
The Temple Mount in Jerusalem is one of the most religiously significant locations in the world to this day. According to global news reports, the outbreak of the second Intifada in the year 2000 was related to the visit of the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount. The actual causes of the unrest are undoubtedly more fundamental in nature. That which the news agencies did report however, is a reflection the unique function of the Mount in modern collective memory.

Yaron Eliav’s book pursues exactly this issue. It discusses why the Temple Mount is so significant, when it became so historically and who was responsible for this movement. The chronological horizon of the study ranges from Salomon to the Rabbinic and Byzantine eras.

Eliav adheres methodologically to “New Historicism” and expresses capriciously that he makes use of “deconstruction more as an approach than a method” (XXIV); he then precedes to make use of it in an energetic way. In a convincing manner, Eliav deconstructs the prevailing opinion that the Temple Mount played an important and identity-constituting role since the construction of the Temple under Salomon. He questions the sources, analyses excavation reports, strongly criticizes preconceived and frequently repeated truisms and arrives at the unsettling conclusion that the Temple Mount first achieved a significant role in the era of Herod’s monumental architecture and more significantly, through the Christian and Rabbinic historical tradition.

Apart from Micah 3:12 (compare Jer 26:18), which occupies a distinctive place in the Bible, Eliav identifies the first meaningful evidence for a new concept of an independent significance of the Temple Mount in 1 Maccabees 4 and Josephus (Bellum VI.271-276). It is quite revealing that the Temple Mount remains unmentioned as an independent topos in important sources, even in the Temple Scroll. Ultimately, however, the Temple Mount does come to occupy a decisive role in the Christian and Rabbinic tradition.

On the one hand, in the Christian tradition, the Temple Mount served as the location of the martyrdom of Jacob, and the Mount “functions” as the “holy grave,” on the other, as can be seen in the works of Barnabas and Justin, the Temple Mount was seen as a symbol of the rejection of the Jews. According to Origenes and Eusebius, the withdrawal of Jewish entitlements plays a meaningful role on the Mount, which is replaced by a spiritual understanding. Naturally, the “New Mount” as the Golgatha is also determined on the same basis.

For the Rabbis, the Temple Mount occupies a central role as a place of memory. A series of elements that were originally attributed to the Temple are now attributed to the Temple Mount, including the presence of the Shekhina in the proximity of the
Temple Mount. Of primary importance is the idea of the foundation stone of the world and the Morija Mount, which is viewed as related to the Aqeda of Isaac (Gen 22). The Temple Mount occupies a new holy sphere inside of Jerusalem. The reasons for this view are to be found in the event of the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. Eliav, however, contests that the destruction of the Temple is the only foundational element for the increased importance of the Temple Mount. He rejects those conceptualizations that suggest a deliberate seizure of Jewish religious identity items by the politics of Hadrian, which for their part would have been capable of inspiring religious sentiment.

Eliav’s results are highly significant for both secular- and religious history. He tries to provide a convincing case that the Temple Mount served no meaningful function within the city during the Roman or Byzantine era, nor ever contained a statue of Jupiter. Accordingly, the religious “provocation” could be omitted. A final conclusion as to why the Temple Mount is so meaningful in Rabbinic and Christian texts is lacking. The following passage serves as an example: “The process by which a place becomes a holy site remains a thorny riddle difficult to solve…. no model can account for all cases and … a variety of factors—social, political, and spiritual—instigate and impel this process, each making its own special contribution” (241). Eliav suggests in the first chapter that Herod’s great construction agenda and the extreme enlargement of the area laid the foundation for the slow discovery of the holy nature of the Temple Mount. Despite this, as a reader, one feels a bit relegated to a gray zone of uncertainty. Even more tantalizing is Eliav’s attempt to attribute the growing importance of the Temple Mount to the Judeo-Christian Jesus movement of the young Jacob and the Rabbis, with their variable exchange of ideas, even though the traditions in individual aspects diverge strongly. This is also the case with, e.g., Justin for whom Eliav states that he was influenced by Jewish sources that drew the Temple Mount into the center of attention, and which he then precedes to rhetorically contest. It would have been interesting to have been provided with more comparative analysis between Christian and Jewish traditions regarding the sacrifice of Isaac and the meaning of the Morija Mount, which may have served to further illustrate this aspect.

The book, with its refreshingly critical and clear differentiation of perspectives regarding such an important topic, is a highly recommended reading for cultural- and religious studies, for historians, theologians and scholars of Jewish Studies alike.

Gerhard Langer
Universität Salzburg