

Why Did Jesus Ascend From The Mount of Olives?

By David W. New. Esq.

The Scripture says that Jesus Christ ascended from the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath Day's journey from Jerusalem. Here is what Luke, who wrote the Book of Acts, said concerning the Ascension:

“Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.

And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel,

who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.’

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey.” **Acts 1:9-12 NKJV.**

The detail in which Luke presents the above account clearly indicates the importance of the Ascension of Jesus in his Gospel story. The Ascension marks the end of one phase of the Gospel and the beginning of another. Jesus' personal ministry on earth is now at an end and the ministry of Jesus through the Church is about to begin.

Exactly, why does Luke tell us that Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives? Why was that important for us to know? Why didn't Jesus ascend from Galilee? Or from the Temple in Jerusalem?

The Scriptures do not directly tell us the reason. But there are a number of historical facts concerning the Mount of Olives which can provide us some clues.

In the Bible, geographic sites sometimes can have a symbolic meaning. They can convey a spiritual message. Consider these examples, “Is there no balm in Gilead?” **Jere. 8:22**; “But I say unto you that it will be more tolerable in that Day for Sodom than for that city.” **Lk. 10:12**; “And they gathered them together to the place called in Hebrew, Armageddon.” **Rev. 16:16.**

The Mount of Olives as a site has a meaning for the Jewish people which in my opinion, reveals the reason why the Ascension occurred at that location.

The Fires That Began at the Mount of Olives

The Jewish calendar was extremely important in the religious life of the nation. The entire religious cycle of Jewish worship is based upon beginning the calendar on the correct day. The Lord on the eve of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, instituted the Passover Feast to remind the Jewish people what God had done for them. The Passover celebration began the religious calendar of worship for the nation. Every Jew in the world was expected to regulate his worship to God around the cycle that began on Passover. The Lord said to Moses and Aaron this:

"This month [the Passover month] shall be your beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you." **Ex. 12:2.**

Accordingly, the Jewish calendar is based on a series of monthly cycles. The Feasts of the New Moon, Passover, Tabernacles and others were based on when each month began.

The appearance of the new moon was the key. The Sanhedrin (the highest ruling body in Israel) had the sole authority to decide when the new moon appeared. A special court of three was delegated the task to test witnesses who would testify that they had seen the new moon. There was the constant danger that false testimony would be given to deliberately throw-off the calendar. The Jews in Babylon and Palestine in the days of Simon III (140-163 A.D.) seriously split over the timing of the calendar and a permanent division was barely avoided by diplomacy. Once a determination was made by a court of three, a fire signal went out to inform the Jewish people everywhere of the new month. *The fire signals began at the Mount of Olives.* The Junior Jewish Encyclopedia said this about the fire signals:

"In ancient times, before astronomical calculations were made mathematically exact, the people of Judea watched the skies for the appearance of the new moon. As soon as it was spotted by witnesses, great bonfires were lit on the hilltops to speed the news. Burning torches signaled from mountain to mountain, beginning with Jerusalem's Mount of Olives and on as far as the Babylonian frontier. In the Holy Land, the Sanhedrin (highest legislative and judicial council) fixed the dates of the holidays and the festivals, and fast messengers relayed the information as far as Babylonia." **Note 1.**

During the days of Rabbi Judah I (163-193 A.D.) the fire signals were stopped and fast messengers began to be used because of false signals. The Samaritans in an effort to throw-off the Jews and to cause them to fall into error would send out false fire signals. **Note 2.**

The Mount of Olives as a Burial Site

Another important fact about the Mount of Olives concerns its role as a burial site. The Mount of Olives in Israel is roughly equivalent to America's Arlington National Cemetery. The Mount of Olives is the largest and most important Jewish cemetery in the world. Long before the days of Jesus, the Jews believed that the resurrection would occur here. They believed the Mount of Olives would be the site where the Lord would defend Israel at the end of time based on their interpretation of Zechariah 14:4. They believed the Messiah would enter Jerusalem by way of the Mount of Olives. It was from the Mount of Olives that the Glory of the Lord left Israel. See Ezek. 11:23. And it would be here that the Glory of the Lord would return. Interestingly, Jesus made His triumphant entry into Jerusalem by way of the Mount of Olives! See Mk. 11:1-11.

Just like Lafayette, who, when he left America for the last time, took enough American soil with him so he could be buried on it in France, so the Jews take soil from the Mount of Olives in order to share in the benefits of being raised from its sacred ground. **Note 3.**

The Last Olivet Signal

The last words of Jesus just before He ascended from the Mount of Olives now have a richer meaning for us. Now that we understand the importance of where He said them. Luke records for us what Jesus said:

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”
Acts 1:8.

The Ascension of our Lord and Savior occurred at the Mount of Olives because this was the place where the Sanhedrin signaled God's people worldwide to worship Him. Except now, God would send out One Last Signal from the Mount of Olives: the Ascension of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. Jews and Gentiles alike were now expected to regulate their spiritual life by Jesus of Nazareth. He was the beginning of the 'religious calendar.' He is our 'religious cycle.' He fulfilled the Passover Feast. He fulfills all the Feasts of Israel.

The message of the two angels is clear. “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven?” Prepare to spread the news of the SIGNAL SENT OUT TO ALL THE WORLD, Jesus Christ has ascended and He will return again.

The spiritual significance of the Mount of Olives cannot be doubted. If anyone wants to worship God in spirit and truth, it now must be done through Jesus the Christ. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. See John. 14:6.

In conclusion: it is likely that the strong messianic association by the Jewish people with the Mount of Olives is the reason God chose it for the Ascension of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear Friend, I have developed a Weekend Seminar on the “*The Jewish Background of the New Testament.*” My messages have enriched many Christians in their study of the New Testament. If you think your church could benefit from my Seminar, please feel free to contact me to schedule a visit. Please call [703-534-7444](tel:703-534-7444) or email me at: david_new@juno.com

Some topics which are covered in the Seminar are:

- ◆ The Jewish influence in the Gospel of Matthew. For example, why does Matthew base his genealogy on the number 14? Why does this mysterious number 14 appear three times in Matt. 1:17?
- ◆ Why does Luke introduce his genealogy with the baptism of Jesus? See Lk. 3:21-38. Why does Luke’s order of the Temptations (Luke 4) differ from Matthew’s order (Matt. 4)? And why this is not a contradiction?
- ◆ Paul said he was circumcised on the eighth day. See Phil. 3:5. What is the spiritual significance of having circumcision occur on the *eighth* day? Why is that important? Why not circumcise on the first, second or fifth day?
- ◆ What secrets are hidden in the Prologue of John 1:1-18 which unlock its meaning and prove that Jesus Christ is God.
- ◆ How Mark’s Gospel was clearly written for the Gentiles as proved by comparisons with the Jewish Gospel of Matthew.

NOTES.

Note 1. The Junior Jewish Encyclopedia, edited by Naomi Ben-Asher and Hayim Leaf, page 72.

Note 2. The Jewish Encyclopedia, managing editor, Isidore Singer, Ph.D., Vol. 3, page 500.

Note 3. Legends of Jerusalem, The Sacred Land by Zev Vilnay, The Jewish Publication Society, Vol. 1, pages 285 to 297