to the top of the Mount of Olives (which could be called Upper Mount Moriah). They saw that YHVH was to stand on the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:4).

The symbol of the footstool for God’s feet came to be identified with the summit of the Mount of Olives. This is the spot where it was thought that God figuratively dwelt on earth after the destruction of the Temple and where God’s people were to gather to worship him. In other words, the phrase “footstool of God” came to represent God’s holy residence on earth (like was the case in his Tabernacle and even in his Temple). The phrase “footstool of God” came to mean the official place to worship God. Note what the scriptures teach. “We will go into his tabernacles [the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies]: we will worship at his footstool” (Psalm 132:7). “Exalt ye the Lord our God, and worship at his footstool; for he is holy” (Psalm 99:5). “How hath the Lord covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in his anger, and cast down from heaven unto the earth the beauty of Israel, and remembered not his footstool [his Temple] in the day of his anger” (Lamentations 2:1). It was called “the place of my sanctuary; and I will make the place of my feet glorious” (Isaiah 60:13).

Worshipping God at his Footstool

These scriptures indicate that the “footstool of God” was reckoned as the holiest place on earth and where people were officially required to worship God. It is no accident that the later Jewish authorities (when Islam began) returned to Jerusalem and went directly to the Mount of Olives and re-established the Sanhedrin on that mount. They called that mount God’s footstool. They seemed to know that God had certainly abandoned Lower Mount Moriah as the place of his footstool and that God was now reckoning the Mount of Olives (Upper Mount Moriah) as the proper footstool of God. But in the fifteenth century, Jews seem to forget the importance of Olivet and they started again to assemble at their Western Wall. This still made them to direct their prayers *eastward* from the Wall to Olivet which they formerly called “God’s footstool.”

We will come to see in the next chapter that the Christian community at Jerusalem after the destruction of the city and Temple in A.D.70, also came to see this region on the Mount of Olives as being the official “footstool of God.” In fact, it can now be shown that Christians established their headquarters after A.D.70 (and in one way of looking at it, until the time of Constantine) at the summit of the Mount of Olives. So influential did the Christian authorities become in this area on the Mount of Olives (and they continued to be powerful until Constantine built the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on the western side of Jerusalem) that the Jewish authorities felt it better to move their Sanhedrin away from the Christian region of Jerusalem after A.D.70. They went to Jabneh (Jamnia) on the coast of Palestine. The Jewish Sanhedrin remained there until A.D.135 and then it moved into regions of Galilee until A.D.429 when the Romans had the Sanhedrin disbanded. Only later, with the arrival of Islam, did the Jewish authorities finally raise up another Sanhedrin (which they began to call the Great Sanhedrin) and they did this by returning to the summit of the Mount of Olives (the place of God’s footstool) in order to be in close association with the

God of their fathers (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol.XII.481-485).

Abraham took Isaac to the Mount of Olives. This Symbolized Jesus

It can now be shown from the information that I have presented in this chapter, that the Mount of Olives becomes important for reasons that many people have not realized. That is the fact that Abraham actually had his trial concerning Isaac NOT on Lower Mount Moriah where the Temple was later built by Solomon, but it was at the summit of Olivet. It is no wonder that early Christians began to see the importance of the Mount of Olives. Indeed, it was long recognized in Christian circles that Isaac was a type of the Christ who was to come so it was expected that several parallels between Isaac and Jesus would be apparent. And when one compares the history of Isaac with that of Jesus, the similarities are very profound. Let us notice what some of those parallels were that prompted the early Christians to make the typical connection between Isaac and Jesus. Note the agreements.

- (1) The birth of Isaac was miraculous (Genesis 18), so was the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:18).
- (2) In Abraham's attempt to sacrifice Isaac, Isaac even assisted Abraham in carrying the wood to the altar (Genesis 22:6). In like manner Jesus also helped to carry his own crosspiece to his crucifixion.
- (3) Isaac did not dispute Abraham's will in the matter of his own sacrifice, nor did Jesus with God the Father.
- (4) Jesus and Isaac were both "offered" on the Mount of Olives. It is this parallel that makes the geographical information I am presenting in this book to be a valuable source for proper Christian interpretation.

- (5) Isaac was willing to lay down his life of his own free will, just as Jesus did. Note that Isaac was younger and stronger than his father Abraham. No one knows the exact age of Isaac when this attempted “offering” occurred, but he was not a child. The word “lad” simply refers to a younger man as distinct from one of old age. Isaac could well have been just over 30 years of age, as was Jesus.

- (6) Abraham also was willing to sacrifice his only son who was his only legal son (or legitimate son for inheritance) while God the Father did in fact give up his only begotten Son. As God provided a ram caught in the thicket as a substitute sacrifice for Isaac so that Isaac could live, New Testament teaching shows that the Father provided Jesus as a substitute sacrifice for Israel and the world so that they may live forever. This theme was well recognized in early Christian circles.

- (7) Abraham came down from the mountain of sacrifice (which was the Mount of Olives) with Isaac still alive. The author of the book of Hebrews said that this was tantamount to Isaac having been resurrected from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19). And similarly, Jesus was also resurrected (in a literal sense) at the same site and on the same mountain. And remember, Isaac had a three day journey to the spot to be “offered” and figuratively resurrected from the dead, while it is interesting that the resurrection of Jesus also took place after a period of three days.

Typical Teachings were Important to Early Christians

Since it was clear that Jesus was indeed crucified for the sins of the world on the Mount of Olives, one can easily see that the sup-

posed sacrifice of Isaac in the same location has strong symbolic attachments to that event (especially when one considers all the other similarities of Isaac and Jesus given above). The accounts of Isaac and Jesus are too close to be accidental, and there is no doubt that early Christians saw the importance of this symbolic teaching. This fact is just another reason why it is important for us to know the exact spot in the Jerusalem area where Jesus was crucified. It makes the symbolic teachings in the Old Testament regarding the spiritual significance of the sin and burnt offerings to apply to Jesus. It shows the substitutionary role that Jesus played in his crucifixion in redeeming Israel and the world to the Father.

When these matters are understood, a new way of looking at prophetic and doctrinal geography emerges on the scene. Whole sections of the Scriptures that were too incoherent (and which many people simply allegorized because of the obscurities of the language) now begin to make perfectly good practical sense. Prophetic statements that have been hidden from knowledge for so long, now become crystal clear in meaning. And what a significance emerges. The glorious majesty given to Jesus, now takes on a role that is infinitely more grand and important than what most people have formerly observed from the Holy Scriptures. Indeed, parts of Scripture that used to make little sense, now take on deep meanings and within a theme of full simplicity. This is why it is important to know that Jesus was crucified and resurrected on the Mount of Olives.