

Summary

This thesis, inspired by the author's personal history of climbing and feeling awe on mountains, aims to answer these questions: What does the Bible have to say about mountains? What can biblical uses of mountains teach us today? Through analyses of key passages, this essay explores the various ways that the Bible presents mountains, looking at earthly functions, religious purposes, and divine uses. Ultimately, because mountains serve as sites for theophany and covenant, as symbols for the future and might, and as metaphors for God and God's relationship with humanity, mountains can become relevant sources of meaning-making today. The research and applications contribute to specific literature on mountains and Judaism.

This thesis includes four chapters plus a conclusion. Chapter 1 introduces the general topic of mountains in the Bible, including the influence of geography and sacred space on religion, and explores the relevant Hebrew words for mountains. Chapter 2 then examines mountains as natural resources and narrative components, including as parts of geography and territory, quarries, settlements, military endeavors, and effects on plot. Chapter 3 explores religious uses of mountains in the Bible, including as locations for sacrifice, other rituals, and expressions of the human-divine relationship. Chapter 4 studies God's use of mountains, including as sites of theophany and God's abode, as well as mountains' roles in expressing God's might. Chapter 5 summarizes conclusions and explores applications of this thesis for the modern Jewish world.

Research mainly included secondary resources that provided context for the roles mountains play in the Bible, biblical commentaries that gave detailed insight into the textual passages, and modern works on religious applications of mountains and nature.

“I Lift Up My Eyes”:
Mountains in the Bible and Their Application Today

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Chapter 1: An Introduction to Mountains in the Bible

Introduction

When the Holy Seer of Lublin was a little boy, he was known to skip school for hours or even days. Once, his teacher followed the young boy to see what became of these free moments. The Seer walked to the edge of the town, into the deep woods, and there, in a small, green circle of trees, he began to pray. The next day the teacher asked the boy what drew him to those woods. The Seer of Lublin replied, “I can find God there.” “But,” said the teacher, “surely God is the same in the town as in the woods.” “That is true,” replied the Seer, “but I am not the same.”¹

I feel on mountains what the Holy Seer of Lublin felt in the woods.

I recall a climbing trip that friends and I took about seven years ago to Rattlesnake Mountain in Rumney, NH. No spot in New England compares to the sport climbing² in Rumney: hundreds of routes on a variety of cliffs and a myriad of types and difficulties in rock formation and terrain. My friends and I generally spent most of our time climbing indoors at our local rock gym, and so the opportunity to be on a mountain, on real rock, meant a day of joy.

I vividly remember one specific climb. After a whole day of scaling the cliffs, I pushed the limits of my endurance. I found one last climb, worked my way through each move: step here, pinch this rock, shift my weight just enough, push up, and do it all again. Slowly but surely, I ascended the rock; I climbed the mountain. When I reached the top, I affixed my anchors, leaned back in my harness, and rotated my body to turn around.

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Somewhere a Master: Hasidic Portraits and Legends* (New York: Schocken, 1984, 2005), quoted in Jeremy Benstein, PhD, *The Way Into Judaism and the Environment* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2006).

² Sport climbing involves a lead climber clipping into pre-bolted anchors along the cliff while a belayer feeds out rope below.

There, overlooking the White Mountains, the sun began to set. The majestic purples and deep oranges of sunset spread over the scenery, blanketing forests, valleys, and hills with splashes of warm color. Sunrays peaked out from the few wispy clouds.

In that moment, I felt awe.

In that moment, I sensed God.

Indeed, I have always felt drawn to mountains and to nature. I first discovered this theology of what Abraham Joshua Heschel would call “radical amazement” at Scout camp,³ a place which also solidified my love for climbing through my work on the adventure course. Whether camping with the Scouts, hiking through the mountains of Israel, or trekking around the Tetons with my now-wife two months before our wedding, I have always felt a connection to the mountains. Whenever I stand high above the land below, looking out over sunsets and natural beauty, I feel God.

Thus, my relationship to mountains led to this thesis. Originally conceived as a generic look at all topics mountain- and climbing-related, ranging from the *halakhah* (Jewish law) of risk-taking in rock climbing to mountain-activities for synagogue youth groups, the focus narrowed down to biblical origins: What does the Bible have to say about mountains? What can biblical uses of mountains teach us today?

This thesis aims to answer those questions. Through analyses of key passages, this essay explores the various ways that the Bible presents mountains, looking at earthly functions (comprising temporal utilizations of mountains, such as quarries and fortifications, as well as narrative settings and geography), religious purposes (such as

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone*, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1951), 10-17.

sacrifice, other rituals, and human expressions of the relationship with God), and divine uses (including the election of mountains as sites for theophany and God's abode, as well as demonstrations of God's might). Ultimately, because mountains serve as sites for theophany and covenant, as symbols for future events and might, and as metaphors for God and God's relationship with humanity, mountains can become relevant sources of meaning-making today.

Research Review

The research for this thesis falls under a few basic categories, starting with secondary literature about mountains in the Bible. This research primarily includes theological dictionaries and encyclopedias. For example, G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry's *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*⁴ provided excellent articles on specific key words, especially "mountain" (הר)⁵ and "rock" (צור),⁶ as well as other terms including "Sinai" (סיני)⁷ and "[El] Shaddai" (שדי).⁸ Mircea Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion*⁹ contains articles that survey the big picture of religion in general and Israelite society specifically, covering topics such as mountains,¹⁰ religious experience,¹¹ and sacred space.¹² David Noel Freedman's *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*

⁴ G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Translated by Douglas W. Stott. 11 vols. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1970-2015.

⁵ S. Talmon, "הר (*har*); בגעה (*gibh'āh*)," *TDOT* 3:427-47.

⁶ H.-J. Fabry, "צור (*šûr*) II," *TDOT* 12:311-21.

⁷ P. Maiberger, "סיני [*sînay*]," *TDOT* 10:216-35.

⁸ G. Steins, "שדי (*šadday*)," *TDOT* 14:418-46.

⁹ Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (16 vols.; New York: MacMillan, 1987).

¹⁰ Diana L. Eck, "Mountains," *ER* 10:130-34.

¹¹ James Alfred Martin, Jr., "Religious Experience," *ER* 12:323-30.

¹² Joel P. Brereton, "Sacred Space," *ER* 12:526-535.

supplied valuable information on important biblical concepts, including on mountains such as Moriah¹³ and Sinai¹⁴ and other topics like sacrifice.¹⁵ These secondary sources provided the context necessary to understand the roles of mountains in the Bible and their background both in the larger ancient Near East and compared to other world religions. These readings also granted knowledge to support various claims throughout this thesis.

These secondary sources paved the way for detailed analysis of the Bible itself. Biblical commentaries offered comprehensive data on specific biblical passages featuring mountains. Various volumes within *The JPS Torah Commentary* were helpful, especially Nahum M. Sarna's commentary on Exodus¹⁶ and Jeffrey H. Tigay's commentary on Deuteronomy.¹⁷ *The JPS Torah Commentary* series provides academic biblical scholarship that offers a historical and contextual approach to studying the Bible.¹⁸ These books in particular lent insight into Exodus and Deuteronomy broadly and Mounts Sinai and Zion specifically. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler's *The Jewish Study Bible*¹⁹ offered general context on various biblical passages as well as some relevant specific details. The exegesis process also involved consulting various other biblical commentaries for specific verses: Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr.'s

¹³ James R. Davila, "Moriah," *ABD* 4:905.

¹⁴ G.I. Davies, "Sinai, Mount," *ABD* 6:47-49.

¹⁵ Gary A. Anderson, "Sacrifice and the Sacrificial Offerings (OT)," *ABD* 5:870-886.

¹⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991).

¹⁷ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996).

¹⁸ "What is Academic Scholarship?" *TheTorah.org*. n.p. [Cited 28 January 2018]. Online: <http://thetorah.com/what-is-academic-biblical-scholarship/>.

¹⁹ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Psalms,²⁰ Brueggemann's *Isaiah 1-39*²¹ and *Isaiah 40-66*,²² and other specific commentaries on various other biblical books taught about specific passages with detail and wisdom. Like *The JPS Torah Commentary*, the commentaries that gave broader context as well as grammatical and historical detail proved most helpful.

Only a handful of books specifically cover mountains in the Bible. Richard J. Clifford's *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*²³ analyzes biblical mountains, mainly Mounts Sinai and Zion, exploring whether they are cosmic mountains (see "Geography and Sacred Space" below). In doing so, he compares them to other mythological mountains of the ancient Near East, especially those of Canaan. Clifford's research focuses narrowly on one aspect of biblical mountains, although his book provided useful information on the relationship between Israelite and Canaanite views of mountains. Another author, Joseph James Summerbell, offers a survey of biblical mountains in his book, *Mountains of the Bible*.²⁴ However, the more scholarly secondary sources provide similar information, and with more depth.

Finally, this thesis examines contemporary approaches to mountains and modern religion. Most of the Jewish books in this realm cover topics such as nature or environmentalism broadly, but do not assess mountains specifically or with much detail.

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms* (New York: Cambridge University, 2014).

²¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

²² Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

²³ Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1972).

²⁴ Joseph James Summerbell, *Mountains of the Bible* (Boston: Sherman, French & Company, 1912; repr., Miami: Hardpress).

For example, Jeremy Benstein's *The Way Into Judaism and the Environment*²⁵ discusses the relationship between Judaism and nature but does not focus on mountains. Jamie Korngold's *God in the Wilderness*²⁶ includes a chapter that discusses mountains; but while she connects biblical mountain encounters to modern experiences of awe, her analysis does not focus on offering a deep assessment of the depiction of mountains in the Bible. One book, Belden C. Lane's *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*,²⁷ renders a meaningful theological exploration of mountains from a Christian perspective. While some of Lane's personal reflections and historical assessments of mountains reflect a familiarity with some of the knowledge presented in this thesis, his Christian approach, and thus the spiritual conclusions he draws, do not often relate to a Jewish view of mountains.

Therefore, a gap exists in the literature about mountains in the Bible. While a number of sources cover mountains in the Bible, Judaism and nature, or mountains and Christian theology, no text seems to provide a modern assessment of Jewish theology and spirituality based on biblical views of mountains. This thesis attempts, in a small way in the conclusion, to fill that gap.

²⁵ Jeremy Benstein, PhD, *The Way Into Judaism and the Environment* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2006).

²⁶ Rabbi Jamie S. Korngold, *God in the Wilderness: Rediscovering the Spirituality of the Great Outdoors with the Adventure Rabbi* (New York: Doubleday, 2007, uncorrected proof).

²⁷ Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University, 1998).

Overview

After the introduction, research review, and this overview, Chapter 1 continues its introduction to mountains in the Bible by discussing “Geography and Sacred Space,” covering the way cultures and religions internalize their surrounding landscape and use it to hone in on the sacred. The topography of Israel, especially, influenced the Israelite religion and the various roles that mountains play in it. The chapter then concludes with an overview of biblical terms for “mountain,” and expands the criteria to include elevated heights and large, mountain-sized rocks.

Chapter 2 examines mountains as natural resources and narrative components. These include looking at mountains as part of geography and territory, as well as practical uses such as quarries, settlements, and military purposes. Chapter 2 additionally studies narrative settings such as the stories of Noah and of Lot’s Daughters.

Chapter 3 explores religious uses of mountains in the Bible. People in the biblical period frequently used mountains for sacrificial purposes, which connects to utilizing them as sites for covenant and shrines. Other rituals and spiritual endeavors, such as the final covenant ritual of Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, fall under this chapter. The chapter also discusses prophetic and predictive descriptions of mountains. Finally, Chapter 3 ends with an assessment of mountains as features of figurative language.

Whereas Chapters 2 and 3 investigate human use of mountains, Chapter 4 examines God’s use of mountains. Indeed, God often chooses mountains, mainly Sinai and Zion, as sites for theophany. Moreover, God may even dwell on these heights. Mountains also play central roles in displays of God’s might and power. Finally, one of God’s names, El Shaddai, may contain mountain roots. Chapter 5 summarizes

conclusions from the research and explores applications of this thesis for the modern Jewish world.

One must recognize that despite dividing the chapters into multiple sections, many of the chosen categories and genres overlap. A poetic description of mountains moving to display God's might, for example, could fall under figurative expressions as human religious use in Chapter 3 or under demonstrations of God's power as divine use in Chapter 4. Similarly, Psalm 125:2, which compares Jerusalem's geography to God's compassion, fits both in Chapter 2—a description of geography—and in Chapter 3—figurative language. Ultimately, decisions had to be made and lines had to be drawn, and this thesis does its best to categorize passages into their pertinent chapter and section as the author deemed appropriate.

Geography and Sacred Space

Before exploring mountains in the Bible, it is worth taking a step back and examining geography and sacred space in general. Geography, as it relates to this thesis, refers to the physical earthly features that inform a religion and culture, influencing a people through a variety of factors.²⁸ Geography helps humans navigate the world, both physically and religiously; sets boundaries for territory; and affects the way two peoples interact with each other, such as politics regarding border disputes and trade routes. Furthermore, geography relates directly to climate. It also informs the narrative of a people; for example, looking at the Bible, the desert features of the Wilderness of Sinai

²⁸ Richard F. Townsend, "Geography." *ER* 5:509.

directly affect the Israelites' wanderings and eating.²⁹ In essence, geography shapes a way people physically interact with the world.

Yet the geography of a locale transcends these physical interactions. In fact, geography impacts how humans order space, and thus, how they mentally and spiritually navigate the world and find meaning in it.³⁰ Often, geography becomes sacred space, a place that is distinct and set apart from other defined places through ritual, narrative, or symbols.³¹ Jonathan Z. Smith calls sacred space a "focusing lens," in that it helps people hone in on various symbols and rituals to help find religious meaning.³² Sacred spaces can be natural or manmade.³³ Moreover, a variety of factors can sanctify aspects of geography, including the environment itself, historical events, cultural needs, and narrative events.³⁴ For instance, a place may become sacred because of a foundational narrative (e.g. YHWH giving the Holy Land to the Israelites), through an intentional demarcation as separate space (e.g. for Hindus, the Brahmins brought fire across a river to establish the sanctity of the land), through divine communication (e.g. revelation at Sinai), and through physical features (e.g. in Japanese culture, the heights of the mountains indicate that *kami*, spirits, live there).³⁵ As places become sacred, they may gain additional layers of sanctity as more stories, memories, and rituals attach themselves to that locale.³⁶

²⁹ See, for example, Exodus 16:1-4.

³⁰ Townsend, "Geography," 5:509.

³¹ Brereton, "Sacred Space," 526.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Townsend, "Geography," 5:509.

³⁵ Brereton, "Sacred Space," 527.

³⁶ Townsend, "Geography," 5:509.

For religions in general, sacred spaces tend to serve three primary functions: they allow for communication with or about divine beings; they serve as a location of divine power; and they help humans navigate and organize (their interpretation of) the world.³⁷ These holy sites may serve as or contain symbols that help mortals communicate with or to the gods. Because of that nexus between the human and divine planes, these places often end up with some sort of power themselves. Finally, through their symbolism, narratives, and rituals, sacred spaces enable humans to find connections between the body, the cosmos, cosmogony, time, and more.³⁸

Mountains serve as prime examples of both geography and sacred space in religions across the globe. Diana L. Eck provides a few different ways that mountains can operate in various religions: cosmic mountains, locations for visions or revelations, dwelling-places for the divine, manifestations of the gods, symbols, and more.³⁹

For some peoples and religions, mountains serve as a cosmic mountain or *axis mundi*. A cosmic mountain is “involved in the government and stability of the cosmos.”⁴⁰ Often, these heights connect the heavens and the earth.”⁴¹ This type of mountain relates to the *ómphalos*, the navel or midpoint of the world found in Greek and other mythologies.⁴² This world axis may also provide the setting for an encounter with a god.⁴³ Thus, Sinai and Zion—both locations of theophany—serve as cosmic mountains (see Chapter 4).

³⁷ Brereton, “Sacred Space,” 528.

³⁸ Ibid., 532.

³⁹ Eck, “Mountains,” 10:130.

⁴⁰ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 3.

⁴¹ Talmon, “הַר (*har*),” 3:437. Eck, “Mountains,” 10:130.

⁴² Talmon, “הַר (*har*),” 3:437

⁴³ Eck, “Mountains,” 10:131.

Additionally, sometimes mountains act as dwelling-places for divine beings in some religions. Cases of mountains marking godly abodes range from Middle Minoan mountaintop sanctuaries, to Mount Zaphon in Canaanite texts, to both Sinai and Zion in the Bible.⁴⁴ Furthermore, in some religions, mountains receive a divine charge, serving as a nexus of divine power.⁴⁵ Mountains do not acquire this trait in the Bible, but they do in other cultures, such as Japanese and Native American religions. Mountains also operate as givers of life and takers of death, symbols of fertility and nourishment; the Tanakh presents this outlook on mountains, too, such as when Amos describes the land of Israel as including “mountains that drip with sweet wine.”⁴⁶

Thus, the geography of the biblical land of Israel clearly informed the ways that the biblical authors viewed and organized their sacred space.⁴⁷ The emphasis on the land motif, both as an inheritance and as settings for narratives, and the recurrent use of geographic terms throughout the text indicate the importance of geography within the Bible.⁴⁸ If the events of the Bible had occurred elsewhere, perhaps on a flat plain or relatively homogenous landscape, then maybe mountains would not have played as significant a role as they do.

Instead, the biblical land of Israel includes a wide diversity of topographic and climatic regions.⁴⁹ The Great Rift Valley stretches north of the land into modern Lebanon

⁴⁴ See, for example, Exodus 24:16 for Sinai and Psalm 74:2 for Zion. See also Chapter 4.

⁴⁵ Eck, “Mountains,” 133.

⁴⁶ Amos 9:13. See Chapters 3 and 4.

⁴⁷ Talmon, “הַר (*har*),” 3:433.

⁴⁸ W. Janzen, “Land,” *ABD* 4:143.

⁴⁹ Herbert G. May, *Oxford Bible Atlas* (3d ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 13.

and Syria and south through Africa and has shaped much of the geography of the land. This rift includes the Jordan River and divides the land into western Palestine and eastern Transjordan. This massive geologic feature helped form the diverse mountain ranges and valleys. This impressive landscape spans from Mount Hebron in the north to the mountains of Moab in the south and includes heights of 3,000+ feet and descents of -1,300 feet.⁵⁰ Compared to the dry deserts and fertile coasts, the mountains and variations in heights they provide clearly stand out and serve roles that other geographic features could not. As the next chapters explore, not only did mountains provide practical applications such as military fortifications, but their heights inspired awe and wonder, leading to theological and religious interactions between God and humans.⁵¹

Biblical Terms for Mountains

Numerous Hebrew words could fit the definition of “mountain” depending on context. Much of this thesis focuses on the word הָר and its synonyms. הָר is the Hebrew word for “mountain.”⁵² Its etymological roots remain obfuscated; הָר rarely occurs in other Semitic languages, although there are some connections between this Hebrew word and other Semitic terms (e.g. the Hebrew הָר and the Ugaritic *gr*).⁵³ הָר can refer to either individual mountain peaks or to mountain ranges. הָר occurs approximately 550 times in the Bible,⁵⁴ such as Exodus 19:11, in which God appears to the Israelites on Mount (הָר) Sinai:

⁵⁰ Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas, Revised Edition* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 14.

⁵¹ *Reader's Digest Atlas of the Bible: An Illustrated Guide to the Holy Land* (Pleasantville, N.Y.: The Reader's Digest Association, 1981), 38.

⁵² Talmon, “הָר (*har*),” 3:429.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 3:427.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:430.

וְהָיוּ נִכְנָיִם לַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי כִּי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יֵרֵד יְהוָה לְעֵינֵי כָל־הָעָם עַל־
הַר סִינַי:

Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day the *Eternal* will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai. (Exod 19:11 NJPS)⁵⁵

Here, *הר* refers to *Mount Sinai*, the Mountain of Sinai. Other named mountains include Mount Zion (*הר ציון*), e.g. Psalm 48:3), Mount Ebal (*הר עיבל*), e.g. Deuteronomy 11:29), and Mount Nebo (*הר נבו*), e.g. Deuteronomy 32:49).

In contrast, sometimes *הר* refers to an unnamed mountain, as in Exodus 4:27, when Aaron meets Moses at an unidentified mountain:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵךְ לִקְרֹאת מֹשֶׁה הַמִּדְבָּרָה וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ בְּהַר
הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּשָּׁק־לּוֹ:

The *Eternal* said to Aaron, "Go to meet Moses in the wilderness." He went and met him at the mountain of God, and he kissed him. (Exod 4:27 NJPS)

In this case, while unnamed, the mountain does refer to the “mountain of God,” a common description that frequently describe both Sinai and Zion.⁵⁶ In this verse, the “mountain of God” seems to be Horeb, another name for Sinai.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Two notes on translations: First, any quoted biblical verses that lack a citation (e.g. no “NJPS”) indicate that the translation is my own. I interpreted these passages based on guidance from *HALOT* and the NJPS and NRSV biblical translations, as well as occasionally other commentaries. Second, when used, I have adjusted the NJPS translation to reflect egalitarian language (e.g. substituting “Eternal” for “Lord”). Changes are marked by italicized font. Beyond these egalitarian linguistic changes, the NJPS translation remains unaltered.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Numbers 10:33; Isaiah 56:7; Ezekiel 28:14, 16; Psalm 2:6; 15:1.

⁵⁷ Sarna, *Exodus*, 14. Chapter 4 contains a comparison of Sinai and Horeb.

Furthermore, הר often refers to a specific mountainous or “hilly” region.⁵⁸ Thus, in Numbers 13:17 during the story of the Twelve Scouts, Moses indicates that part of the scouts’ exploration should include “ההר”:

וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה לְתוֹר אֶת־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם עָלוּ זֶה בְּנֶגֶב
וְעַלִיתֶם אֶת־הָהָר:

When Moses sent them to scout the land of Canaan, he said to them, “Go up there into the Negeb and on into the hill country...” (Num 13:17 NJPS)

Note that even though a literal translation of the end of this verse would be for the scouts to go up to “the mountain,” the NJPS translation here offers ההר as “the hill country.” Thus, הר often refers not only to a mountain (either specifically or generally), but also to the region around it.⁵⁹

A common synonym of הר is גבעה, though גבעה tends to refer to smaller, individual peaks, rather than whole ranges.⁶⁰ This version, גבעה, occurs 60 times in the Bible.⁶¹ Like הר, גבעה can be a part of a place name, denoting either a specific mountain or the territory surrounding it.⁶² This synonym for mountain can appear on its own, as in 1 Samuel 10:5, during Samuel’s instructions to the newly anointed Saul:

אַחֲרַיִם כֵּן תָּבוֹא גְבַעַת הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם נֹצְבֵי פִלְשְׁתִּים וַיְהִי כְּבֹאֲךָ שָׁם
הָעִיר וּפָגַעְתָּ חֶבֶל נְבִיאִים יֹרְדִים מִהַבְּמָה וּלְפָנֵיהֶם גִּבֹּל וְתָף וְחִלָּל וּכְנֹזֶר
וְהִמָּה מִתְנַבְּאִים:

After that, you are to go on to the Hill of God, where the Philistine prefects reside. There, as you enter the town, you will encounter a band of prophets coming down from the shrine, preceded by lyres, timbrels, flutes, and harps, and they will be speaking in ecstasy. (1 Sam 10:5 NJPS)

⁵⁸ HALOT, s.v. “הר.”

⁵⁹ Talmon, “הר (har),” 3:429. Note that while NJPS tends to translate it as “hill country,” I have generally chosen to translate הר as either “mountain” or “mountain region,” for the sake of clarity.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 3:430.

⁶² Ibid., 3:429.

Notice that once again, the Bible presents a “mountain” of God, here a גבעה, “hill.”

However, גבעה often exists parallel to הר, especially in poetic verse. For example, in

Isaiah 40:12, the prophet speaks of God’s might:

מִי־מִדַּד בְּשַׁעֲלוֹ מַיִם וְשָׁמַיִם בְּזֶרֶת תִּזְנֶן וְכָל בִּשְׁלֹשׁ עֶפְרָא הָאָרֶץ וְשָׁקֵל
בְּפָלֶס הָרִים וּגְבָעוֹת בְּמֵאזְנִים:

Who measured the waters with the hollow of God’s hand, And gauged the
skies with a span, And meted earth’s dust with a measure, And weighed
the mountains with a scale And the hills with a balance? (Isa 40:12 NJPS)

Note the chiasmic structure of the last colon, with הרים (translated here as “mountains”)

and גבעות (translated here as “hills”) as synonyms. The two words appear synonymous in

31 other verses, such as Deuteronomy 33:15; 2 Samuel 21:6, 9; Isaiah 31:4; Jeremiah

3:23; 4:24; 50:6; Micah 6:1-2; Nahum 1:5-6; Psalm 148:9; and Proverbs 8:25.⁶³ Although

these two terms often appear to be nearly identical, this thesis will distinguish between

the two terms, referring to הר as “mountain” or “mountain region” and גבעה as “hill” or

“hill region.”

Other words, though not always synonymous, may also refer to large, looming, and potentially awe-inspiring topographical formations. In the Bible, rocks and boulders are not always limited to small, easily moveable stones. Rather, depending on the word and its context, a biblical “rock” may indicate large, immovable, and/or seemingly unchanging rock formations that resemble—or are synonymous with—mountains.⁶⁴

Therefore, this thesis also explores the key word צור, generally meaning “rock,”⁶⁵ which

⁶³ Ibid., 3:430.

⁶⁴ Although rocks do, in fact, change over time, the figurative language associated with rocks seems to indicate a level of near-timelessness to the biblical authors; they served as symbols of “stability and constancy” (Fabry, “צור (*sûr*),” 12:315).

⁶⁵ Ibid., 12:311.

also may relate to the Ugaritic *gr*, “mountain.”⁶⁶ Although translations often interpret צור as “rock,” more often than not it refers to a large, perhaps even mountain-like geological feature.

Extrabiblical sources in Hebrew as well as Aramaic indicate that a צור is relatively large.⁶⁷ For example, in 1 Samuel 24:3, as Saul seeks David, one reads:

וַיִּקַּח שָׁאוּל שְׁלֹשֶׁת אֲלָפִים אִישׁ בַּחֹר מִכָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּלֶךְ לְבַקֵּשׁ אֶת־דָּוִד
וְאֶנְשָׁיו עַל־פְּנֵי צוּרֵי הַיְעֵלִים:

So Saul took three thousand picked men from all Israel and went in search of David and his men in the direction of the rocks of the wild goats... (1 Sam 24:3 NJPS)

While the JPS translation, offered here, interprets צורי היעלים as a generic description, others, such as the NRSV, describe it as “the Rock of Wild Goats,” a proper noun. This raises the question, why name or mention these rocks if they were insignificant?

Another case of a large rock occurs in 1 Chronicles 11:15. During a recounting of David’s exploits, David waits at a rock associated with a cave:

וַיֵּרְדּוּ שְׁלוֹשָׁה מִן־הַשְּׁלוֹשִׁים רֹאשׁ עַל־הַצֹּר אֶל־דָּוִד אֶל־מְעֵרַת עֲדָלָם
וּמַחֲנֶה פְּלִשְׁתִּים חָנָה בְּעֵמֶק רְפָאִים:

Three of the thirty chiefs went down to the rock to David, at the cave of Adullam, while a force of Philistines was encamped in the Valley of Rephaim. (1 Chr 11:15 NJPS)

Furthermore, in the original telling of this story in 2 Samuel, while there is no allusion to a rock, there is mention of a מצודה, a “stronghold”:

¹³וַיֵּרְדּוּ (שְׁלֹשִׁים) מִהַשְּׁלֹשִׁים רֹאשׁ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־קִצִּיר אֶל־דָּוִד אֶל־
מְעֵרַת עֲדָלָם וְחֵית פְּלִשְׁתִּים חָנָה בְּעֵמֶק רְפָאִים:¹⁴ וַיֵּרְדּוּ אֲזַי בַּמְּצוּדָה וּמַצֵּב
פְּלִשְׁתִּים אֲזַי בֵּית לָחֶם:

⁶⁶ Ibid., 12:312.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 12:312-313.

¹³Once, during the harvest, three of the thirty chiefs went down to David at the cave of Adullam, while a force of Philistines was encamped in the Valley of Rephaim. ¹⁴David was then in the stronghold, and a Philistine garrison was then at Bethlehem. (2 Sam 23:13-14 NJPS)

Thus, by comparing these two verses, a צור is associated with both a cave (large enough to hide a person) and a “stronghold,” implying strength and, presumably, grand size. Indeed, countless other examples indicate that a צור seems to be large or significant, such as Isaiah 27:4, where the rock is עולמים (“everlasting”), or Job 19:24, in which Job wishes his words could be inscribed on a צור forever; these examples imply that a צור can withstand the effects of erosion, a trait of larger geological features. Moreover, if one were to compare צור to other types of stones such as אבן, one would discover that other words for “rock” have meanings indicating smallness or temporariness.⁶⁸ For example, in both Exodus 24:12 and 31:18, the stone tablets of the pact, using the word אבן, must be small enough to carry.⁶⁹ Thus, a צור seems to be permanent and larger than the small, portable rocks indicated by אבן; it must be substantial.⁷⁰

Just as importantly, צור often appears parallel to הר, indicating that these two words may be synonymous. Notice the poetic verse of Job 14:18, in which הר and צור are parallel word pairs:

וְאוֹלָם הָר־נוֹפֵל יִבֹּל וְצוֹר יַעֲתֶק מִמָּקוֹמוֹ:

Mountains collapse and crumble; Rocks are dislodged from their place.
(Job 14:18 NJPS)

Similarly, צור ישראל and הר יהוה are juxtaposed in this verse from Isaiah

⁶⁸ See, for example, Exodus 24:12 and 31:18, in which an אבן is small enough to carry.

⁶⁹ Granted, there are other examples where צור and אבן *do* appear morphologically synonymous, e.g. Isaiah 8:14, which just proves that this is not an exact science!

⁷⁰ Fabry, “צור” (*šûr*), 12:316.

...וְשִׂמְחָת לֵבָב כְּהוֹלִיךְ בְּחִלָּל לְבוֹא בְּהִרְיָהוּ אֶל-צוּר יִשְׂרָאֵל:

There shall be rejoicing as when they march With flute, with timbrels, and with lyres To the Rock of Israel on the Mount of the *Eternal*. (Isa 30:29 NJPS)

Indeed, many other verses express צור and הר in similar ways, including 2 Samuel 21:9-10; Micah 1:5-6; Job 24:8; and 28:9-10. Therefore, due to its context of largeness and permanence and its synonymous parallelism with הר, צור seems to imply an incredibly large, even mountainous rock. The word thus becomes a fitting target for exploration in this thesis.

Moreover, other Hebrew words may, from time to time, indicate a large rock or mountain. For example, the Hebrew word סלע can indicate a rock, cliff, or hiding place depending on context.⁷¹ This word appears parallel to other mountain-like words previously mentioned, such as in Psalm 71, in which the psalmist refers to God as both a צור and a סלע:

הִיָּה לִי לְצוּר מְעוֹן לְבוֹא תָמִיד צוּיָתָ לְהוֹשִׁיעֵנִי כִּי-סִלְעִי וּמְצוּדָתִי אַתָּה:

Be a sheltering rock for me to which I may always repair; decree my deliverance, for You are my rock and my fortress. (Ps 71:3 NJPS)

This verse indicates that a סלע is semantically synonymous with a צור. Similarly, in Jeremiah 49:16, סלע appears parallel to גבעה:

...שְׁכֵנֵי בְּחֻגֵי הַסֵּלַע תִּפְשִׁי מְרוֹם גְּבֻעָה...

You who dwell in clefts of the rock, Who occupy the height of the hill! (Jer 49:16 NJPS)

Thus, biblically, a סלע may also refer to a mountain.

⁷¹ HALOT, s.v. "סלע."

Another key word that relates to mountains is מרום. In general, מרום tends to indicate an elevated site, perhaps even the heavens.⁷² However, at other times, מרום may refer to a mountain or mountaintop. Ezekiel 17, for example, presents הר and מרום paired together:

בְּהָר מְרוֹם יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשַׁתְּלֶנּוּ וְנָשָׂא עָנָף וְעָשָׂה פֶרִי וְהָיָה לְאֶרֶץ אֲדִיר וְשָׁכְנָה
תַּחְתָּיו כָּל צִפּוֹר כָּל-כָּנָף בְּצֵל דְּלִיּוֹתָיו תִּשְׁכָּנָה:

On the mountain height of Israel I will it, and it shall carry forth branches and make fruit and be a cedar tree; and every bird and every winged animal will dwell under it, dwelling under the shade of its boughs. (Ezek 17:23)

These two nouns, הר and מרום, form a construct nominal phrase, indicating that they seem to relate to each other in a meaningful way. This pairing occurs elsewhere, such as 2 Kings 19:23 (= Isaiah 37:24) and Ezekiel 20:40. מרום also appears paired with גבעה, for instance in Jeremiah 49:16.

Similarly, while גבול often means “boundary” or “territory,” context may indicate another meaning of “mountain.”⁷³ Accordingly, as the raiders leave the Philistine camps in 1 Samuel 13:18, one reads:

וְהָרָאשׁ אֶחָד יִפְנֶה דֶּרֶךְ בֵּית חֶרְזֵן וְהָרָאשׁ אֶחָד יִפְנֶה דֶּרֶךְ הַגְּבוּל הַנִּשְׁקָף
עַל-גֵּי הַצְּבָעִים הַמְּדִבְרָה:

...another column headed for the Beth-horon road, and the third column headed for the border road that overlooks the valley of Zeboim toward the desert. (1 Sam 13:18 NJPS)

In this case, while גבול may indeed indicate some sort of border road, the context also implies that this path lies above a valley; therefore, it may signify a mountain or other high geographic locale. Moreover, גבול sometimes appears parallel to other “mountain”

⁷² HALOT, s.v. “מרום.”

⁷³ Talmon, “הר (har),” 3:431. Interestingly, in Arabic, *ḡabal* means “mountain.”

words. For example, in Ezekiel 39:4a, the prophet judges Gog, stating that he will fall on the mountains of Israel:

עַל-הָרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּפּוֹל אֶתָּה וְכָל-אַגְפֶּיךָ וְעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר אִתָּךְ...

You shall fall on the mountains of Israel, you and all your battalions and the peoples who are with you... (Ezek 39:4 NJPS)

While this verse employs the word *הר*, Ezekiel 11:10 utilizes similar language, but instead uses *גבול*:

בַּחֶרֶב תִּפְּלוּ עַל-גְּבוּל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁפּוֹט אֶתְכֶם וַיִּדְעֻתֶם כִּי-אֲנִי יְהוָה:

You shall fall by the sword; I will punish you at the border of Israel. And you shall know that I am the *Eternal*. (Ezek 11:10 NJPS)

The similarity in these passages seems to associate *גבול* with *הר*. Similarly, in Psalm 78, one reads:

וַיָּבִיאוּם אֶל-גְּבוּל קִדְשׁוֹ הַר-יְזֵה קִנְיָתָהּ יְמִינוֹ:

God brought them to *God's* holy realm, the mountain *God's* right hand had acquired. (Ps 78:54 NJPS)

Here, *הר* and *גבול* once again appear semantically related. Moreover, in this case, the word *הר* even contains a modifier of *קדש*, “holy,” which frequently occurs paired with *הר*.⁷⁴

One final mountain word worth noting is *שפי*, an uncommon synonym of “mountain” used almost exclusively by Jeremiah.⁷⁵ Ambiguity surrounds this word’s meaning. While it could refer to a “bare plain” or “sand dune,” scholars also interpret the word to mean a high topographical form, perhaps an elevated plain, mountain track, or bare height.⁷⁶ In Jeremiah 3, for example, the prophet proclaims:

⁷⁴ See, for example, Exodus 19:23 and Joel 4:17. Chapter 4 offers more details on holy mountains.

⁷⁵ Talmon, “הר (*har*),” 3:432.

⁷⁶ *HALOT*, s.v. “שפי.”

שְׂאֵי-עֵינֶיךָ עַל-שָׁפִים וְרְאֵי אֵיפֹה לֹא (שָׁגַלְתָּ) (שָׁכַבְתָּ) עַל-דַּרְכֵּי יִשְׁבָּתָהּ
 לָהֶם כְּעֶרְבִי בַמִּדְבָּר וְתַחְנִיפִי אֶרֶץ בְּזִנוּתֶיךָ וּבְרָעָתֶךָ:

Look up to the bare heights, and see: Where have they not lain with you?
 You waited for them on the roadside Like a bandit in the wilderness. And
 you defiled the land With your whoring and your debauchery. (Jer 3:2
 NJPS)

Although difficult to interpret, the fact that one must “look up” (literally “lift the eyes”) toward the שָׁפִים implies that they are elevated. Additionally, this language may evoke Psalm 121:1, in which the psalmist again “lifts up” the eyes toward the mountains (הָרִים, see Chapter 3). Moreover, שָׁפִים appear again in Jeremiah 3:21, and Jack R. Lundbom suggests that the שָׁפִים are “treeless, windswept hills where people are engaging in Canaanite fertility rites.”⁷⁷ Thus, שָׁפִי seems to indicate a mountain- or hill-like elevation.⁷⁸

In conclusion, this thesis, in exploring mountains in the Bible, extends beyond the most common term for “mountain” (הָר) and considers synonymous words such as גִּבְעָה, צוּר, מְרוֹם, סֶלַע, and שָׁפִי. In doing so, this essay examines only the physical uses of mountains as geographic settings and religious sites but will gather a wider swathe of examples to assess the figurative and theological uses of mountains and other large rocks.

⁷⁷ Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1999) 321. See Chapters 3 and 4 for more analysis on fertility and mountains.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Numbers 23:13; Isaiah 41:8; 49:9; Jeremiah 4:11; 7:29; and 12:12; 14:16.

Chapter 2: Mountains as Natural Resources and Narrative Components

Introduction

Mountains serve a variety of earthly, non-religious roles in the Bible.⁷⁹ The Bible frequently presents mountains as part of the setting, and mountains affect the stories because of their height or geological features. These uses include descriptions of the landscape, territorial boundaries, sources of rocks at quarries, settlements and military fortifications, and other narrative functions.

Geographic and Territorial Descriptions

To begin, sometimes the Bible describes mountains simply as part of a geographical setting, with no immediately recognizable, deeper meaning or narrative function.⁸⁰ For instance, as Moses pleads with God to permit him to cross over into the Promised Land, Moses prays:

אֶעְבְּרָה-נָא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן הַהוּא הַטּוֹב הַזֶּה
וְהַלְבָּנוֹן:

Please, let me cross over and see the good land across the Jordan; this good mountain [region], and the Lebanon. (Deut 3:25)

Moses wants to see the land, described as “הַהוּא הַטּוֹב הַזֶּה,” meaning, “this good mountain [region].”⁸¹ Deuteronomy 11 also contains verses that describe the whole Promised Land,

⁷⁹ For this thesis, “religious” means a human attempt to reach out to or build relationship with God in some manner. In this chapter, the mountains themselves generally do not involve God in any significant way (even if God does act in the larger narrative context). See the introduction to Chapter 3 for more details on “religious.”

⁸⁰ Later rabbinic commentators often found meaning in every word of the text. On the next verse, Deuteronomy 3:25, for example, Rashi specifically identifies “this good mountain” as Jerusalem and “Lebanon” as the Temple. However, the *p’shat* (plain) reading of the text seems to only describe the land’s physical features, e.g. the Judean Hills (Plaut, *Torah Modern Commentary*, 1188).

⁸¹ See Chapter 1 for an explanation into “mountain” vs “mountain region.”

comparing its geography to Egypt's terrain (v. 10). Verse 11 then mentions mountains as a key topographical feature:

וְהָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ אֶרֶץ הָרִים וּבִקְעוֹת לַמָּטָר
הַשָּׁמַיִם תִּשְׁתָּהּ-מֵיָם:

The land you are about to cross into, to possess it, is a land of mountains and valleys; it soaks up water from the rains of the heavens. (Deut 11:11)

Notice that here, the description of the land juxtaposes הָרִים, mountains, with בקעות, valleys, highlighting the broad range of topographic features formed by the Great Rift Valley.⁸² Similarly, Joshua 9:1 depicts the whole biblical land with all its key geographic features, which includes mountains, the *shephelah* (“lowlands”), and the coast:

וַיְהִי כַשְׁמַע כָּל-הַמְּלָכִים אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן בְּהָר וּבְשִׁפְלָה וּבְכָל חוֹף הַיָּם
הַגָּדוֹל אֶל-מֹול הַלְּבָנוֹן הַחֲתִי וְהָאֹמֹרִי הַכְּנַעֲנִי הַפְּרִזִּי הַחִוִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי:

When all the kings who were across the Jordan heard of this—in the mountain region, and in the lowlands, and in every coast of the great sea, up to the Lebanon; the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites... (Josh 9:1)

Thus, the whole land contains a range of features, with mountains standing out as particularly impressive. Indeed, the above verse lists the mountains first, a frequent descriptive recurrence, perhaps suggesting the primacy of mountains in relation to other topographical features.⁸³ Whether due to physical presence or symbolic meaning, mountains tend to take center stage in the Bible.

Additionally, the Bible also depicts geographic descriptions of Mount Zion, the key mountain of Jerusalem and location of the Temple, a focus of theophany and

⁸² Aharoni and Avi-Yonah, Macmillan Bible Atlas, 14. See Chapter 1.

⁸³ Some other texts similarly depict mountains first among geographic features, such as Deuteronomy 1:7; 11:11; Joshua 10:40; 11:2, 16; 12:8; Judges 1:9; Jeremiah 32:44. While this seems to be the norm, a few other passages do place other landforms first, such as Jeremiah 17:26 and Obadiah 1:19.

theology for the biblical authors (see Chapter 4). Psalm 125, for example, in presenting a poetic supplication to protect the people, describes Jerusalem's geography:

יְרוּשָׁלַם הָרִים סָבִיב לָהּ וַיהוָה סָבִיב לְעַמּוֹ מֵעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם:

Jerusalem, mountains surround it, and the Eternal surrounds God's people
from now until eternity. (Ps 125:2)

Although this text represents mountains in a metaphor about God's protective compassion, a use of mountains relevant for Chapter 3, it does so through the depiction of physical geography. The practical use of Jerusalem's topography lends insight to the allegorical message of the psalm.⁸⁴ As Shemaryahu Talmon explains, "The description of Jerusalem as a city upon a mountain surrounded by other mountains (Ps. 125:2) suggests quite accurately the nature of the Syro-Palestinian landscape. This fact appears to have decisively influenced the meaning and semantic content of the word 'mountain' as well as its metaphorical use."⁸⁵ Those who have travelled to and looked upon Jerusalem have probably observed that Jerusalem is, indeed, surrounded by the Judean Hills.⁸⁶ Thus, the Bible provides descriptions for both Jerusalem and the whole land of Israel that reflect its diverse topography and highlight the importance of mountains.⁸⁷

Beyond simple geography, mountains and rocks often gain proper names and serve as borders or boundaries in the Bible. Scripture provides countless named

⁸⁴ Note that most physical descriptions of Jerusalem seem to be part of figurative language, e.g. Zechariah 14:4-5 and Psalm 68:17. On the other hand, the conquering of Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 5 (esp. v. 7) lacks significant topographical descriptions (only mentioning the water channel in v. 8). (Philip J. King, "Jerusalem," *ABD* 3:751-52.)

⁸⁵ Talmon, "הַר (*har*)," 3:433.

⁸⁶ Jon D. Levenson, "Zion Traditions," *ABD* 6:1102.

⁸⁷ For other examples of topographical descriptions of Jerusalem, the Judean Hills, and the land of Israel, see Numbers 13:17; Deuteronomy 1:7; 11:11; Joshua 10:40; 11:2, 16; 12:8; 15:1-12 (esp. vv. 8-9); Judges 1:9; Jeremiah 17:26; 32:44; Obadiah 1:19; Zechariah 14:4-5; Psalm 68:17.

mountains in the Bible, some of which feature prominently, such as Mounts Sinai and Zion (see Chapter 4). Other named mountains include Mount Carmel (e.g. 2 Kings 4:25, see below), Mount Hor (e.g. Numbers 20:27-28, see Chapter 3), Mount Nebo (e.g. Deuteronomy 32:49-50, see Chapter 3), Mounts Ebal and Gerizim (e.g. Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:4-5, 11-13; Joshua 8:30-35; see Chapter 3), the Mount of Destruction (e.g. 2 Kings 23:13), Mount of Olives (e.g. Zechariah 14:4), Mount Shomron (e.g. 1 Kings 16:24), and Mount Tabor (e.g. Judges 4:12, see below).⁸⁸ Besides mountains, other massive rocks also acquired names, or at least descriptions. For example, Isaiah 10 names the Rock of Oreb, located north of Jericho and to the west of the Jordan:⁸⁹

וְעוֹרֵר עָלָיו יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת שׁוֹט בְּמַכֶּת מִדֵּין בְּצוּר עוֹרֵב וּמִטֶּהוּ עַל־הָיִם
וְנִשְׂאוּ בְדֶרֶךְ מִצְרַיִם:

The *Eternal* of Hosts will brandish a scourge over him as when *God* beat Midian at the Rock of Oreb, and will wield *God's* staff as *God* did over the Egyptians by the sea. (Isa 10:26 NJPS)⁹⁰

Another set of named rocks, “the Rocks of Wild Goats,” appears in 1 Samuel 24:3, and “the Field of Stones” appears in 2 Samuel 2:16.⁹¹ However, the text limits named locations using צוּר to just these few examples. The fact that so few rocks receive names may indicate that while a צוּר looms large, it does not always appear massive enough to consistently receive a name. Another explanation may be that these specific rocks stand out as significantly enormous, hence why the Bible names them, whereas other rocks do

⁸⁸ Talmon, “הַר (*har*),” 3:433-34.

⁸⁹ Yairah Amit, “Judges,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford, 2004), 527.

⁹⁰ Judges 7:25 also mentions this Rock of Oreb.

⁹¹ Note that 2 Sam. 2:16 presents חֶלְקֵת הַצִּדִּים, which could be translated as “the Field of Stones,” although this verse may use an alternate meaning of צוּר that means “flint.” While this passage does not name a specific rock, the rocks do stand out enough to be worthy of mention as part of the name (Fabry, “צוּר (*śûr*),” 12:315).

not project so prominently. Perhaps, too, the events that occur at these locations indicate why they receive a name; the impact of defeating Midian, for instance, may have led to naming the Rock of Oreb (Isaiah 10:26, above). Identifying specific rocks or events may also denote that a writer or later editor attempted to interject a level of historicity to the affair, as if a reader could visit the site.⁹²

Mountains and rocks also function as boundaries and territorial borders. For instance, while listing the descendants of Noah, the Bible notes the sons of Joktan and their territory:

וַיְהִי מוֹשְׁבָם מִמֶּשָׁה בְּאַכָּה סְפָרָה הַר הַקָּדָם:

Their settlements reached from Mesha to Sephar, the mountain [region] to the east. (Gen 10:30)

Thus, the mountain of Sephar serves as an eastern territorial border.⁹³ Similarly, in Deuteronomy 3:8, Mount Hermon denotes the boundary of land once held by the Amorites:

וַנִּקַּח בְּעֵת הַהוּא אֶת-הָאָרֶץ מִיַּד שְׁנֵי מְלָכֵי הָאֱמֹרִי אֲשֶׁר בְּעֶבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן

מִנְחַל אֲרִגֹן עַד-הָהָר הָרְמוֹן:

Thus we seized, at that time, from the two Amorite kings, the country beyond the Jordan, from the wadi Arnon to Mount Hermon... (Deut 3:8 NJPS)

As massive geographic structures, it makes sense that the ancients would use mountains as boundary markers and geographic landmarks, just as people do today.⁹⁴

⁹² Craig E. Morrison, *2 Samuel* (Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry; ed. Jerome T. Walsh; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2013), 40.

⁹³ Talmon, “הַר (*har*),” 3:433.

⁹⁴ Townsend, “Geography,” 5:509. See also Exodus 19:1; Deuteronomy 1:7; 2:5; and Judges 3:3. For modern uses of mountains as landmarks, consider American patriotic songs such as Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America,” which includes the lyrics “From the mountains / to the prairies...” or Lee Greenwood’s “God Bless the USA,” which mentions “the hills of Tennessee.” Furthermore, the North Face’s logo displays the

Non-Religious Narrative Uses of Mountains

Sometimes, mountains provide a location for a story, with no immediate implications for the plot. When Elisha heals the Shunammite woman's son, for example, he lives on Mount Carmel; however, the mountain does not affect the story.⁹⁵ Characters often live or temporarily dwell on or near mountains in other cases, too, such as Laban and Jacob setting up camp near mountains in Genesis 31:25 and Israel encamping near Baal-Zaphon in Numbers 33:7.⁹⁶ In these cases, mountains seem to simply provide the setting, presumably because of prominence of mountainous in Israel's landscape.

In other cases, however, mountains directly affect a narrative or event in practical ways. Mountains directly affect the outcomes of certain stories. In Genesis, for example, mountains play key roles in the Noah story.⁹⁷ Their heights become important elements to indicate the extent of the flood waters:

וְהַמַּיִם גָּבְרוּ מְאֹד מְאֹד עַל-הָאָרֶץ וַיִּכְסּוּ כָּל-הַהָרִים הַגְּבוּהִים אֲשֶׁר-תַּחַת
כָּל-הַשָּׁמַיִם:

When the waters had swelled much more upon the earth, all the highest mountains everywhere under the sky were covered. (Gen 7:19 NJPS)

unique mountain shape of Half Dome in Yosemite, CA. Additionally, some modern literature, such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, feature mountains as critical topographical obstacles that influence the narrative. In these and other cases, the enormity and impressiveness of mountains seem to have left a lasting impact on the creators of these media.

⁹⁵ 2 Kings 4:24-37.

⁹⁶ For other cases where the mountain does not significantly affect the plot, see, for example, Numbers 33:47; Judges 7:25; Isaiah 10:26. Note that in Genesis 31:54, Jacob does offer a sacrifice on the mountain (a religious purpose, see Chapter 3), but because that happens only *after* the other narrative events take place, it seems to imply that the original purpose of camping on the mountain did not include sacrifice. I have therefore included this verse in this chapter *and* in the next chapter on religious uses, too.

⁹⁷ While one could easily argue that the entire flood narrative is a religious or God-related event, this specific use of mountains as markers does not directly involve God, and thus I have included these verses in this section. See Chapter 3 for a definition of "religious."

Additionally, as the waters recede, the ark comes to rest on the mountains:

וַתָּנַח הַתֵּבָה בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בִּשְׁבַע־עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ עַל הָרֵי אָרָרָט:
וְהַמַּיִם הָיוּ הַלּוֹךְ וְחֹסֵר עַד הַחֹדֶשׁ הָעֲשִׂירִי בָעֲשִׂירִי בָאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ נִרְאוּ
רָאשֵׁי הַהָרִים:

⁴...so that in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. ⁵The waters went on diminishing until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first of the month, the tops of the mountains became visible. (Gen 8:4-5 NJPS)

Interestingly, in the flood story in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Utnapishtim also tells of his boat landing atop mountains, indicating the importance that mountains played for ancient Mesopotamia, too.⁹⁸ In both stories, mountains—as towering geographic landmarks—play critical roles in the development of the flood narratives.

Another story involving mountains is that of Lot and his daughters, who hide in a cave on a mountain as they flee from Sodom:

וַיַּעַל לוֹט מִצְוֶעַר וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּהָר וּשְׁתֵּי בָנָתָיו עִמּוֹ כִּי יֵרָא לְשִׁבְתָּ בְּצִוְעַר וַיֵּשֶׁב
בְּמַעְרָה הוּא וּשְׁתֵּי בָנָתָיו:

Lot ascended from Zoar and settled on the mountain, and his two daughters were with him, for he was afraid to dwell in Zoar; and he settled in a cave, he and his two daughters. (Gen 19:30 NJPS)

The cave on the mountain plays a crucial role in the story: if Lot and his daughters had instead fled to a populated city, the daughters may not have assumed they were the last

⁹⁸ N.K. Sanders, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Assyrian International News Agency Books Online), 21. Clifford, in his exploration of the Cosmic Mountain in both the ancient Near East and Bible, notes many similarities between ancient Near Eastern and biblical views of mountains, including as cosmic centers, dwelling-places of the divine, and even the similarities between biblical Zion and Canaanite Zaphon (Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 4). Interestingly, however, while mountains tend to appear in the center of the narrative in biblical texts, often in relationship to God, Mesopotamian culture tends to relegate them to the periphery, reflecting negative connotations associated with foreign invasion (Ibid., 9-10). In the *Gilgamesh* story, the mountains may therefore represent a foreign, peripheral divine domain, in contrast with the mortal realm.

people on earth and engaged in intercourse with their father (v. 31 and onwards). Note mountains serve as locations for refuge, just as they do for military fortifications and hideouts (see below).

Mountains also supply stones for quarries, such as when King Solomon excavates the mountains to gather stones to build the Temple:

וַיְהִי לְשִׁלְמֹה שִׁבְעִים אֶלֶף נָשָׂא סִבָּל וּשְׁמָנִים אֶלֶף חֲצֵב בְּהָרָ: ³⁰לִבְד
מִשְׁרֵי הַנִּצָּבִים לְשִׁלְמֹה אֲשֶׁר עַל־הַמֶּלֶכָה שְׁלֶשֶׁת אֲלָפִים וּשְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת
הָרָדִים בָּעָם הָעֹשִׂים בַּמֶּלֶכָה: 31 וַיִּצְוּ הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּסְעוּ אֲבָנִים גְּדֹלוֹת אֲבָנִים
יְקָרוֹת לִיסֹד הַבַּיִת אֲבָנֵי גִזִּית:

²⁹Solomon had 70,000 burden-bearers and 80,000 stonemasons in the mountain, ³⁰besides Solomon's 3,300 officers who stood over the work and supervised the people who did the work. ³¹The king commanded, and they quarried great, precious stones—hewn stones—to lay the foundations for the house. (1 Kgs 5:29-31)

At the end of verse 29, one can notice that these workers excavated in the הר.⁹⁹ The rocks in the central highland and Galilee primarily comprise limestone, which serves as excellent building material.¹⁰⁰ The text continues by noting that these stones were finished stones, meaning no tools struck the altar.¹⁰¹ This detail reinforces the prohibition of iron tools in constructing an altar, perhaps also implying that the Temple remained pure and unadulterated.¹⁰² Were it not for the mountain with geologic traits ripe for construction, the Temple may not have been the “lofty house” that Solomon later describes.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Talmon, “הר (har),” 3:435. See also 2 Chronicles 1:18-2:1.

¹⁰⁰ May, *Oxford Bible Atlas*, 11.

¹⁰¹ See 1 Kings 6:7.

¹⁰² See Deuteronomy 27:5, Joshua 8:31, which command the building of an altar without using iron tools. M. Jack Suggs et al., eds., *The Oxford Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 348.

¹⁰³ See 1 Kings 8:13.

According to Talmon, mountains also served as locations of settlements and fortifications, and for a variety of reasons: the Canaanites prevented the Israelites from settling in the lowlands, the heights provided easier defense and fortifications, the settlements remained high while farming happened in the lowlands, and the summits provided theological and cultic meaning.¹⁰⁴ Hence, the Bible presents various dwellings on mountains. For example, Judges 15:20 introduces a series of settlements and their locations, and beginning in verse 48, the text names villages in the mountains:

וּבְהָרָה שָׁמִיר וַיִּתִּיר וְשׁוֹכָה:

And on the mountain: Shamir, Jattir, Socoh. (Josh 15:48)

Similarly, mountains offered protection for military bases. Mount Zion, for example, once hosted a Canaanite fortress:

וַיִּלְכֹּד דָּוִד אֶת מְצֻדַת צִיּוֹן הִיא עִיר דָּוִד:

David captured the fortress of Zion; it is the City of David. (2 Sam 5:7)

Zion—a “hill crest” associated with Jerusalem—contained a מצודה, in this case a “mountain fortress.”¹⁰⁵ This word, מצודה, relates to the notions of “hiding place,” “place of refuge,” and “stronghold,” and often associates with places of protection in caves or mountains.¹⁰⁶ The root מצד connects to mountains specifically in other verses, too:

וַתֵּעַז יַד-מִדְיָן עַל-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִפְּנֵי מִדְיָן עָשׂוּ לָהֶם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-הַמְּנָהָרוֹת
אֲשֶׁר בַּהָרִים וְאֶת-הַמְּעָרוֹת וְאֶת-הַמְּצָדוֹת:

The hand of the Midianites prevailed over Israel; and because of Midian, the Israelites made for themselves dens in the mountains, and caves, and strongholds. (Judg 6:2)

¹⁰⁴ Talmon, “הר (har),” 3:434.

¹⁰⁵ Suggs et al., *Oxford Study Bible*, 316. See also *HALOT*, s.v. “מצודה.”

¹⁰⁶ K.-D. Schunck, “מצודה (m^ešûdâ),” *TDOT* 8:502-503.

Note the direct relation between מצד and הר.¹⁰⁷ Because of the Israelites' errant behavior in verse 1, Midian overpowers Israel and they escape to protection in the natural landscape. Hence, here in verse 2, the Israelites flee to בהרים אשר, "dens in the mountains," to המערות, "caves," and to המצודות, "the strongholds." Note that מצדות, plural of מצד, shares a root with מצודה and similarly means "an almost inaccessible place for warriors, refugees, and raiders."¹⁰⁸ The word מנהרות is a *hapax legomenon*, yet the root נהר relates to ravines or river valleys, and Robert G. Boling suggests the word means "dens" in the mountains produced by river erosion.¹⁰⁹ The connection between these mountain dens, caves, and strongholds seems to be the natural protective environment they all provide. Moreover, because the מנהרות and מערות associate with mountains (מנהרות due to the connection to הרים in Judges 6:2 and מערות because caves exist in mountains), מצדות also seem to connect to mountains. Thus, the ancient Israelites understood mountains as able to offer security.

Moreover, mountains could provide protection for an army during wartime. Amidst the civil war between David's men and the remnant of Saul's house, for example, Saul's cousin and a commander of his troops, Abner, retreats to a mountaintop (here, גבעה, "hill") for safety:

וַיִּתְקַבְּצוּ בְנֵי־בְנִימִן אַחֲרֵי אֲבִנֵּר וַיְהִיו לְאַגְדָּה אֶחָת וַיַּעֲמִדוּ עַל רֹאשׁ־גִּבְעָה
אֶחָת:

The Benjaminites gathered behind Abner, forming a single troop; and they stood on the top of a hill. (2 Sam 2:25)

¹⁰⁷ See also 1 Samuel 23:14, 19; 24:23; Isaiah 33:16 (with סלעים, "stones"); Ezekiel 33:27 (with מערות, "caves"). Metaphorically, see also Psalm 18:3; 31:3; 71:3 (with סלע, "stone").

¹⁰⁸ HALOT, s.v. "מצד."

¹⁰⁹ Robert G. Boling, *Judges* (AB; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 122.

Although Abner then entreats Joab, one of the David's generals, to cease fighting, and although Abner seems to be fleeing from the stronger army, Abner's retreat to the mountain implies that the "high ground" of the mountain offers Abner and his troops some level of defensive protection.¹¹⁰

Not only do mountains serve as locations for fortifications and safe havens for troops, but they also provide the setting for actual battles. Joshua and Judges especially recount various skirmishes in the heights. For instance, Joshua annihilated the Anakites from their towns atop mountains:

וַיָּבֹא יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בָּעֵת הַהִיא וַיִּכְרֹת אֶת־הָעֲנָקִים מִן־הָהָר מִן־חֶבְרוֹן מִן־דִּבְרִי
מִן־עֵזְבָּ וּמִכָּל־הָרֵי יְהוּדָה וּמִכָּל־הָרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עִם־עֲרִיָּהֶם הַחֲרִימָם יְהוֹשֻׁעַ:

At that time, Joshua came and wiped out the Anakites from the mountain [region], from Hebron, from Debir, from Anab, and from the entire mountain [region] of Judah, and from the entire mountain [region] of Israel; Joshua destroyed their cities. (Josh 11:21)

In fact, the Israelites attacked many peoples who lived on mountains or in mountain regions, mentioned throughout the book of Joshua.¹¹¹ As previously mentioned, because mountains provided key locations for settlements, it makes sense that Joshua, while conquering the Canaanites, would battle many peoples atop mountains.

Deborah and Barak's attack on Sisera also occurs on a mountaintop:

וַתִּשְׁלַח וַתִּקְרָא לְבָרַק בֶּן־אֲבִינוֹם מִקְדֵּשׁ נַפְתָּלִי וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הֲלֹא צֹוָה
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר וּמַשְׁכַּת בָּהָר תָּבוֹר וְלָקַחְתָּ עִמָּךְ עֶשְׂרֵת אֲלָפִים
אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי נַפְתָּלִי וּמִבְּנֵי זְבֻלֹן: וּמַשְׁכַּתִּי אֵלֶיךָ אֶל־נַחַל קִישׁוֹן אֶת־סִיסְרָא
שֶׁר־צָבָא יָבִין וְאֶת־רָכְבּוֹ וְאֶת־הַמּוֹנֶה וְנִתְּתִיהוּ בִידְךָ:

⁶She summoned Barak son of Abinoam, of Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "The *Eternal*, the God of Israel, has commanded: Go, march up to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and

¹¹⁰ Morrison, 2 *Samuel*, 44.

¹¹¹ See, for instance, Joshua 11:16, 12:7, and 15:48.

Zebulun. ⁷And I will draw Sisera, Jabin's army commander, with his chariots and his troops, toward you up to the Wadi Kishon; and I will deliver him into your hands.” (Judg 4:6-7 NJPS)

When Sisera attacks Barak with his soldiers and chariots on the mountain (v. 13), Sisera’s army lurches into disarray and Barak defeats them (v. 15).¹¹² The combination of the chariots failing to ascend Mount Tabor and rains flowing down the mountain (5:21) provide Barak’s army with its tactical advantage and victory.¹¹³

Thus, the Bible presents multiple reasons why the people of the Bible would build settlements and fortifications on mountains and use them for military benefits: protection against horses and chariots, shelter above flood zones, and safety from ascending enemies. Interestingly, while these are all practical, tactical advantages of mountains, in the context of the Bible they also hint at some theological conclusions. With mountains providing such safety and security, the fact that Joshua and Barak could easily defeat these other armies on mountains prove not only their strength or strategical insight but also, presumably, God’s might.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Bible suggests a variety of ways in which humans interact with mountains for worldly and non-religious purposes. Humans physically use mountains for stones for quarries and as protection for armies and settlements. Mountains also offer unique settings for narrative, with their geological features—such as towering heights and hidden caves—affecting the stories that take place there. Their massive dominance of the landscape and tops reaching toward the heavens did not just influence physical

¹¹² Note that prior to the invention of horseshoes, horses could not easily access mountains (Talmon, “הר (*har*),” 3:435).

¹¹³ Aharoni and Avi-Yonah, *Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 47.

boundaries and temporal narratives, however; mountains also became sites for religious experiences, as the next chapter will explore.

Chapter 3: Religious Uses of Mountains in the Bible

Introduction

This chapter covers human interactions with mountains in religious ways. This chapter provides cases where humans use mountains to connect to God, convey a theology about God or the way the world operates, or portray some other function that involves God or religion. These religious acts include sacrifice, ritual, and metaphors about God and mountains.

Before turning to these applications, a note on “religious.” American philosopher and psychologist William James defined religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”¹¹⁴ For James, the essence of a religious experience was that the experience relates to God.¹¹⁵ In the Bible, religious experiences tend to involve divine-human encounters that invoke commandedness.¹¹⁶ In other words, religious acts are those which somehow involve God or may allow for relationship with God. Although some of the following passages may not be traditionally considered religious acts, they fall into this category for this thesis because they involve human relationship with God.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Williams James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1963), 31, quoted in Martin, *Religious Experience*, 324.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 326.

¹¹⁷ Note that sometimes, examples blur boundaries as to whether they are religious or non-religious, or whether God or humans are the primary actor. For instance, in the mountain ritual of Deuteronomy 27 (see “Mountains and Other Religious Acts” below), God appears as the first actor, commanding humanity to perform a mountain ritual; however, because humans are the ones “using” the mountain, I have categorized it in this chapter.

Mountains and Sacrifice

Those familiar with the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22), no doubt recognize that mountains play a key role in sacrifice. During this story, Abraham famously brings Isaac up a mountain as an offering:

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךְ אֶת-יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר-אַהֲבָה אֶת-יִצְחָק וְלֵךְ-לְךָ אֶל-
אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ:

And God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as an offering on one of the mountains that I will show you.” (Gen 22:2)

Even after Abraham ceases his attempts to sacrifice Isaac and instead offers the ram, he does so on the mountain. Genesis does not specifically name this mountain as “Mount Moriah” as 2 Chronicles 3:1 later does; however, God still commands Abraham to offer his son “on one of the mountains” in the land of Moriah. Robert Alter explains that the Hebrew word *מֹרְיָה* relates to the verb *יראה*, “[He] sees,” in v. 14, “the thematic key word of the resolution of the story.”¹¹⁸ While the “seeing” in v. 14 connects to God, *יהוה יראה*, this linguistic relationship may nonetheless lend insight into why sacrifices occur on mountains: the top of the height enables a high vantage point, not only to see the landscape but also to see and experience God.

The Bible presents plenty of other cases of sacrifice on mountains. After Jacob and Laban make a pact, for instance, Jacob offers a sacrifice on the mountain:

וַיִּזְבַּח יַעֲקֹב זֶבַח בָּהָר וַיִּקְרָא לְאֶחָיו לְאֹכַל-לֶחֶם וַיֹּאכְלוּ לֶחֶם וַיָּלִינוּ בָּהָר:

Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and he called to his brothers to eat food; they ate food and spent the night on the mountain. (Gen 31:54)¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 109.

¹¹⁹ As noted in the previous chapter, sacrificing on the mountain happens after the events of the pact, after the characters had already encamped there. Nonetheless, it is not insignificant that this is yet another case of sacrifice occurring on mountains.

Here, not only does sacrifice happen on a הָר, but the two men also share a meal together, an act that finalizes the treaty.¹²⁰ Interestingly, breaking bread on a mountaintop occurs elsewhere in the Bible and relates to ancient Near Eastern feast customs. In Exodus, for example, Moses and other Israelite leaders ascend the mountain (Exodus 24:9), witness God (v. 10), and then eat together (v. 11).¹²¹ In Canaanite mythology, the gods Baal and El held feasts on their mountains, though not for sacrifice; thus, there is a clear distinction between the Bible and Canaanite texts.¹²²

The Genesis passage cited above (31:54, Jacob and Laban) additionally connotes the idea that mountains serve as sites to seal a covenant. This sealing happens between people, as Genesis 31:54 teaches, as well as between humans and God:

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ כָּתַב עִמָּנוּ בְּרִית בְּחֹרֵב:

The *Eternal* our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. (Deut 5:2 NJPS)¹²³

Another key scene that involves both mountains and covenants is that of the ritual of Mounts Ebal and Gerizim, a rite that finalizes a covenant on a mountain setting (see the next section for more detail about this ritual). Mountains become the setting for covenants in part because covenants often involve sacrifice.¹²⁴ Moreover, the awe-

¹²⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 222.

¹²¹ See also Isaiah 30:29, which speaks of a future festival at the “Mountain of YHWH,” and Ezekiel 39:17, which also speaks of a forthcoming feast on the “mountains of Israel.”

¹²² Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 112, 176.

¹²³ Note that “Horeb” refers to Mount Horeb, often associated or equated with Sinai (see Chapter 4). See also Exodus 34:27-29; Deuteronomy 28:69.

¹²⁴ See, for example, Genesis 15:1-21 (the Covenant of the Pieces) and Psalm 50:5. These covenants also resemble similar traditions in Mesopotamia. Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford, 2004), 35.

inspiring settings and apparent closeness to God no doubt added solemnity to the ritual.¹²⁵

Other cases of mountains serving as the location for sacrifice include Moses erecting an altar at the base of the mountain in Exodus 24:4-5,¹²⁶ the Israelites constructing altars on Mount Ebal in Deuteronomy 27:4-5, and Moses blessing Zebulun and Issachar by mentioning sacrifices on mountaintops in Deuteronomy 33:19.¹²⁷

Moreover, sacrifices also happen on rocks, as when Manoah, father of Samson, offers a sacrifice on a rock (צור):

וַיִּקַּח מָנוּחַ אֶת-גִּדֵּי הָעִזִּים וְאֶת-הַמִּנְחָה וַיַּעַל עַל-הַצּוּר לַיהוָה וּמִפְּלֵא
לַעֲשׂוֹת וּמָנוּחַ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ רְאִים:

Manoah took the kid and the meal offering and offered them up on the rock to the *Eternal*; and a marvelous thing happened while Manoah and his wife looked on. (Judg 13:19 NJPS)

Similarly, an offering occurs on a rock when Gideon sacrifices under an angel's instructions in Judges 6:20-21. Note that Judges 13 (above) presents the size of these rocks and their relation to the altar ambiguously. One interpretation states that the rock serves as the altar, and thus is not, presumably, mountain-sized.¹²⁸ Another interpretation notes that the rocks (צורים) used for sacrifice suggest (large) boulders.¹²⁹ However, the rocks nonetheless serve an important purpose in bringing humans closer to God; Judges 13:19, above, even says that Manoah went up to the rock "to the Eternal," indicating that

¹²⁵ Regarding solemnity, note that Exodus 19:12 warns that anyone who touches the mountain will die, indicating a solemn affair. Moreover, the Israelites shrink back from God on the mountain in Exodus 20:15, indicating a sense of awe (Sarna, *Exodus*, 115).

¹²⁶ Interestingly, this altar represented God's divine presence, and thus the fact that Moses built it at the *base* of the mountain—rather than the top—does not seem to affect the altar's sacredness or effectiveness (Sarna, *Exodus*, 151).

¹²⁷ See also Numbers 23:1, 23:28-29; 1 Kings 18:20-39; Hosea 4:13.

¹²⁸ Amit, "Judges," 541.

¹²⁹ See Judges 6:21 and 13:19. Fabry, "צור (*šûr*)," 12:316.

God somehow exists on, near, or through the sacrifice that occurs on that rock, which may imply a large size.¹³⁰

Furthermore, Solomon built the Temple—the center of sacrificial cultic life¹³¹—on a mountain:

וַיֵּחַל שְׁלֹמֹה לִבְנוֹת אֶת־בַּיִת־יְהוָה בִּירוּשָׁלַם בְּהַר הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֲשֶׁר נִרְאָה
לְדָוִד אָבִיהוּ אֲשֶׁר הָכִין בַּמָּקוֹם דָּוִד בְּגֶרֶן אֲרָנָן הַיְּבוּסִי:

Then Solomon began to build the House of the *Eternal* in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the *Eternal* had appeared to his father David, at the place which David had designated, at the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. (2 Chron 3:1 NJPS)

While this verse refers to the Temple as being built on Mount Moriah, other verses associate the Temple with Mount Zion.¹³² Granted, no single verse clearly and explicitly states that Solomon built the Temple on Mount Zion specifically, yet one can nonetheless infer that the Temple sat there. Many verses associate Jerusalem with a mountain, with Zion generally, or with Mount Zion specifically,¹³³ and other verses associate the Temple

¹³⁰ Granted, another interpretation could be much more metaphorical: that the rock is not the source of the sacrifice, but is, in fact, a euphemism for God (Boling, *Judges*, 222).

¹³¹ The Temple as the singular center for sacrifice developed out of King Josiah's reforms, mentioned in 2 Kings 23 and 2 Chronicles 34, and emphasized in the Book of Deuteronomy. For more information, see Tigay's "Restriction of Sacrifice to a Single Sanctuary," *Deuteronomy*, 459-64.

¹³² The connection between Zion and Moriah is rife with debate. Davila notes that the two occurrences of Moriah, the setting of the Akedah and the site of the Temple, cannot be the same place, and therefore some later editor adjusted one story or the other to be at the same location (Davila, "Moriah," 4:905.)

¹³³ Note that because many of these verses include allusions or indirect references to these other sites, it is difficult to find a hard count for the number of verses that associate these locations in some way. See, for instance, Isaiah 2:3; 27:13; 31:4-5; 33:20; 37:22, 32; 40:9; 62:1; Joel 3:5; 4:17; Zechariah 8:3; 9:9; Psalm 125:1-2; and Lamentations 1:6-7.

with Jerusalem, Zion, and a generic mountain,¹³⁴ and therefore one may presume that the Temple existed on Mount Zion. Indeed, the Bible often presents the terms Jerusalem, Zion, and Mount Zion as synonyms, sometimes using them interchangeably to refer to the Temple, the mountain under the Temple, and either the regions or people of Jerusalem, Judah, and Israel.¹³⁵

Moreover, two passages strongly imply that the Temple sat on Mount Zion. First, the prophet Micah explains that there is a “mountain of the House of the Eternal” that relates to both Zion and Jerusalem:

וְהָיָה בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים יְהִיָּה הָרַבִּית יְהוָה נֶכֶן בְּרֹאשׁ הַהָרִים וְנִשְׂאָה הוּא
מִגִּבְעוֹת וְנִהְרָוּ עָלָיו עַמִּים: וְהָלְכוּ גוֹיִם רַבִּים וְאָמְרוּ לָכֵן וְנַעֲלֶה אֶל-הָר־
יְהוָה וְאֶל-בֵּית אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב וְיִזְרְנוּ מִדְּרָכָיו וְנִלְכֶּה בְּאַחֲרֵיתוֹ כִּי מִצִּיּוֹן תֵּצֵא
תּוֹרָה וּדְבַר-יְהוָה מִירוּשָׁלַם:

¹In the future days, the mountain of the House of the Eternal will endure on the peak of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and the peoples will stream to it. ²Many nations will go and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Eternal, to the House of the God of Jacob, that God may teach us God's ways, and we will walk in God's paths; for from Zion comes forth Torah, and the word of the Eternal from Jerusalem. (Micah 4:1-2)

In this prophecy of the future, Micah describes an upcoming time in which the Temple, resting on a mountain in Zion/Jerusalem, sits at the center of the world.¹³⁶ This passage conveys multiple key concepts about mountains. First, in verse 1, the text expresses both *הר* and *גבעה* in parallel as synonymously equivalent nouns, both paired with “lifting”

¹³⁴ Again, it is difficult to quantify the exact number of instances of the Temple's connection to Jerusalem and/or its mountain. See, for example, 2 Samuel 24:16-21; Ezekiel 20:40; Psalm 43:3-4; 48:10-12; Lamentations 2:6-8.

¹³⁵ W. Harold Mare, “Zion,” *ABD* 6:1096.

¹³⁶ Ehud Ben Zvi, “Micah,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford, 2004), 1211.

verbs (ונהרו and ונשא). Moreover, by placing the Temple Mount at the center of the world, the Bible conveys a notion of cosmic mountain.¹³⁷ The passage also expresses ideas of pilgrimage to the Temple and its mountain and of mountain as a component of figurative language. In this text, figurative language describes Torah coming from Zion and YHWH's word coming from Jerusalem. The city on a mountain dominates the horizon, with God's judgments and teachings spreading out for all nations to hear and accept.¹³⁸ The mountain therefore acts as a symbol, representing the throne—divine or otherwise—that sits on Mount Zion and presides over the world; the mountain serves a role in a larger metaphor in which Zion signifies God's sovereignty over the earth.

Another key passage that relates the Temple to Mount Zion comes from Psalm 78:

וַיִּבְחַר אֶת־שִׁבְט־יְהוּדָה אֶת־הָרֶ֑צִיּוֹן אֲשֶׁר־אָהָב׃⁶⁹ וַיִּבֶן בְּמִזְבְּחִים מִקְדָּשׁוֹ
בְּאֶרֶץ יִסְדָּה לְעֹלָם׃

⁶⁸God did choose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which God loved. ⁶⁹God built God's Sanctuary like the heavens, like the earth that God established forever. (Ps 78:68-69 NJPS)

This psalm, difficult to categorize,¹³⁹ presents a “lengthy poetic narration of ancient Israel’s historical traditions.”¹⁴⁰ In it, the psalmist recounts Israel’s defiant history, yet ends with the recognition that, rather than choosing the northern kingdom of Joseph/Ephraim, God instead both chose Mount Zion (v. 68) and built God’s sanctuary

¹³⁷ For more information on cosmic mountains, see the introduction, as well as Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*; Eck, “Mountains,” 130-31; and Talmon, “הַר (har),” 3:440-41.

¹³⁸ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, 24-25.

¹³⁹ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, “Psalms,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford, 2004), 1367.

¹⁴⁰ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 340.

(מקדשו, v. 69), presumably on that same mountain. Thus, the Bible depicts a strong connection between sacrifice and mountains, especially the cultic Temple on Mount Zion.

Interestingly, other religions associate sacrifice with mountains, too. The Zinacantan Latin American Mayan Indians, for instance, believe that their deities live on the heights, and so they perform sacrifices upon them.¹⁴¹ Looking more geographically local, the Mesopotamians did not view mountains as noticeably important, although they did build their own high places, ziggurats, which served similar roles as did mountains for the Israelites, including as elevated settings for altars (in addition to dwelling-places for the gods and as cosmological centers).¹⁴² Furthermore, the Canaanites used mountains similarly to the Israelites. As the Israelites conquered the Canaanite settlements of the central mountain range, they also captured the foreign shrines built upon them.¹⁴³ Mount Zaphon (biblically equated with Mount Zion) held the temple to Baal, a Canaanite deity.¹⁴⁴ Even King Solomon, when he strayed from God's path and worshipped other gods, built his foreign altars on mountains, as did other later Israelite kings.¹⁴⁵ These Canaanite cultic mountain shrines may have influenced the Israelite sacrificial model.¹⁴⁶

Why might sacrifice so frequently have occurred on mountains? Scholars have submitted a variety of motives behind the sacrificial system, including as a vestige of

¹⁴¹ Townsend, "Geography," 5:510.

¹⁴² Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 21-22.

¹⁴³ Talmon, "הַר (har)," 3:444. See also: Ellen White, "High Places, Altars, and the Bamah," *Bible History Daily* (23 April 2017), n.p. [cited 15 January 2018]. Online: <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-israel/high-places-altars-and-the-bamah/>.

¹⁴⁴ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 4. See, for example, Psalm 48:2-3.

¹⁴⁵ Talmon, "הַר (har)," 3:444. See, for example, 1 Kings 11:6-8; 2 Kings 23:13.

¹⁴⁶ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 107. Anderson, "Sacrifice," 5:872-874.

offering food to the deities, as strengthening the bond between humanity and God, and as presenting gifts to God.¹⁴⁷ Additionally, mountains serve as cosmic meeting points between heaven and earth.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, the Bible does suggest at times that God dwells above.¹⁴⁹ For instance, just as God's earthly throne sits in the Temple on Mount Zion, God's true seat rests in the heavens.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, the Bible even describes God as a "God of Heaven."¹⁵¹ It therefore makes sense that Israelites would employ this cultic method of connecting to God on a place that bridges the mortal earth and divine heaven.

Talmon also suggests a theory about the development of YHWH as a mountain God. He essentially explains that the Bible, in its presentation of the exodus from Egypt through the occupation of Canaan, contains a poetic tradition of Israel's God traveling with them from mountain to mountain. What may have started as a series of traditions of different deities dwelling on different mountains eventually transformed into a nomadic god moving with the Israelites from mountain to mountain, and finalized with the notion that God dwells on one mountain and therefore only accepts sacrifice from one singular mountain sanctuary, the Temple on Zion.¹⁵² This theory explains in part why the Temple and its mountain became so closely linked, because God became associated not only with mountains but the sanctuaries on top of them, too, and eventually the mountains narrowed down to one mountain and the sanctuaries to one sanctuary. In this sense, then, sacrifice on mountains is a byproduct of trying to connect to this mountain God.

¹⁴⁷ Anderson, "Sacrifice," 5:871-872.

¹⁴⁸ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 3.

¹⁴⁹ Mitchell G. Reddish, "Heaven," *ABD* 3:90.

¹⁵⁰ Reddish, "Heaven," 3:90. See Isaiah 6:1; 40:22; 66:1; Psalm 11:4; 102:20.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. See Jonah 1:9; Ezra 1:2; 2 Chronicles 36:23.

¹⁵² Talmon, "הר (*har*)," 3:443-45.

Mountains and Other Religious Acts

Mountains played key roles not only in sacrifice but also in other religious (God-related) rituals and acts. One such rite appears first in Deuteronomy and then again in Joshua: the mountain ritual upon entering the land, occurring on Mounts Ebal and Gerizim. In Moses' second Deuteronomic discourse (Deuteronomy 4:44-28:68),¹⁵³ he first briefly mentions the ritual in 11:29, then elaborates with more detail in chapter 27. God commands the Israelites to perform a series of acts that connect entering the land to obeying the rules of Torah.¹⁵⁴ One such ritual includes erecting stones and building an altar on Mount Ebal:

וְהָיָה בְּעֶבְרְכֶם אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן תָּקִימוּ אֶת־הָאֲבָנִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מַצְוֶה
אִתְּכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּהָר עֵיבָל וְשִׁדַּת אוֹתָם בְּשִׁיד׃⁵ וּבִנְיַת שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה
אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִזְבֵּחַ אֲבָנִים לֹא־תִנֶּיף עֲלֵיהֶם בַּרְזֶל׃

⁴Upon crossing the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, about which I charge you this day, on Mount Ebal, and coat them with plaster. ⁵ There, too, you shall build an altar to the *Eternal* your God, an altar of stones. Do not wield an iron tool over them. (Deut 27:4-5 NJPS)

Once again, a mountain provides the location for an altar for sacrifice. Then, however, Moses instructs the Israelites to perform a unique ritual:

וַיִּצְוֵ מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הָעָם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר׃¹² אֵלֶּה יַעֲמִדוּ לְבָרֵךְ אֶת־הָעָם
עַל־הָהָר גְּרִזִּים בְּעֶבְרְכֶם אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן שְׁמֵעוֹן וְלֵוִי וַיהוּדָה וִישָׁשְׁכָר וִיוֹסֵף
וּבְנֵימִן׃¹³ וְאֵלֶּה יַעֲמִדוּ עַל־הַקְּלָלָה בְּהָר עֵיבָל רְאוּבֵן גָּד וְאַשֶּׁר וְזִבְלוֹן דָּן
וְנַפְתָּלִי׃

¹¹ Thereupon Moses charged the people, saying: ¹²After you have crossed the Jordan, the following shall stand on Mount Gerizim when the blessing for the people is spoken: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin. ¹³And for the curse, the following shall stand on Mount Ebal: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphthali. (Deut 27:11-13 NJPS)

¹⁵³ Bernard M. Levinson, "Deuteronomy," in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford, 2004), 362.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 425.

After the Israelite tribes position themselves on their respective mountains, the Levites must proclaim a series of curses, after which the blessing-tribes announce their blessings and the curse-tribes say their curses (Deuteronomy 27:14-28:68).¹⁵⁵ Later, in Joshua 8:30-35, the Israelites carry out these commandments.

This ritual combines geography with God's law to create a covenant ceremony.¹⁵⁶ Topography plays a central role in this ritual: the two mountains face each other in the hill country of Ephraim, north and south of Shechem, with a valley in between.¹⁵⁷ The act comprises covenant-making; the recitation of blessings and curses—the terms of the deal—often concluded pacts in the ancient Near East.¹⁵⁸ The fact that this ritual transpires on a mountain makes the ceremony even more poignant. The mountains provide a physical tool for proclaiming the covenant, producing a natural amphitheater for the proclamation despite the mountains existing one to two miles apart. As Tigay writes, “Acoustically, given the right temperature, humidity, and lack of air turbulence, the two groups of tribes could have heard each other across that distance.”¹⁵⁹ Moreover, from Mount Ebal, one can see not only Mount Gerizim and Shechem, but also, in theory, Jerusalem (only five miles away), the *shephelah*, the Carmel ridge, and other geographic landmarks of the biblical land.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, whoever ruled over Mount Ebal could control

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 426.

¹⁵⁶ Carol Meyers, “Joshua,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford, 2004), 478.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 478. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 252.

¹⁵⁸ Meyers, “Joshua,” 479. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 251-252.

¹⁵⁹ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 252.

¹⁶⁰ G. A. Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, 94-95, quoted in Boling, *Judges*, 247.

much of the hill country.¹⁶¹ These mountains, then, provided a ripe stage for a most impressive ritual, one that not only made for a stunning visual and acoustic ceremony, but sent a message of power and control of the land, too.

Another religious act worth mentioning is that of Moses striking the rock, an event that happens twice, once in Exodus 17 and again in Numbers 20.¹⁶² In both cases, the people complain about their thirst, to which Moses responds by striking a rock from which water flows.¹⁶³ While in Numbers 20, the rock is a סלע, in Exodus 17 the rock is a צור, and so it is on Exodus 17 that this thesis will focus:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה עֲבֹר לִפְנֵי הָעָם וְקַח אֶת־רֹדֶף מִזִּקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִטֶּדֶן
 אֲשֶׁר הִכִּיתָ בּוֹ אֶת-הַיָּאֵר קַח בְּיָדְךָ וְהִלַכְתָּ: ⁶הֲנִנִי עֹמֵד לִפְנֶיךָ שָׁם | עַל-
 הַצּוֹר בְּחֶרֶב וְהִכִּיתָ בַּצּוֹר וַיֵּצְאוּ מִמֶּנּוּ מֵיִם וְשָׁתָה הָעָם וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן מֹשֶׁה
 לְעֵינֵי זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

⁵Then the *Eternal* said to Moses, "Pass before the people; take with you some of the elders of Israel, and take along the rod with which you struck the Nile, and set out. ⁶I will be standing there before you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will issue from it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. (Exod 17:5-6 NJPS)

Although, as Chapter 1 explained, a צור often means a large, mountain-sized rock, one could argue that this צור is not significantly large. After all, its parallel story, Numbers 20, uses the noun סלע, which often (though not always) refers to general or small rocks.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, although צור and חורב (a mountain) appear together, it is not צור חרב, "the rock

¹⁶¹ Boling, *Judges*, 247.

¹⁶² Although some might not consider striking the rock a religious act, based on my earlier definition of religious acts involving God, I have deemed the inclusion of these stories as more appropriate for this chapter than for Chapter 2. Because these stories tell of human actions upon rocks that influence divine action, I have included them here.

¹⁶³ The exegetical implications of Moses striking instead of speaking to the rock will not be examined here.

¹⁶⁴ Fabry, "צור (*šûr*)," 12:314.

of Horeb,” but הצור בחרב, “the rock at Horeb.” However, the rock may indeed denote a sizeable rock. In fact, for this passage, William H.C. Propp translates צור not as “rock” but as “mountain,” indicating that the צור is a synonym for mountain.¹⁶⁵ He explains that “rock” inadequately defines צור in this case, because if God stands on the צור, then it must be larger than even a boulder; hence, he argues, “הצור בחרב” actually means “Mount Horeb (or a part thereof).”¹⁶⁶ No matter the size of the צור, however, the story still occurs at a mountain and thus pertains to this thesis.

This narrative account indicates new features of mountains that affect the biblical characters. Even in the desert, mountains could supply much-needed water in times of necessity. While mountainous water sometimes originated from precipitation,¹⁶⁷ in this story from Exodus 17, the water most likely came from the soft, porous limestone’s ability to retain water.¹⁶⁸ This notion of water as a life-giving source appears elsewhere in the Bible, such as waters flowing from the Temple (Mount) in Ezekiel 47:1, Zechariah 14:8, and Joel 4:18,¹⁶⁹ and mountains receiving rainwater in Isaiah’s prophecy of the future in Isaiah 30:25.¹⁷⁰ In fact, Canaanite mythology also presents mountains as sources of water and fertility,¹⁷¹ and in Egypt, mountains related to the flood waters of creation.¹⁷² Indeed, biblical poets later utilized this life-sustaining imagery in their

¹⁶⁵ William Propp, *Exodus 1-18* (AB; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 601.

¹⁶⁶ Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 605.

¹⁶⁷ Talmon, “הר (har),” 3:446.

¹⁶⁸ Sarna, *Exodus*, 94.

¹⁶⁹ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 100.

¹⁷⁰ Talmon, “הר (har),” 3:446.

¹⁷¹ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 3.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 25-26.

comparisons of God to rocks (see the section “Mountains in Figurative Speech” later in this chapter).

The Bible presents another religious event, that of dying on a mountain.¹⁷³ For instance, God specifically commands Moses to ascend Mount Nebo so he can die there:

עֲלֵה אֶל־הָרֹם הָעֵבְרִים הַזֶּה הָרִנְבוֹ אֲשֶׁר בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי יְרֵחוֹ⁴⁹
וְרָאָה אֶת־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֻחֻזָּה:⁵⁰ וּמָת בְּהָרַי אֲשֶׁר
אֶתָּה עֹלֶה שָׁמָּה וְהֶאֱסָפְךָ אֶל־עַמֶּיךָ בְּאֶשְׁר־יָמָת אֶהְרֹן אֲחִיךָ בְּהָרֵי הָהָר
וַיֶּאֱסֹף אֶל־עַמּוֹ:

⁴⁹Ascend this mountain of Abarim, Mount Nebo, that is in the land of Moab, that is across from Jericho; and view the land of Canaan that I give to the People of Israel as a possession. ⁵⁰You shall die there, on the mountain that you shall ascend, and you shall be gathered to your people; just as Aaron, your brother, died on Mount Hor, and was gathered to his people. (Deut 32:49-50)

Aaron similarly dies on Mount Hor:

וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶל־הָרֵי הָהָר לְעֵינֵי כָל־הָעֵדָה:²⁷
וַיִּפְשֹׁט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־אֶהְרֹן אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וַיַּלְבֵּשׁ אֹתָם אֶת־אֶלְעָזָר בֶּנוֹ וַיָּמָת
אֶהְרֹן שָׁם בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיֵּרֶד מֹשֶׁה וְאֶלְעָזָר מִן־הָהָר:

²⁷Moses did as the *Eternal* had commanded. They ascended Mount Hor in the sight of the whole community. ²⁸Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar, and Aaron died there on the summit of the mountain. When Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain... (Num 20:27-28 NJPS)

¹⁷³ One could argue that the two deaths mentioned here, Moses' and Aaron's, are not religious events, since they do not seem to be about the human-divine relationship. I have nonetheless chosen to include them here for a few reasons. First, as established in Genesis 3:22, death does relate to God, who banished humanity from seemingly eternal life in Eden. Second, the Israelite religion viewed God as the master of life and death (Richards, “Death,” 110). Indeed, God seems to be the one in charge of both Moses' and Aaron's deaths. Finally, both deaths affect the religious leadership of the Israelites, influencing the cult and religious practices of the people in the land. Thus, I have included their deaths as religious events in this chapter.

These passages reveal worthwhile information regarding mountains in the Bible. In Numbers 20:28, Aaron dies at ראש ההר, “the summit of the mountain.” This text uses a body part, “head,” to describe a part of the mountain. Certain other passages implement anatomical language to describe mountains, too, including other cases of ראש (“head” or “summit”), כתף (“shoulder” or “slope”), and תחתית/תחת (“foot” or “base”).¹⁷⁴ Although the Bible gives no reason as to why it utilizes anatomical language for mountains, German philosopher Ernst Cassirer posits that the biblical authors saw the world through an analogy of the human body.¹⁷⁵ Thus, there may be a relationship between mountains and bodies.

Moreover, these passages teach that mountains served as the place of death for two significant characters, Aaron and Moses. For Aaron, in Numbers 20, the mountain acts as a public stage for the transfer of power from Aaron to his son Eleazar. For Moses’ announced death in Deuteronomy 32, the mountain provides the height necessary to see the land without entering, a partial concession to Moses’ plea in Deuteronomy 3:25 to “cross over and see” the land.¹⁷⁶ Although one cannot observe the entire land from Mount Nebo (e.g. the Mediterranean, Dan, and Zoar are too far away), the view nonetheless offers remarkable sights.¹⁷⁷ Ultimately, the mountain settings, with their impressive

¹⁷⁴ For ראש, see, for example, Exodus 19:20; Joshua 15:8; and Isaiah 42:11. For כתף, see, for instance, Numbers 34:11; Joshua 15:8, and Ezekiel 25:9. For תחתית/תחת, see, for example, Exodus 19:17; 24:4; 32:19; and Deuteronomy 4:11. (Talmon, “הר (*har*),” 3:432)

¹⁷⁵ Cassirer, Ernst, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II, 83ff, quoted in Talmon, “הר (*har*),” 3:432.

¹⁷⁶ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 317.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 336.

heights and views of the land and people below, add a sense of “mystery and grandeur” to these heroes’ deaths.¹⁷⁸

Prophecy

The Bible also presents mountains in relation to prophecy. The prophets both prophesied from mountains and spoke of them in oracles and visions. Additionally, mountains often appear in scenes of future days.¹⁷⁹

In at least one case, mountains provide the narrative setting for prophecy. Balaam, in his curse-turned-blessing on Israel in the desert, strikes up his theme from atop a mountain:

וַיְהִי בַבֹּקֶר וַיִּקַּח בָּלָק אֶת-בִּלְעָם וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ בְּמֹת בַּעַל וַיֵּרָא מִשָּׁם קֶצֶה
הָעָם:

In the morning, Balak took Balaam, and brought him up the high places of Baal; he saw from there a section of the people. (Num 22:41)

In this verse, Balaam ascends a height to announce his prophecy. The mountain plays a significant role here. First, Balaam ascends בְּמֹת בַּעַל, here translated as “high places of

¹⁷⁸ Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 169.

¹⁷⁹ One could argue that prophecy is simply the word of God, belonging in Chapter 4, and that prophecy and poetry are not religious, and so do not belong here. However, I have chosen to categorize them in this chapter for a few reasons. First, I assume that the prophets added their own flair to their oracles. As Heschel writes, “The prophet is a person, not a microphone. He is endowed with a mission, with the power of a word not his own that accounts for his greatness—but also with temperament, concern, character, and individuality” (Heschel, *The Prophets*, xiv). Thus, by bringing in human personality, the prophet enters into relationship with God (as articulated, for example, by the prophet heeding the call in Isaiah 6). Moreover, the use of figurative language frequently captures the speakers’ yearnings to express their personal emotions, often about some aspect or theological notion relating to the divine (Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 112, 140). Therefore, because these passages involve human expressions of the relationship between God and humanity, I have categorized them here as religious.

Baal.”¹⁸⁰ A בִּמְהָ can mean a few different concepts depending on context, including “back,” “mountain ridge” or “hill,” and “high place of worship.”¹⁸¹ In fact, the Septuagint calls this site בֵּעַל בִּמְתָּ, meaning “the cultic platform of Baal,” indicating a shrine to the Canaanite god Baal.¹⁸² Indeed, the next verse (23:1) reveals that Balaam ordered the construction of seven altars, strengthening the notion that this site contained a cultic shrine. Recall that mountains served as locations of sacrifice not only for the Israelites, but also for the Canaanites, as exemplified by this verse.

While the verse does not specifically mention a “mountain,” one can infer that Balaam stood on a mountain for his prophecy due to two key words, namely בִּמְהָ, which sometimes appears as a synonym for mountain,¹⁸³ and וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ, which comes from the root עלה, “ascend.”¹⁸⁴ Furthermore, in later verses, Balaam indicates that he stands atop mountains:

כִּי־מֵרָאשׁ צֻרִים אֶרְאֶנּוּ
וּמִגְּבְעוֹת אֲשׁוּרֵנּוּ
הֶזְעַם לְבַדָּד יִשְׁכֵּן
וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב:

For from the peak of mountain-rocks I see him,
and from hills view him;
they are a people that dwells alone,
and nations do not reckon. (Num 23:9)

¹⁸⁰ While some other interpretations, such as NJPS and NRSV, simply name this place as “*Bamoth-baal*,” I have chosen to translate the words into English to highlight the relationship of the height and Canaanite altar.

¹⁸¹ HALOT, s.v. “בִּמְהָ.”

¹⁸² Milgrom, *Numbers*, 193.

¹⁸³ See, for example, Numbers 21:28; 2 Samuel 1:19, 25; Micah 3:12.

¹⁸⁴ Talmon, “הַר (*har*),” 3:429-30.

Note the syntactic parallelism in the first bi-colon: מראש צרים אראנו, a mountain-noun with a vision-verb, appears parallel to ומגבעות אשורנו, another mountain-noun with a vision-verb. Note also the use of צור as a “mountain” or “mountain-sized rock.”¹⁸⁵ Taken together, these two verses allude to why Balaam prophesies from a mountain. First, the mountain shrine provides the opportunity for sacrifice, which, as previously mentioned, offers the chance for humans to connect with the divine. Second, the mountain’s height enables Balaam to observe the people; Balaam must maintain visual contact with the Israelites to offer a curse against them.¹⁸⁶

Prophets incorporate mountains into their prophecies, too. Often, they speak of mountains in historical or predictive ways. Isaiah repeatedly refers to mountains in his speeches about the future, especially Mount Zion:

בַּעֲתֹ הָהִיא יִבְלִשִׁי לַיהוָה צְבָאוֹת עִם מַמְשֶׁךְ וּמוֹרָט וּמַעַם נוֹרָא מִן־הוּא
וְהָלְאָה גִזִּי | קוֹקְוָה וּמְבוֹסָה אֲשֶׁר בְּזָאוּ נְהָרִים אֶרְצוֹ אֶל־מְקוֹם שֵׁם־יְהוָה
צְבָאוֹת הַר־צִיּוֹן:

In that time, Tribute shall be brought to the *Eternal* of Hosts From a people far and remote, From a people thrust forth and away -- A nation of gibber and chatter, Whose land is cut off by streams -- At the place where the name of the *Eternal* of Hosts abides, At Mount Zion. (Isa 18:7 NJPS)

In this oracle, Isaiah describes a future time in which the world recognizes God’s authority on Mount Zion.¹⁸⁷ Indeed, Isaiah and other prophets frequently speaks of an

¹⁸⁵ I have rendered the use of צור as “mountain-rock” based in part on the *HALOT* definition of “צור” (*HALOT*, s.v. “צור”) and the NJPS translation, as well as the fact that גבעות and צורים are parallel.

¹⁸⁶ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 193.

¹⁸⁷ Benjamin D. Sommer, “Isaiah,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford, 2004), 819-20.

upcoming period in which Mount Zion exists at the center of the world, no doubt because of its connection to the Temple.¹⁸⁸

Additionally, other predictive prophecies reference mountains. Zechariah, in one oracle, relates a future with Jerusalem in the center and where the Mount of Olives (rather than Mount Zion) splits in earth-shattering events:

ועמדו רגליו ביום־ההוא על־הר הזיתים אשר על־פני ירושלם מקדם
ונבקע הר הזיתים מחציו מזרחה וימה גיא גדולה מאד ומש חצי ההר
צפונה וחציו־נגבה:

On that day, *God* will set *God's* feet on the Mount of Olives, near Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall split across from east to west, and one part of the Mount shall shift to the north and the other to the south, a huge gorge. (Zech 14:4 NJPS)

In this vision of the future, God will display God's might through the shattering of mountains.¹⁸⁹ Other predictive uses of mountains include Amos 9:13 (cf. Joel 4:18), which speaks of a future day of hope in which “mountains will drip with wine.”

The use of mountains in oracles of the future reflect, in part, the prophets' reality; just as they lived in mountain regions, so, too, did their prophecies involve future events happening on and around mountains. Mount Zion's importance for the daily religious life of the Israelite cult embedded it in prophets' predictions of the future. Moreover, because mountains played cosmologically significant roles, the prophets utilized them in their oracles about God's future world.¹⁹⁰

The prophets also perceive mountains in visions and dreams. The prophet Zechariah, for example, sees mountains in his vision:

¹⁸⁸ See, for example, Isaiah 2:2; 11:9; 24:23; 25:6; 37:32; Joel 3:5; 4:17.

¹⁸⁹ Note that this verse also relates to Chapter 4, in which God performs these mighty deeds.

¹⁹⁰ Talmon, “הר (*har*),” 3:446-47.

וָאָשָׁב וָאֶשָׂא עֵינַי וָאֶרְאֶה וְהִנֵּה אַרְבַּע מְרֻכְבוֹת יֹצְאוֹת מִבֵּין שְׁנֵי הַהָרִים
וְהָהָרִים הָרִי נְחֹשֶׁת:

I looked up again, and I saw: Four chariots were coming out from between the two mountains; the mountains were of copper. (Zech 6:1 NJPS)

In his first six chapters, Zechariah presents eight detailed, mostly apocalyptic visions.¹⁹¹

This eighth vision sees four chariots emerging from between two copper mountains, representing the four winds. Visions of chariots may recall Ezekiel 1, although Ezekiel's vision lacks mountains. In this case, Zechariah literally sees these mountains, although they could contain unknown symbolic messages.¹⁹² Similarly, Daniel's interpretations of the king's dream include mountains (Daniel 2:35, 45).¹⁹³

Mountains in Figurative Speech

Beyond the literal expressions of mountains by the prophets, other prophetic and poetic passages render mountains as components of figurative language. Mountains and rocks serve as parts of larger abstract messages. These geological features act as metaphors themselves and as parts of larger figurative meanings.

The prophets employed mountains using figurative language to express “the concrete for the abstract.”¹⁹⁴ In this sense, the prophets speak of mountains as part of a larger message; the mountains indicate literal mountains, but they fit into a larger prophetic notion that uses figurative language to express another idea. Sometimes, the exact meaning of the prophetic words remains unclear; a prophet may weave together

¹⁹¹ Ehud Ben Zvi, “Zechariah,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford, 2004), 1251.

¹⁹² Ibid., 1255. Suggs et al, *Oxford Study Bible*, 988.

¹⁹³ In these verses, the text uses the Aramaic form of צור, “טור,” which means “mountain” (*HALOT*, s.v. “טור”).

¹⁹⁴ As taught by Dr. Andrea Weiss, HUC-JIR.

literal and figurative elements to produce a more evocative message.¹⁹⁵ Moreover, a prophet often voices “fictive” instead of “natural” speech, employing more formal or poetic language to indicate divine dialogue; hence, the figurative language adds a layer of loftiness that further complicates simple interpretation.¹⁹⁶

Jeremiah, for example, in lamenting Judah’s destruction, speaks of annihilation on the mountains:¹⁹⁷

עַל-כָּל-שָׁפִים בַּמִּדְבָּר בָּאוּ שָׂדִדִים כִּי חָרַב לִיהוָה אֲכָלָה מִקְצֵה-אֶרֶץ וְעַד-
קְצֵה הָאֶרֶץ אֵין שָׁלוֹם לְכָל-בָּשָׂר:

Spoilers have come Upon all the bare heights of the wilderness. For a sword of the *Eternal* devours From one end of the land to the other; No flesh is safe. (Jer 12:12 NJPS)

In the entire passage, the prophet employs figurative language to describe reality, such as “My House” (ביתִי) referring to the Temple and “My possession” (נחלתִי) meaning the people of Judah (v. 7).¹⁹⁸ Then, in this verse, Jeremiah speaks of “spoilers” (or “destroyers,” שָׂדִדִים) attacking the “bare heights” (שָׁפִים).¹⁹⁹ Jeremiah clearly refers to the destruction of Jerusalem, noting its geography (a mountain city surrounded by other height) and recalling the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, who used the mountain topography to their advantage.²⁰⁰ Other passages mention attacks through peaks, such as

¹⁹⁵ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 159.

¹⁹⁶ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse* (Chicago, 1978), quoted in Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 141.

¹⁹⁷ Marvin A. Sweeney, “Jeremiah,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford, 2004), 951.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ See the analysis of שָׁפִים in Chapter 1.

²⁰⁰ Mordechai Cogan, “Into Exile: From the Assyrian Conquest of Israel to the Fall of Babylon,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (ed. Michael D. Coogan; New York: Oxford University, 2001), 242-75.

Ezekiel 38:21 and 39:4, prophecies against the enemy Gog. In these two Ezekiel verses, mountains once again play a predictive role in the final days of judgment.²⁰¹

Similarly, in Isaiah 2, during a poetic condemnation of the current state of Jerusalem's inhabitants,²⁰² the prophet warns against the fate of those who continue to sin:

וּבָאוּ בַּמְעֵרוֹת צְרִים וּבַמְחִלּוֹת עֶפְרַיִם מִפְּנֵי פֶחַד יְהוָה וּמִהֲדַר גְּאוֹנוֹ בְּקוֹמוֹ
לְעֶרֶץ הָאָרֶץ:

And *they* shall enter caverns in the rock And hollows in the ground --
Before the terror of the *Eternal* And *God's* dread majesty, When *God*
comes forth to overawe the earth. (Isa 2:19 NJPS)

Isaiah expresses the concrete notion of rocks and hollows as part of an abstract message about fleeing and fear. The prophet speaks of people hiding in caves in צְרִים (“rocks”), indicating that, at least in this oracle, a צור must be large enough to fit a human-sized (or larger) cave. Whether Isaiah means that people will literally hide in caves is unclear.

Walter Brueggemann insists that Isaiah speaks a “poetic act of imagination,” using rhetorical language to emphasize his message.²⁰³ Hans Wildberger, on the other hand, argues that Isaiah's message is “authentic.”²⁰⁴ One can imagine that when God's day of destruction happens, the people will, indeed, try to hide. Either way, the message remains: people will be so frightened that they will at least *desire* to hide in rocky caves. Thus, the prophet depicts mountains as part of a warning against the continuation of Israel's sinful ways.

²⁰¹ Talmon, “הַר (*har*),” 3:446.

²⁰² Sommer, “Isaiah,” 787-88.

²⁰³ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, 31.

²⁰⁴ Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 119.

Jeremiah also speaks of mountains using figurative language, such as in chapter 3 when he decries Israel's wayward path:

קוֹל עַל־שָׁפָיִים נִשְׁמָע בְּכִי תַחֲנוּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי הָעוּל אֶת־דִּרְכָּם שָׁכְחוּ
אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיהֶם:

Hark! On the bare heights is heard The suppliant weeping of the people of Israel, For they have gone a crooked way, Ignoring the *Eternal* their God. (Jer 3:21 NJPS)

Note again the use of שָׁפִי.²⁰⁵ Jeremiah speaks of the current situation of Israel, using mountains to emphasize his message: that the cry of Israel rings so loud that one can hear it atop mountains. The prophet thus uses the imagery of mountains to create a more compelling verse; instead of saying “their cries were loud” he paints a picture of vocalized laments traveling up and out into the hills. Whether one could literally hear the wailing on mountains remains unclear, however.²⁰⁶

Other prophetic passages cast mountains as concrete symbols for abstract concepts, too. Isaiah, for example, speaks of Judah's upcoming disaster after Ahaz's distrust of God.²⁰⁷

וְכָל הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּעֲדָל יַעֲדִירוֹן לֹא־תָבֹא שָׁמָּה יִרְאֶת שְׁמִיר וְשִׁית וְהָיָה
לְמִשְׁלַח שׁוֹר וּלְמִרְמָס שֶׁה:

And all the mountains that are hoed with a hoe, you will not go there for fear of thorns and thistles; it will be pastureland for cattle, and trampled land for sheep. (Isa 7:25)

In this and surrounding verses (7:18-25), Isaiah predicts a future—a direct consequence of Ahaz's actions²⁰⁸—in which the mountains will no longer be tilled, and agricultural

²⁰⁵ See Chapter 1 for more information on שָׁפִי.

²⁰⁶ See also Isaiah 7:19; Jeremiah 3:23; 7:29.

²⁰⁷ Sommer, “Isaiah,” 799.

²⁰⁸ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, 72.

land upon the mountains will become overgrown. The prophet seems to warn of a literal disaster that negatively affects crops and cattle. At the same time, however, the passage alludes to larger destruction, indicating not only a disruption of farming but also of Judah's entire way of life. In this way, the prophet's oracle refers to "Isaiah's real world of geopolitics" in addition to the religious realm of God.²⁰⁹ While "thistles and thorns" appear as the key words, the mountain setting nonetheless provides the landscape for the barrenness that life will become.

Other ways in which prophets speak of mountains as concrete symbols for the abstract include references to declarations from mountains. In Isaiah's "Babylon Pronouncement" (משא בבל) of chapter 13, for example, a prophecy regarding the destruction of Babylonia, the prophet summons a military gathering to fulfill God's plan:

עַל הַר־נִשְׁפָּה שְׂאוּ־נֵס הָרִימוּ קוֹל לָהֶם הַנִּיפּוּ יָד וַיָּבֵאוּ פִתְחֵי נְדִיבִים:

On the windswept mountain, raise a flag, cry out to them; wave a hand,
and they will enter the noble gates! (Isa 13:2)

Here, the prophet summons his kin to raise a (military) flag on the mountain, a sign for impending battle against Babylon.²¹⁰ In verse 4, he then calls for a "tumultuous roar on the mountains" (קול המון בהרים), a mighty force of assembled nations ready for war. In the military, raising a signal indicated that the army must move, and so Isaiah commands the troops to proceed to war.²¹¹ However, whether Isaiah intends to literally move an army into battle remains unclear; the use of figurative language obscures the veracity of his

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 73.

²¹⁰ Note that this prophet regards Babylon, not Assyria, as the major world power, indicating that this text probably comes from a later, exilic writer rather than the pre-exilic Proto-Isaiah (Sommer, "Isaiah," 809).

²¹¹ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, 116.

statement. Either way, however, his message stands: a rallying-cry to move against powerful enemies.²¹²

Other verses also involve a cry from on mountains, such as Isaiah 40:9:

עַל הַר־גְּבוּהָ עֲלִי־לָךְ מִבְּשֶׁרֶת צִיּוֹן הָרִימִי בְּכַח קוֹלְךָ מִבְּשֶׁרֶת יְרוּשָׁלַם
הָרִימִי אֶל־תִּירְאִי אִמְרֵי לְעָרֵי יְהוּדָה הִנֵּה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Ascend a lofty mountain, O herald of joy to Zion; Raise your voice with power, O herald of joy to Jerusalem -- Raise it, have no fear; Announce to the cities of Judah: Behold your God! (Isa 40:9 NJPS)

The prophet calls for messengers to announce God's arrival in Jerusalem from atop a "lofty mountain" (הַר גְּבוּהָ). The messengers will proclaim the liberation of Israel from atop this height.²¹³ Once again, one must ask whether the messengers will literally call from a mountain, or if the prophet uses vivid imagery to convey only an abstract truth; either way, the passage emphasizes that messengers will shepherd in God's arrival.

In all, these passages tend to utilize mountains, either literally or symbolically (or both), to represent the fulfillment of God's will and as locations for upcoming events.²¹⁴ The mountain serves as a powerful symbol: the mountaintop on which everyone can view and hear the message (or, at least, see the banner) and thus heed the call. Whether that declaration demands rallying the troops or rejoicing over God enacting justice in the world, the prophet uses figurative language to enhance the message.

The prophets and other biblical poets also use mountains in metaphorical ways. As this thesis will soon explore, sometimes mountains and rocks act as the metaphor themselves, representing some other concept. However, at other times, the Bible presents

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Talmon, "הַר (*har*)," 3:446.

²¹⁴ See also Isaiah 25:9-12; 52:7; Jeremiah 31:6; Joel 2:1.

heights as components of larger allegorical concepts, where the figurative speech does not focus on the mountain and yet the mountain nonetheless elaborates the analogy. Furthermore, mountains appear as parts of other types of figurative speech beyond metaphors, including personification and allegory. Overall, biblical poetry often portrays mountains as symbols to help signify other physical and theological concepts.

For instance, not only do prophets speak on mountains, as previously mentioned, but also *to* mountains, as in Ezekiel 36, in which God commands Ezekiel to speak to the heights:

וַאֲתָהּ בֶן-אָדָם הִנָּבֵא אֶל-הָרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ הָרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁמָעוּ דְבַר-
יְהוָה:

And you, O mortal, prophesy to the mountains of Israel and say: O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the *Eternal*. (Ezek 36:1 NJPS)

In this verse, the prophet directs his speech at the mountains of Israel, even calling out to them as personified entities. In fact, this verse stands as a foil to the previous biblical chapter, in which God tells Ezekiel to prophesy against Mount Seir, indicating the nation of Edom.²¹⁵ Thus, while Ezekiel 35 depicts a condemnation of Edom, chapter 36 presents an oracle of restoration for Israel. This, then, suggests another use of mountains in the Bible: as personifications for peoples. The Bible ascribes the mountains that so poignantly define the geographic area to the nation that dwells within or around them. Other passages involve a prophet speaking to the mountains as personified entities, often

²¹⁵ Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 712.

bearing witness.²¹⁶ Biblical prophets—and psalmists—additionally speak to mountains seeking a response, such as rejoicing or praise²¹⁷ or to turn over to show God’s might.²¹⁸

The prophets and psalmists spoke to the mountains as a literary device to drive home their message.²¹⁹ Mountains’ consistency and stability provided important symbolism for wisdom literature.²²⁰ Moreover, as massive geological features, they stand out as key features of their geographic regions, and thus came to represent the entire land as a whole, such as Sinai connoting both the wilderness of Sinai and the mountain therein; this led to the association with the people of the land, too.²²¹ Ultimately, as symbols of security, impregnability,²²² and strength,²²³ mountains no doubt evoked strong feelings in biblical poets, leading to their personification and literary representation of the people.

The prophets employ mountains in other figurative ways, too. For example, Isaiah uses mountains as part of a metaphor for arrogance:

וַאֲתָה אָמַרְתָּ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶעֱלֶה מִמֶּנִּי לְכוֹכְבֵי-אֵל אֲרִים כְּסֵאִי וְאֶשְׁבֵּה
בְּהַר-מוֹעֵד בִּירֵכְתִי צִפּוֹן:

Once you thought in your heart, “I will climb to the sky; Higher than the stars of God I will set my throne. I will sit in the mount of assembly, On the summit of Zaphon.” (Isa 14:13 NJPS)

²¹⁶ See, for example, Isaiah 10:32; Micah 6:1.

²¹⁷ See Psalm 48:12; 148:9.

²¹⁸ See Zechariah 4:7.

²¹⁹ Note that the Bible personifies other natural features, too. In Isaiah 55:12, for example, not only do the “mountains and hills” (הַהָרִים וְהַגְּבָעוֹת) cheer, but the “trees of the field” (עֲצֵי הַשָּׂדֶה) clap their hands. Moreover, in Judges 9:8-15, Jotham tells a parable of trees anointing a monarch over themselves (Amit, “Judges,” 530-31). Finally, Isaiah 44:23, 49:13, and Psalm 148 all call for natural elements to praise God.

²²⁰ Fabry, “צֹר” (*šûr*), 12:315.

²²¹ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 109.

²²² *Ibid.*, 153.

²²³ Talmon, “הַר” (*har*), 3:440.

This verse appears in a “mock dirge” parodying an Assyrian (identified as Babylonian) king.²²⁴ Overall, the verse uses a dirge meter,²²⁵ and involves the prophet placing words in the king’s mouth.²²⁶ The passage presents a metaphor of climbing mountains as a symbol of arrogance. This perhaps recalls the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) in which the people also tried to climb too high in their conceit.

The passage moreover resembles Ugaritic texts about polytheistic deities dwelling on cosmic mountains, translated into the monotheistic language of the Bible. In this case, the notion of a foreign king climbing a cosmic mountain to achieve divinity transformed into a prophetic admonition against arrogance.²²⁷ Perhaps the strongest evidence for this transformation comes from the use of “Zaphon” (צפון), a vestige of a reference to the mountain on which the Canaanite god Baal dwelled. Indeed, Isaiah also refers to the king as “Shining One” (הילל) and “son of Dawn” (בן-שחר) in verse 12, references to a Canaanite mythological character and perhaps even to the high god El.²²⁸

Trying to achieve great heights as a sign of arrogance seems to be a classic trope, not only in these texts but in other contexts, too, such as the Greek myth of Icarus flying too close to the sun. These stories share common attributes: height as a perceived difficult or nearly unreachable challenge and a character attempting to reach that height as a means of pushing the limits of the natural (or God-approved) order. In the context of the Bible, then, the mountain functions as this same setting of unreachable height. However, the Bible also adds a theological twist: mountains may be unachievable except when

²²⁴ Sommer, “Isaiah,” 812.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, 131.

²²⁷ Talmon, “הר (*har*),” 3:441-42.

²²⁸ Sommer, “Isaiah,” 812-13.

ordained by God. Moses, Elijah, and other characters can safely climb mountains to reach God, whereas foreign kings cannot.

Isaiah speaks of climbing mountains as arrogance again in a latter passage:

בֵּיד עֲבָדֶיךָ חֲרַפְתָּ | אֲדֹנָי וְתֹאמַר בָּרַב רֶכֶבִי אֲנִי עָלִיתִי מְרוֹם הָרִים יִרְכָּתִי
לְבָנוֹן וְאֶכְרַת קוֹמַת אֲרָזָיו מִבְּחַר בְּרִשְׁיוֹ וְאֶבּוֹא מְרוֹם קִצּוֹ יַעַר כְּרַמְלוֹ:

Through your servants you have blasphemed my *Lord*. Because you thought, “Thanks to my vast chariotry, It is I who have climbed the highest mountains, To the remotest parts of the Lebanon, And have cut down its loftiest cedars, Its choicest cypresses, And have reached its highest peak, Its densest forest.” (Isa 37:24 NJPS)²²⁹

Here, the prophet mentions the fact that chariots can aid armies in climbing mountains.

Note that this symbolism adds a metaphorical dimension to the previously mentioned notion of militaries on mountains (see Chapter 2). This verse specifically harkens back to Judges 4-5, in which Sisera’s chariots could not effectively conquer Mount Tabor. Prior to the invention of horseshoes, horses could not easily ascend mountains.²³⁰ Whereas Judges 4-5 recalls a specific narrative event, here, the prophet uses the mountain as part of a metaphor for arrogance: instead of climbing the mountain, Israel’s enemy will instead fall to the bottom of a pit (v. 15).²³¹

The Prophets also use figurative language regarding mountains in other ways.

Jonah, while lamenting his troubles inside the belly of the fish, speaks of sinking to the bottom of mountains:

לִקְצֵבֵי הָרִים יִרְדֹּתִי הָאָרֶץ בְּרַחֲתָהּ בְּעֵדֵי לְעוֹלָם וְתַעַל מִשְׁחַת חַיֵּי יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֵי:

²²⁹ cf. 2 Kings 19:23.

²³⁰ Talmon, “הַר” (*har*),” 3:435.

²³¹ Other verses with mountains and large rocks as metaphors for arrogance include Isaiah 2:9-11 (צור), 2:14-17 (גבעות and הרים), and Jeremiah 49:16 (גבעה and סלע).

I sank to the base of the mountains; The bars of the earth closed upon me forever. Yet You brought my life up from the pit, O *Eternal* my God!
(Jonah 2:7 NJPS)

Jonah pities himself and so he uses vivid, poetic language to describe his sad situation.

Unlike other biblical figurative speech that tends to refer to the heights of mountains, he refers to קַצְבֵּי הָרִים, “the base of mountains.” Interpretations of this use of קַצְבֵּי vary, and possible meanings include “the remotest extremity,” “the deepest depths of the sea,” and “mountain crevasse.”²³² In other words, rather than imagining himself at the top of the mountain—a place that receives plenty of sunlight, boasts captivating views, and even contains the potential for meeting God (see Chapter 4)—Jonah instead describes his situation as the opposite, as being at the bottom of the mountain, a place frequently in shadow and which lacks the awe-inspiring characteristics of mountaintops.

Mountains also serve as parts of metaphors for less tangible notions. Jeremiah, for example, employs imagery of mountains to allude to Israel’s abandonment of God (and possible repentance):

הֲיַעֲזֹב מִצּוֹר שְׂדֵי שֶׁלֶג לְבָנוֹן אִם־יִנָּתְשׁוּ מִים זָרִים קָרִים נוֹזְלִים: ¹⁵כִּי־
שָׁכַחְנִי עַמִּי לְשׂוֹא יִקְטְרוּ וַיִּכְשְׁלוּם בְּדַרְכֵיהֶם שְׁבִילֵי עוֹלָם לָלֶכֶת נְתִיבוֹת
דֶּרֶךְ לֹא סֻלְּחָה:

¹⁴ Does one forsake Lebanon snow From the mountainous rocks? Does one abandon cool water Flowing from afar? ¹⁵ Yet My people have forgotten Me: They sacrifice to a delusion: They are made to stumble in their ways -- The ancient paths -- And to walk instead on byways, On a road not built up. (Jer 18:14-15 NJPS)

Here, the prophet uses the literary technique of a rhetorical question to contrast a nature setting with Israel’s behavior: while nature—including mountains and their climatic

²³² HALOT, s.v. “קַצְבֵּי.”

features—obey God’s ordered world, Israel, by breaking the covenant, has not.²³³ Ultimately, the exact meaning of each word in the metaphor is unclear, and so countless interpretations exist.²³⁴ One analysis explains that while people would not abandon the cool water that flows from Lebanon’s melted snow, Israel has nonetheless forsaken God.²³⁵ Some scholars understand the verse to focus on the snow, that snow cannot forsake Lebanon, whereas Israel did reject God.²³⁶ No matter the interpretation, however, mountains function as a part of this larger metaphor. They may simply serve as context, adding detail to the emphasized image of snow. However, “Lebanon” could refer to the Lebanon mountain range,²³⁷ and so mountains could represent God or possibly the relationship between God and humanity. Therefore, no matter how one interprets these Jeremiah verses, mountains act as a component in this nature metaphor.

Furthermore, the prophets use mountains as part of figurative language describing wisdom. The prophet Obadiah, for instance, speaks of wisdom and understanding disappearing from Edom’s mountain:

הֲלֹא בַיּוֹם הַהוּא נֶאֱמַר יְהוָה וְהֶאֱבַדְתִּי חֲכָמִים מֵאֶדוֹם וְתִבּוֹנָה מִהָר עֵשָׂו׃
וְיַחַתּוּ גִבּוֹרֵיךָ תִּימָן לְמַעַן יִכָּרֶת-אִישׁ מִהָר עֵשָׂו מִקָּטָל׃⁹

⁸ In that day -- declares the *Eternal* -- I will make the wise vanish from Edom, Understanding from Esau's mount. ⁹ Your warriors shall lose heart, O Teman, And not a man on Esau's mount Shall survive the slaughter. (Obad 1:8-9 NJPS)

²³³ Sweeney, “Jeremiah,” 963.

²³⁴ Solomon B. Freehof, *Book of Jeremiah* (The Jewish Commentary for Bible Readers; New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1977), 124. See also: Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 821.

²³⁵ Freehof, *Jeremiah*, 124.

²³⁶ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 821.

²³⁷ HALOT, s.v. “לבנון.”

Here, a mountain once again represents the entire people, Edom/Esau, the main subject of the prophecy.²³⁸ Moreover, this allegory seems to be in part a warning of Edom's dire fate, a destruction that will lead to the end of its wisdom. This wisdom may refer to the political leaders who advised the king.²³⁹ When one compares this passage to Isaiah 2:3, in which Torah comes forth from Zion, then one will find that together these verses paint a picture of mountains as sources of wisdom and instruction, or at least as settings for the people who bring forth wisdom. As sites of theophany, urban centers (e.g., Mount Zion denoting the city of Jerusalem),²⁴⁰ locations for great thinkers, and vantage points that allow for knowledge-seeking (troop movements, scouting, etc.), mountains represented sources of understanding.²⁴¹

The prophets and other poetic writers additionally use rocks and mountains in reference to and even as metaphors for God. Often, these authors write about God as a צור, what Fabry calls a leitmotif to characterize God.²⁴² These writers both express צור as an epithet for God, describing God's qualities as being rock-like, and directly call God a צור. Sometimes, the speaker even refers to God as צורי, "my Rock," language found

²³⁸ Ehud Ben Zvi, "Obadiah," in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford, 2004), 1193.

²³⁹ Johan Renkema, *Obadiah* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; trans. Brian Doyle; Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2003), 152.

²⁴⁰ White, "High Places."

²⁴¹ See also Job 28, "A Hymn of Wisdom," which similarly associates mountains with wisdom. Mayer Gruber, "Job," in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford, 2004), 1539.

²⁴² Fabry, "צור (*śûr*)," 12:319.

predominantly in the Psalms.²⁴³ As Dr. Tamara Cohen and Rabbi Andrea L. Weiss explain, Moses, employs this leitmotif frequently in his poem in *Parashat Ha'azinu*.²⁴⁴

הַצֹּר תָּמִים פַּעֲלֹ כִּי כָל-דִּרְכָּיו מִשְׁפָּט אֶל אֱמוּנָה וְאֵין עֹל צְדִיק וַיֵּשֶׁר
הוא:

The Rock! – *God's* deeds are perfect, Yea, all *God's* ways are just; A faithful God, never false, True and upright is *God*. (Deut 32:4 NJPS)

Here, Moses simply calls God a rock, without immediate comparison to other nouns or notions, as he similarly does in Deuteronomy 32:30-31 and other writers do in 2 Samuel 22:32, 47,²⁴⁵ and Psalm 28:1. In these verses, while broader context does lend insight into the overlapping characteristics between God and a צור, the speaker calls out to their “Rock” without attribute (e.g. no “my Redeemer” or “my Rock of my deliverance”).

However, other passages call God a rock while also clearly describing God's qualities or actions, thus establishing the associative commonplaces between God and a צור. For example, later in *Ha'azinu*, Moses describes names God as the rock “in whom they sought refuge”:

וְאָמַר אֵי אֱלֹהֵי יְצֹר חָסְיוּ בּוֹ:
God will say: Where are their gods, The rock in whom they sought refuge?
(Deut 32:37 NJPS)

In this case, rock seems to relate to a protective haven. Isaiah similarly calls God a rock who shelters:

כִּי שָׁכַחְתָּ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּצֹר מַעֲזָךְ לֹא זָכַרְתָּ עַל-כֵּן תִּטְעֵי נַעֲמָנִים
וְזָמַרְתָּ זֶר תִּזְרַעְנֻ:

²⁴³ Ibid. See 2 Samuel 22:3, 47; Psalm 18:3, 47; 19:15; 28:1; 62:3, 7; 92:16; 144:1.

²⁴⁴ In fact, the word צור appears eight times in *Ha'azinu*. Dr. Tamara Cohen Eskenazi and Rabbi Andrea L. Weiss, Ph.D., eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 1254.

²⁴⁵ Verse 47 has two cases of צור, one of which lacks attributes.

Truly, you have forgotten the God who saves you And have not remembered the Rock who shelters you; That is why, though you plant a delightful sapling, What you sow proves a disappointing slip. (Isa 17:10 NJPS)

Not only is God “the Rock who shelters you,” but also a God who saves. Other verses that call God a rock associate the term with “deliverer” (ישעי, Psalm 18:47), “redeemer” (גואלי, Psalm 19:15), “sanctuary” (מקדש, Isaiah 8:14), “everlasting” (עולמים, Isaiah 26:4), “uprightness” (ישר, Psalm 92:16), “stronghold” (מצודה, Psalm 31:3), and “mountain refuge” (משגב, Psalm 94:22).²⁴⁶

Why might these authors call God a “rock,” and why compare a צור to these other concepts? Looking at the associative commonplaces, these notions all seem share many features with each other and with God. Just as a צור relates to concepts of protection and shelter, so, too, does God offer a protective presence to these biblical writers.²⁴⁷ Moreover, just as a צור is large and enduring, so, too, must God be to the biblical conceptions of divinity. Moreover, because some rocks provided much-needed water in the desert, rocks became associated with life-saving qualities.

Not only do the authors use mountains and rocks as direct metaphors for God, but also as parts of larger allegories about God, too. One such metaphorical use represents the relationship between God and humanity (usually, Israel). In *Ha'azinu*, for instance, Moses tells of God's relationship to Israel by using rock/mountain language:

יִרְכְּבֵהוּ עַל-^(בְּמוֹתַי) [בְּמֹתַי] אֶרֶץ וַיֹּאכֵל תְּנוּבַת שָׂדֵי וַיִּנְקְהוּ דָּבֶשׁ מִפְּלֶע
וְשָׁמֶן מִחֶלְמִישׁ צֹר:

²⁴⁶ See also 2 Samuel 22:3; Habakkuk 1:12; Psalm 18:31-32; 62:3; 71:3; 73:26; 78:35; 89:27; 144:1-2.

²⁴⁷ Chapter 2 provides examples of physical uses of צור relating to protective caves and fortresses, e.g. 2 Samuel 23:13-14 and 11 Chronicles 11:15.

God caused him to ride over the tops of the earth, and to eat the produce of the field; God fed him honey from the crag, and oil from flinty rock. (Deut 32:13)²⁴⁸

This verse employs figurative use of both mountains and rocks. First, it describes how God brought Israel into the promised land, here called *בְּמַתֵּי אֶרֶץ*, “the tops of the earth,” a poetic description of the mountains of Israel.²⁴⁹ Moreover, Moses also speaks of “flinty rock,” *חֲלִמִישׁ צוּר*, a metaphor about feeding Israel. As Tigay explains, “Even places that one would expect to be barren yielded abundant foodstuffs: honeycombs, found in the land’s countless caves and fissures, and oil-producing olive trees that flourish in its rocky limestone soils.”²⁵⁰ Moreover, the feminine imagery of God feeding and even nursing Israel (another interpretation of *וַיִּנְקֶהוּ* in v. 13) presents a metaphor of God as mother.²⁵¹ Yet this nursing mother metaphor still prominently features mountains, too, the vehicle through which God nurtures Israel.²⁵² Thus, the mountains and boulders provide imaginative language for God’s relationship with Israel: God cares for God’s people, nursing them with ease, and bringing them into the protective care of the land of Israel—a land where even hills and rocks can provide for the people.

Not only does God provide for and protect Israel, but God also gave birth to Israel—a concept expressed through rock metaphors. A few verses later in *Ha’azinu*,

²⁴⁸ While this passage (and related verses) involves God using mountains, I have placed it in this chapter because the writer employs mountains in figurative language, and thus counts as “human use.”

²⁴⁹ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 305.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Eskenazi and Weiss, *Women’s Commentary*, 1257.

²⁵² Perhaps, as a vehicle for nurturing Israel, mountains resemble breasts. See Chapter 4’s analysis on “El Shaddai.”

Moses once again employs a rock metaphor, this time calling God a צור who gave birth to Israel:

צור ילדך תשי ותשכח אל מחללך:

You neglected the Rock that begot you, Forgot the God who brought you forth. (Deut 32:18 NJPS)

In this condemnation of Israel's wayward behaviors, Moses compares God, אל, to a rock, צור. However, the rock seems to take on an additional attribute, that of "mythical progenitor."²⁵³ Isaiah 51:1 also speaks of a rock from which humanity was hewn, and Psalm 89:27 may, too, allude to a generative rock.²⁵⁴ These verses could convey an ancient mythical idea that rocks gave birth to humans.²⁵⁵ Furthermore, especially in the *Ha'azinu* verse cited above (Deuteronomy 32:18), God acquires motherly (feminine) characteristics, giving birth (ילד) to Israel.²⁵⁶ *Ha'azinu* juxtaposes the metaphor of God as protective rock with that of God as a laboring mother.²⁵⁷

Rocks and mountains relate to mortal views of the human-divine relationship, too.

In Psalm 61, for instance, the psalmist depicts a rock in describing a personal theology:

מקצה הארץ | אליך אקרא בעטף לבי בצור-ירום ממני תנחני:

From the end of the earth I call to You; when my heart is faint, You lead me to a rock that is high above me. (Ps 61:3 NJPS)

In this psalm of petition, the psalmist prays for God to guide the speaker to a "high rock" (צור ירום) and relates God to strength and refuge (v. 4).²⁵⁸ Thus, the psalmist views God

²⁵³ Fabry, "צור (*šûr*)," 12:319.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 12:320.

²⁵⁶ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 307.

²⁵⁷ Eskenazi and Weiss, *Women's Commentary*, 1258.

²⁵⁸ Berlin and Zvi Brettler, "Psalms," 1348.

as one who can bring help and salvation and uses mountain imagery to do so. The psalmist employs figurative language to express the notion of God protecting the speaker.

This language of mountains as a reflection of God's care also appears in one of the most famous psalms about mountains, Psalm 121:

שִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת אֲשָׁא עֵינַי אֶל-הַהָרִים מֵאֵן יִבֹּא עֲזָרִי: ²עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יְהוָה
עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:

¹A song for ascents. I lift my eyes to the mountains; from where does my help come? ²My help comes from the Eternal, maker of heaven and earth. (Ps 121:1-2)

In this psalm, however, the relationship of God to the mountains is unclear. One interpretation maintains that the mountains refer to Mount Zion, the site of the holy Temple in Jerusalem and God's throne on earth.²⁵⁹ Another interpretation claims that the mountains do not contain God's dwelling place, but rather comprise dangers which evoke the psalmist's cry for help.²⁶⁰ Yet another interpretation argues that the psalmist offers a polemic against pagan gods living in mountains.²⁶¹ Either way, God is "the single, necessary, all-sufficient source of help who will give protection."²⁶² Whatever challenges face the psalmist while gazing upon the mountains, God acts as the solution to those problems.

Thus, from these many examples, one can see how the Bible presents mountains as components within figurative language. Speech such as metaphor, personification, and allegory conjure up imagery in the reader's mind to better connect to the biblical message

²⁵⁹ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 526.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 525.

²⁶¹ Berlin and Zvi Brettler, "Psalms," 1425.

²⁶² Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 526.

and material.²⁶³ The vivid images of mountains—massive, towering structures that fill the biblical landscape—no doubt inspired awe in the biblical authors’ imaginations. The relationship that ancient climbers and hikers felt as they viewed their surroundings inspired many feelings and evoked many concepts, including God, people, and wisdom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, humans employ the use of mountains in a variety of religious ways, methods that attempt to connect them to or put them in relationship with God. From locations for sacrifice, to objects of prophetic predictions, to metaphors and symbols relating to God, humanity, and other notions, mountains relate a variety of theological concepts. Mountains’ proximity to the heavens, offerings of vantage points, possibilities for cave protection, enduring and enormous qualities, and other notable features provide ample imagery and figurative language for the biblical authors to employ in conveying their messages and connecting them to God and humanity.

²⁶³ William P. Brown, *Psalms* (Interpreting Biblical Texts; Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 27-28.

Chapter 4: Divine Uses of Mountains in the Bible

Introduction

As previous chapters have examined, humans utilize mountains in a myriad of ways in the Bible. God, too, interacts with peaks and hills in Scripture. Sometimes, God chooses a specific mountain, such as Sinai or Zion, which becomes a site for theophany or God's dwelling. The Bible also mentions mountains to refer to God's might or creative attributes. Even one of God's names, אֵל שַׁדַּי, may be intimately connected to mountains.²⁶⁴

Theophany

Throughout the Bible, God chooses mountains as sites of theophany, where God manifests God's self to humanity. The primary example of this phenomenon is *the* mountain—הֹרֶה—Mount Sinai,²⁶⁵ a mountain in the wilderness of Sinai.²⁶⁶ Some early Christians identified Mount Sinai with Jebel Musa in the Sinai Peninsula starting in the 4th century CE, while other modern scholars claim to have located it at Mount Serbal in the Sinai or even with a volcano nine miles north of Aqaba.²⁶⁷ However, due to conflicting evidence and textual ambiguities, the precise location of Mount Sinai remains uncertain.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁴ Note that like previous chapters, the classification of the texts presented in this chapter could fit multiple categories. For example, I could have included mountains trembling before God as figurative language in Chapter 3. However, I found no evidence that these authors spoke figuratively in such passages, and I therefore included them here. Hence, for this chapter, I have included passages where God performs as the primary actor or subject of attribution regarding mountains. However, I recognize that one could classify these texts differently.

²⁶⁵ For Sinai as “הֹרֶה,” see, for example, Exodus 19:2.

²⁶⁶ Davies, “Sinai,” 6:47.

²⁶⁷ Maiburger, “סִינַי [sīnay],” 233-35.

²⁶⁸ Davies, “Sinai,” 6:48.

Starting in the book of Exodus, the Torah recounts how the Israelites travel to Sinai after fleeing Egypt.²⁶⁹ Moses ascends the mountain, where he receives God's instruction, and the people remain encamped in the area until Numbers 10.²⁷⁰ The Sinai narrative and events on the mountain incorporate a variety of biblical concepts, including the Exodus, law-giving, and pre-conquest narratives.²⁷¹ In fact, the term "Sinai" may refer to multiple concepts, including "Mount Sinai" and the "wilderness of Sinai."²⁷² The concept of Mount Sinai may even borrow mythological elements from Canaanite lore.²⁷³

The Bible also refers to (Mount) Sinai as (Mount) Horeb.²⁷⁴ Some scholars, utilizing source-criticism, assign Sinai to the J and P sources and Horeb to E and D, although this designation excludes some poetic and non-Pentateuchal sources.²⁷⁵ However it developed, the Bible generally equates Horeb with Sinai. When Moses first encounters God, for example, he does so at Horeb (Exodus 3:1), while many texts associate that location with Sinai.²⁷⁶ Moreover, whereas the book of Exodus assigns Israel's covenant, theophanic and revelatory experience, and law-giving to Sinai,

²⁶⁹ Moses first reaches "Horeb, the mountain of God" in Exodus 3:1, and the first reference to "Mount Sinai" comes in Exodus 19:11.

²⁷⁰ Davies, "Sinai," 6:47-48.

²⁷¹ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 107.

²⁷² Ibid., 109.

²⁷³ Ibid., 114.

²⁷⁴ Davies, "Sinai," 6:47. Note that sometimes the Bible refers to one landmark or the other without the "mount" attribute, as in Exodus 16:1; Judges 5:5; and Psalm 68:9, 18 for "Sinai," and Deuteronomy 4:10, 15; 9:8; 18:16; 28:69; 1 Kings 8:9; Malachi 3:22; Psalm 106:19; and 2 Chronicles 5:10 for "Horeb." As noted, Davies argues that the mountain and region of Sinai and Horeb seem to be identical (although some scholars disagree).

²⁷⁵ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 107-108. Davies, "Sinai," 6:47.

²⁷⁶ Sarna, *Exodus*, 14.

Deuteronomy situates those same events at Horeb.²⁷⁷ Thus, Horeb seems to be synonymous with Sinai, even if some scholars disagree.²⁷⁸ This equivalent nature of these two mountain names could simply reflect a bridging of source texts. However, the confusion of names could lend to a deeper meaning, such as emphasizing that the location of the mountain is less important than what happens there, a notion bolstered by the fact that outside of Elijah (in 1 Kings 19), no one visits the mountain after revelation.²⁷⁹ Moreover, the idea that two different traditions exist regarding God's revelation and theophany may hold deeper implications about the nature and authenticity of Torah and its origins.

Assuming that the names Horeb and Sinai refer to the same location, this mountain serves primarily as a site of theophany. First, Moses climbs the mountain:

וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיְקַרָּא אֵלָיו יְהוָה מִן־הָהָר לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמַר
לְבֵית יִעֲקֹב וְתִגִּיד לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

And Moses ascended to God, and the Eternal called out to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you will say to the House of Jacob, and tell the People of Israel." (Exod 19:3)

²⁷⁷ For covenant, compare Exodus 34:28-19 to Deuteronomy 5:2 and 28:69. For theophanic and revelatory language, compare Exodus 19-20 to Deuteronomy 4:10-11. For law-giving, compare Exodus 24:12 to Deuteronomy 9:8-9. See also Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 107, 154; Davies, "Sinai," 6:47-48.

²⁷⁸ Clifford, for example, says that "Horeb, therefore, is not simply the Elohist and Deuteronomic counterparts of Sinai in the Yahwist and Priestly traditions. It does not appear to be a mountain at all. It is rather an indefinite location which has gathered certain traditions of the wandering to itself" (Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 122). Sarna also presents some textual reasons why the two locations may not be the same (Sarna, *Exodus*, 339). Davies, however, disagrees, saying they are "apparently" the same place (Davies, "Sinai," 6:47). I agree with Davies based on the similarities in language between Sinai in Exodus and Horeb in Deuteronomy.

²⁷⁹ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 420.

God then appears to the Israelites. This theophany involves numerous features, including a storm, with cloud, thunder, and lightning:

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְּהִיט הַבָּקָר וַיְהִי קֹלֶת וּבָרָקִים וַעֲנָן כָּבֵד עַל-הָהָר וְקוֹל
שֹׁפָר חֲזָק מְאֹד וַיִּחַרַד כָּל-הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה:

On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. (Exod 19:16 NJPS)²⁸⁰

During this storm, God speaks to Moses and the Israelites:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה כֹּה תֹאמַר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם כִּי מִן-
הַשָּׁמַיִם דִּבַּרְתִּי עִמָּכֶם:

The *Eternal* said to Moses: Thus shall you say to the Israelites: You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens. (Exod 20:22 NJPS)

Indeed, Moses even meets God face-to-face on the mountain:

פָּנִים| בְּפָנִים דִּבֶּר יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם בְּהָר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ: ⁵אֲנֹכִי עֹמֵד בֵּין-יְהוָה
וּבֵינֵיכֶם בַּעֲת הַהוּא לְהַגִּיד לָכֶם אֶת-דִּבְרֵי יְהוָה כִּי יֵרָאֶתְכֶם מִפְּנֵי הָאֵשׁ וְלֹא-
עֲלִיתֶם בְּהָר לֵאמֹר:

⁴Face to face the *Eternal* spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire -- ⁵I stood between the *Eternal* and you at that time to convey the *Eternal's* words to you, for you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain – saying... (Deut 5:4-5 NJPS)²⁸¹

Other aspects of the theophany at Sinai include law-giving and covenant building.²⁸²

The language and imagery of Sinai's theophanic moments convey much about how God reveals God's self to the Israelites. First, one must recognize the importance of God choosing a mountain for revelation: God does not pick a valley or plain, but a mountain. In fact, while God does choose springs (Genesis 16:7), rivers (Genesis 32:23-

²⁸⁰ See also Exodus 19:9 and 20:21.

²⁸¹ See also Exodus 33:18-23.

²⁸² See footnote #277.

33), and trees (Genesis 12:6-7) as sites for theophany, God predominately elects mountains for this role.²⁸³ As mentioned in Chapter 1, the topography of Israel lends itself to awe-inspiring views of mountains, a key feature of the biblical landscape. As Theodore Hiebert writes about the mountain as a site for theophany,

With its peak reaching into the skies, it represents the closest connection in the environment between earth, the domain of humanity, and heaven, the realm of the gods. The splendor of the highest peaks produces a sense of awe, a sense heightened and made more mysterious when the cloud banks of the thunderstorm veil the summit from view. Once scaled, the mountain offers an unlimited vision, not only of the clouds and the heavens but also of the horizon of the earth.²⁸⁴

The awe-inspiring mountain must have added extra meaning to the theophanic events.

Moreover, as Chapter 3 explained, people in the ancient Near East often finalized covenants on mountains.²⁸⁵ Covenants in the ancient Near East were not just religious acts or literary forms, but frequently combined relationships between two (often unequal) partners, religious language, norms for behavior, literary or oral agreements, and a ritual act to finalize the agreement.²⁸⁶ Though frequently bonding two mortals, the Sinai covenant adopts a traditional ancient Near East covenantal model and applies it to the God-Israel relationship, with YHWH as the sovereign and Israel as the vassal.²⁸⁷ If covenants did indeed occur on mountains, as one did between Jacob and Laban, then when God forms the covenant at Sinai, God must reveal God's self to make said pact—

²⁸³ Theodore Hiebert, "Theophany in the OT," *ABD* 6:505.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 6:506.

²⁸⁵ See, for example, Genesis 31:54, in which Jacob and Laban seal a covenant on a mountaintop (Chapter 3).

²⁸⁶ George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, "Covenant," *ABD* 1:1180. Note that each of these elements appear throughout Scripture (e.g. the final ritual appears in Deuteronomy 28/Joshua 8).

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:1183.

hence, theophany on the mountain. Similarly, as will be explained later, the Bible describes Sinai as a dwelling place for God, and so the theophany seems to have occurred where God dwells—on Mount Sinai.

Another reason for God choosing a mountain as a site for theophany could be so that the massive topography and visual light show would help validate Moses' leadership.²⁸⁸ In Exodus 3:11-12, when Moses asks "Who am I that to go and bring out the Israelites from Egypt," God responds "I will be with you, and this will be a sign that I sent you: when you bring out the people from Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." Therefore, when God reveals God's self to the entire people on Mount Sinai, God lends authority Moses' claim to free the Israelites.

Furthermore, during the theophany, Mount Sinai resembles a sanctuary.²⁸⁹ Both Mount Sinai and the Tabernacle had three sections, some of which were forbidden to all but the elite, including a most sacred spot (the summit/Holy of Holies) where the Israelite leader could encounter God. Therefore, just as people would use the Tabernacle to reach out to God, so, too, does the bond between humanity and God manifest at Sinai.²⁹⁰

The Bible also portrays the theophany as happening with stormy, visual spectacles. These vivid atmospheric eruptions highlight God's power: "The Bible frequently portrays upheavals of nature in association with God's self-manifestation."²⁹¹ In fact, storm imagery occurs in other pagan and Canaanite texts, indicating that those

²⁸⁸ Sarna, *Exodus*, 104.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 105. Note that Sarna also cites Ramban's commentary on Exodus 25:1 and introduction to Numbers.

²⁹⁰ See Chapter 3 for more about sacrifices and shrines.

²⁹¹ Sarna, *Exodus*, 106.

deities are part of nature; the Bible, on the other hand, depicts God as above creation, controlling nature.²⁹²

The prophet Elijah also encounters God on Horeb in 1 Kings 19. After destroying the prophets of Baal, Elijah flees from Jezebel and eventually arrives at “the mountain of God, Horeb” (v. 8). God then calls out to him and passes by:

וַיֹּאמֶר צֵא וְעַמְדָּתָּ בְּהָרִי לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וְהִנֵּה יְהוָה עֹבֵר וְרוּחַ גְּדוֹלָה וְחֹזֶק
מִפָּרֶקֶת הָרִים וּמִשִּׁבְרֵי סִלְעִים לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לֹא בְרוּחַ יְהוָה וְאַחֲרֵי הָרוּחַ רֶעַשׁ
לֹא בְרֶעַשׁ יְהוָה: ¹²וְאַחֲרֵי הָרֶעַשׁ אֵשׁ לֹא בָאֵשׁ יְהוָה וְאַחֲרֵי הָאֵשׁ קוֹל דְּמָמָה
דָּקָה:

¹¹God said, “Come out, and stand on the mountain before the Eternal.” And behold, the Eternal passed by in a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and smashing stones before the Eternal; but the Eternal was not in the wind. And after the wind, an earthquake; but the Eternal was not in the earthquake. ¹²And after the earthquake, a fire; but the Eternal was not in the fire. And after the fire, a still, small voice. (1 Kgs 19:11-12)

Like with Moses and the Israelites, God appears to Elijah atop a mountain. However, while the revelation at Sinai involved powerful storm imagery to convey God’s might, this narrative does the opposite. As Nahum M. Sarna writes:

The vivid, majestic, and terrifying depictions [of Exodus 19], which draw their ultimate inspiration from the storm and the earthquake, are meant to convey in human terms something of the awe-inspiring impact of the event upon those who experienced it. The narrative of I Kings 19:11-12 is intended to dispel any possibility of mistaking the atmospherics for the substance of theophany.²⁹³

²⁹² See, for example, Exodus 14:21-22; 19:16, 18; 20:18; Deuteronomy 33:2-3; Judges 5:4-5; Isaiah 29:6; 30:30; Jeremiah 10:10-13; Joel 4:15; Psalm 50:3; 77:19; 97:2-4 (Ibid.).

²⁹³ Ibid.

Thus, in this case, the powerful wonders serve not to glorify God but to act as a foil. Instead of finding God in the awe-inspiring events on the mountain, Elijah finds God in the “still, small voice.”

Revelation of law, a form of theophany, also occurs at Sinai. Exodus 19-20, in which the Israelites congregate around Sinai and receive the Ten Commandments (and other laws following), serves as a paradigmatic example of this revelation of law. Moses obtains many other laws on Sinai, too, including those of *Parashat Mishpatim*²⁹⁴ and instructions for building the Tabernacle.²⁹⁵ The prophets and later biblical leaders also highlight the revelatory nature of Sinai, emphasizing the mountain as a source of laws and teachings.²⁹⁶ Thus, the Bible presents a connection between the receiving of commandments and instructions with a specific mountain, Sinai. Perhaps because of its perceived proximity to the God²⁹⁷ or its role in theophany, the Bible connects *mitzvot* with mountains.

Besides Sinai, Mount Zion also serves as a site for theophany. As previously mentioned, Zion was a Canaanite fortress until David conquered it, turning it into the city of David.²⁹⁸ There, on top of Mount Zion, Solomon erected the Temple to YHWH.²⁹⁹ Note that the Bible frequently associates Zion, its mountain, Jerusalem, and the Temple

²⁹⁴ See especially Exodus 21-23.

²⁹⁵ See, for instance, Exodus 25:8.

²⁹⁶ See, for instance, Malachi 3:22 and Nehemiah 9:13.

²⁹⁷ For the connection between mountains and God in the heavens, see Isaiah 14:13, which uses figurative language to describe climbing a mountain to be higher than God, and Psalm 2:4-6, which juxtaposes God in heaven with a mortal sovereign on Mount Zion.

²⁹⁸ 2 Samuel 5:7. See Chapter 2.

²⁹⁹ 2 Chronicles 3:1. For the connection between Moriah and Zion, see Chapter 3.

with each other, often using one as a synonym for the other.³⁰⁰ Perhaps because of its relationship to the Temple, Mount Zion becomes a site for theophany, exemplified by Psalm 48:

גָּדוֹל יְהוָה וּמְהֻלָּל מְאֹד בְּעִיר אֱלֹהֵינוּ הֶרֶם קִדְשׁוֹ: יִיפָּה נוֹף מְשׁוֹשׁ כָּל־
הָאָרֶץ הֶרֶם צִיּוֹן יִרְבְּתִי צִפּוֹן קִרְיַת מֶלֶךְ רַב:

² The *Eternal* is great and much acclaimed in the city of our God, *God's* holy mountain -- ³ fair-crested, joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, summit of Zaphon, city of the great king. (Ps 48:2-3 NJPS)

The psalm begins with a reference to God's praise on Mount Zion in the above verses.

Then, verse 4 continues:

אֱלֹהִים בְּאַרְמְנוֹתֶיהָ נִזְדַּע לְמִשְׁגָּב:
Through its citadels, God has made *God's self* known as a haven. (Ps 48:4 NJPS)

Thus, God reveals God's self on Mount Zion.³⁰¹ While Brueggemann argues that "Mount Zion" refers specifically to the Temple in Jerusalem, the psalm nonetheless specifically names the mountain as this site for theophany.³⁰² Moreover, while one could argue that theophany only occurs because of the Temple, the mountain served as a site for theophany even before Solomon built the Temple.³⁰³ Curiously, this psalm may not have originated in the southern kingdom of Judah (which contained Mount Zion and the

³⁰⁰ See Chapter 3.

³⁰¹ Berlin and Zvi Brettler, "Psalms," 1335.

³⁰² Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 224.

³⁰³ God revealed God's self to Abraham on the mountain in Moriah in Genesis 22 (see Chapter 3 for an analysis of Moriah and Zion), and 2 Chronicles 3:1 mentions David encountering God on the mountain; both events occurred prior to the Temple's construction. Clifford, on the other hand, suggests that the Temple cult attached the theophanic language of Mount Sinai to Mount Zion, "to impress upon the worshipper that the God of Sinai reveals himself anew on Mount Zion" (Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 154). This seems to indicate that Mount Zion increased in holiness to help lend authority to the sacredness of the Temple.

Temple); rather, it may have come from either the north or outside of Israel.³⁰⁴ Indeed, the use of צפון (v. 3) could mean “north” but may also refer to the Canaanite god Baal’s mountain.³⁰⁵ Here, it translates to “Zaphon,” leaving the ambiguity.

In fact, Mount Zion even retains some storm imagery, indicative of other biblical theophanies:

אִם | רָחַץ אֲדֹנָי אֶת צִיּוֹן בְּנוֹת־צִיּוֹן וְאֶת־דָּמֶי יְרוּשָׁלַם יְדִיחַ מִקֶּרְבָּהּ בְּרוּחַ
 מְשַׁפֵּט וּבְרוּחַ בָּעֵר: ⁵וַיִּבְרָא יְהוָה עַל־כָּל־מְכוֹן הַר־צִיּוֹן וְעַל־מִקְרָאָהּ עָנָן
 יוֹמָם וְעֶשֶׂן וְנֹגַהּ אֵשׁ לְהִבָּה לַיְלָה כִּי עַל־כָּל־כְּבוֹד חֲפָה:

When my Lord has washed away The filth of the daughters of Zion, And from Jerusalem's midst Has rinsed out her infamy -- In a spirit of judgment And in a spirit of purging -- ⁵ the *Eternal* will create over the whole shrine and meeting place of Mount Zion cloud by day and smoke with a glow of flaming fire by night. Indeed, over all the glory shall hang a canopy. (Isa 4:4-5 NJPS)

Interestingly, Clifford argues that Mount Zion acquired Mount Sinai traditions over time. Because certain descriptions of Zion resemble Sinaitic portrayals, Clifford claims that the language and imagery of Sinai transferred to the cultic views of Mount Zion. He asserts: “This theophany language, at home in the traditions of Mount Sinai, was utilized in the Jerusalem cultus to impress upon the worshipper that the God of Sinai reveals himself anew on Mount Zion. Israel in the Temple liturgy relives the primal experience of Yahweh at Mount Sinai.”³⁰⁶ Indeed, the psalmist even seeks to find God at Zion just as the Israelites found God at Sinai:

אָחַת | שְׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת־יְהוָה אוֹתָהּ אֲבַקֵּשׁ שְׁבִתִּי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה כָּל־יְמֵי חַיִּי
 לַחֲזוֹת בְּנֹעַם־יְהוָה וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהִיכָלוֹ:

³⁰⁴ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 224.

³⁰⁵ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 4.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

One thing I ask of the *Eternal*, only that do I seek: to live in the house of the *Eternal* all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the *Eternal*, to frequent *God's* temple. (Ps 27:4 NJPS)³⁰⁷

Though the psalmist does not mention Mount Zion specifically, the speaker nonetheless seeks a theophanic experience, one that can only happen at the Temple which, as other verses teach, sits on Mount Zion.³⁰⁸

Other religions also believe in theophanies occurring on mountains. As mentioned, Canaanite mythology contains theophanic elements on mountains, even including storm imagery and feasts.³⁰⁹ In Islam, too, Mount Hira and Mount Arafat serve as important mountains of revelation and vision.³¹⁰

God's Mountain

Related to theophany is the notion that a mountain somehow belongs to God, often through God living on or choosing the mountain. The Bible describes God as dwelling on Sinai, as in Exodus 24:

וַיֵּשְׁבֶן בְּבוֹד־יְהוָה עַל־הָרַ סִינַי וַיִּבְסְהוּ הָעָנָן שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־מֹשֶׁה
בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מִתּוֹךְ הָעָנָן:

The presence of the Eternal dwelled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; God called to Moses on the seventh day from within the cloud. (Exod 24:16)

³⁰⁷ Note that v. 5 also mentions צור.

³⁰⁸ As noted in Chapter 3, the Bible often equates Zion with Mount Zion with Jerusalem, referring to the city, the mountain, or even the people who live there. Thus, other passages refer to Zion as a site of theophany, even if they do not explicitly mention "Mount Zion." For example, Psalm 43:3-4 mentions arriving at God's dwelling place on God's mountain, without mentioning the name of said mountain.

³⁰⁹ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 111-112.

³¹⁰ Eck, "Mountains," 131.

In this case, כבוד may mean the “glory” or “majesty” of God, used to represent Gods “manifest presence.”³¹¹ Thus, in this example, not only does God dwell on Sinai, but God’s presence, the כבוד, provides the opportunity for theophany (which happens in vv. 17-18).

Additionally, Sinai seems to belong to God. Some scholars argue that the connection between YHWH and Mount Sinai existed before the Exodus.³¹² The Bible also refers to YHWH as זה סיני, which may mean “the lord of Sinai”³¹³ or “the one of Sinai.”³¹⁴ Judges 5:5, for instance, reads:

הָרִים נָזְלוּ מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה זֶה סִינֵי מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

The mountains quaked before the Eternal; the one of Sinai, before the Eternal, the God of Israel. (Judg 5:5)

YHWH seems to be a master of this abode, which is Sinai.

God also “comes from Sinai.” In Psalm 68, for example, the psalmist recounts God’s redemption of Israel:

אֱלֹהִים בְּצֵאתְךָ לִפְנֵי עַמֶּךָ בְּצֵעְדְךָ בִּישִׁימוֹן סָלָה: ⁹אָרֶץ רָעָשָׁה | אֵף-שָׁמַיִם

נָטְפוּ מִפְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים זֶה סִינֵי מִפְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

⁸O God, when you went out before your people, when you marched through the wilderness, Selah. ⁹The earth quaked, the heavens dripped because of God, the one of Sinai; because of God, the God of Israel. (Ps 68:8-9)

³¹¹ Sarna, *Exodus*, 154.

³¹² Davies, “Sinai,” 6:48-49.

³¹³ Ibid., 6:49. Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 298.

³¹⁴ The term זה סיני appears to be an epithet, an idea aided by grammar from extrabiblical sources such as the Ugaritic texts with *il dpid* (“El the merciful one” or “El the one of the heart”). Similar epithets also appear in Psalm 75:8 (זה ישפיל, “the one who puts one down”) and Micah 5:4 (זה שלום, “the one of peace”). See Dahood, *Psalms II*, 139 and Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 298.

This passage, from Psalm 68, is a hymn that praises God as one who inhabits and blesses Zion; verses 7-18 recount the voyage from Sinai through Zion.³¹⁵ These verses allude to the theophany—complete with storm imagery—of Exodus 19.³¹⁶ Yet this text also adds a new element, that God is “of Sinai” (זֶה סִינַי), somehow intimately connected to the mountain.

Furthermore, the Bible associates Sinai/Horeb with “the mountain of God,” as in Exodus 3:1:

וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת־צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתֶנּוּ כְּהֵן מִדִּין וַיָּנֶהֱג אֶת־הַצֹּאן אַחֲרֵהֶם
הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֹא אֶל־הָר הָאֱלֹהִים חֲרֹבָה:

Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. (Exod 3:1 NJPS)

Because of the previously described associations between Horeb and Sinai, Mount Sinai must also be considered “the mountain of God.” Additionally, in this case, calling Horeb “the mountain of God” may indicate the later role the mountain will play in the covenant between God and Israel.³¹⁷

As mentioned in Chapter 3, Talmon argues that these texts may signify that YHWH originated as a nomadic mountain god that eventually transformed into YHWH of Sinai (and Zion). Moreover, Clifford argues that this language “of Sinai” resembles other ancient Near Eastern lore. For instance, Canaanite mythology claims that the god El dwells among a divine assembly on a mountain handing out laws, a notion that resembles YHWH “of Sinai” who also distributes commandments.³¹⁸ Clifford additionally believes

³¹⁵ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 296.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Sarna, *Exodus*, 14.

³¹⁸ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 113.

that much of Exodus borrows motifs and language from Canaanite sacred heights.³¹⁹

Nevertheless, even if these texts do indicate archaic or foreign origins for God on Sinai, the final product implies that Sinai somehow belongs to God and serves as God's dwelling-place.³²⁰

The Bible furthermore describes Sinai as holy.³²¹ After Moses arrives at Horeb, “the mountain of God,” in Exodus 3:1, God then tells Moses that the ground is hallowed:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־תִּקְרַב הָלֵם שֶׁל־נַעֲלֶיךָ מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ בִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אֲתָה עוֹמֵד
עָלָיו אֲדַמֶּת־קֹדֶשׁ הוּא:

And *God* said, “Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.” (Exod 3:5 NJPS)³²²

Interestingly, this verse presents the first case of sacred space in the Bible, which happens to be a mountain.³²³ According to one analysis, this verse also establishes the notion that sacred space in the Bible is *not* inherently holy, as other pagans believed; rather, in this verse, the mountain becomes holy solely through the theophany that occurs there.³²⁴

In fact, Mount Sinai even becomes sanctified through human actions:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה לֹא־יֻכַּל הָעָם לָעֲלֹת אֶל־הָרַ סִינַי בִּי־אֲתָה הַעֲדָתָה
בָּנוּ לֵאמֹר הַגִּבֹּל אֶת־הָהָר וְקֹדֶשְׁתּוֹ:

³¹⁹ Ibid., 114.

³²⁰ Ibid., 119-120.

³²¹ As mentioned below, Mount Zion, too, is holy (see below for more verses). Additionally, multiple verses refer to unnamed holy mountains, although these all seem to be references to Zion. See, for example, Brueggemann's commentary on Isaiah 11:9 (Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, 103), Brueggemann and Bellinger's commentary Psalms 3:5 (Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 37), and 15:1 (Ibid., 82), and Greenberg's commentary on Ezekiel 28:14 (Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37*, 591).

³²² Note that while the text is ambiguous about whether Moses arrived at the *base* of the mountain or actually climbed up it, he nonetheless encounters God at the mountain, since he “came to the mountain” (ויבא אל הר האלהים הרבה).

³²³ Sarna, *Exodus*, 15.

³²⁴ Ibid. Talmon, “הר (*har*),” 3:436.

But Moses said to the *Eternal*, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us saying, ‘Set bounds about the mountain and sanctify it.’” (Exod 19:23 NJPS)

In preparation for God’s theophany at Sinai, the Israelites remained pure, washed their clothes, and avoided touching the mountain (Exodus 19:10-15); these acts, presumably, sanctified the mountain. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, Mount Sinai resembled a sanctuary, and so by setting boundaries, the people divided the mountain similarly to the Tabernacle. In creating a boundary outside the “Holy of Holies” (the top of the mountain), the people manufactured a holy space on the mountain.³²⁵

Yet while God dwells on and comes from Sinai, Zion ultimately operates as God’s holy mountain. The prophet Joel, for instance, places “Zion” in parallel with “[God’s] holy mount”:

תִּקְעוּ שׁוֹפָר בְּצִיּוֹן וְהָרִיעוּ בְּהַר קֹדֶשִׁי יִרְגָּזוּ כָּל יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ כִּי-בֹא יוֹם-
יְהוָה כִּי קָרוֹב:

Blow a shofar on Zion; raise an alarm on My holy mountain! Let all who dwell on the earth tremble, for the day of the Eternal comes; it is close.
(Joel 2:1)

Here, God claims both that Zion is holy and that it belongs to God. As expressed in the examples in Chapter 3, this prophet also issues a war cry from atop the mountain—in this case, God’s holy mountain.³²⁶

Zion also serves as God’s dwelling place. While God did dwell on Sinai, some scholars argue that Zion became God’s true and final abode. As Eck writes, “For the Hebrews, God’s ‘dwelling place’ was surely not Sinai, the place of revelation, but Mount

³²⁵ Sarna, *Exodus*, 105.

³²⁶ For other cases of Zion’s holiness, see Isaiah 11:9; 27:13; Ezekiel 20:40; 28:14; Joel 2:1; 4:17; Zechariah 8:3; Psalm 2:6; 3:5; 15:1; 48:2-3; 99:9; and Daniel 9:16, 20.

Zion, the study, rocky mount of Jerusalem. Zion, neither lofty nor dramatic, was the firm foundation of Jerusalem, the ‘City on a hill.’”³²⁷ Thus, Isaiah declares that God dwells on Zion:

הִנֵּה אֲנִי וְהַיְלָדִים אֲשֶׁר נָתַן-לִי יְהוָה לְאִתּוֹת וּלְמוֹפְתִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעַם
יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת הַשֹּׁכֵן בְּהַר צִיּוֹן:

Here stand I and the children the *Eternal* has given me as signs and portents in Israel from the *Eternal* of Hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion. (Isa 8:18 NJPS)

The Psalms similarly describe God as dwelling on Mount Zion:

זָכֹר עֲדָתְךָ | קְנִיתָ קֹדֶם גְּאֻלָּתְךָ שֶׁבַט נַחֲלָתְךָ הַר-צִיּוֹן זֶה | שְׁכֵנְתָּ בוֹ:
Remember the community You made Yours long ago, Your very own tribe that You redeemed, Mount Zion, where You dwell. (Ps 74:2 NJPS)³²⁸

No doubt God dwells on Zion in part because of the Temple. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Israelites and other ancient Near Eastern peoples built shrines and offered sacrifices on top of mountains to better connect to God. The Temple, therefore, may have been built on Mount Zion because God dwells there; or, from the opposite perspective, the theology of God dwelling on Zion may have developed because of the cultic practices that occurred there. Indeed, as Clifford says, “If traditions of the high gods of Canaan, El and Baal, associated themselves with venerable mountain peaks all over Syria-Palestine, then it is only to be expected that Mount Zion, the center of Israelite piety from the time of David, would attract traditions common to the religion of Canaan.”³²⁹ Therefore, God’s dwelling on Mount Zion connects directly to the Temple’s presence on it.

³²⁷ Eck, “Mountains,” 132. Talmon’s nomadic mountain God theory also infers that God finally “settled down” on Zion, accepting only sacrifice from the Temple that stood upon it (Talmon, “הַר (*har*),” 3:444).

³²⁸ For other cases of God dwelling on Zion, see Isaiah 8:18; 18:7; 33:5; Micah 4:7; Psalm 9:12; 65:2; 76:3.

³²⁹ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 140.

Not only does sacrifice occur on Mount Zion and God dwell on Zion, but God also chose Mount Zion specifically. As Jon D. Levenson explains, “[Some passages] see Zion’s uniqueness as owing to election: YHWH has chosen it as the site of his royal palace, the temple, the place where he finds rest.”³³⁰ Though no text explicitly states that God chose “Mount Zion” specifically, plenty of texts do speak to the election of Zion or Jerusalem broadly, and others mention God’s mountain in such a way as to imply Mount Zion’s selection. For instance, the prophet Zechariah notes the election of Zion/Jerusalem:

עוֹד | קָרָא לְאֹמֶר כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת עוֹד תִּפְּוֹצֵינָה עָרֵי מְטוֹב וְנָחֵם
יְהוָה עוֹד אֶת־צִיּוֹן וּבָחַר עוֹד בִּירוּשָׁלָּם:

Proclaim further: Thus said the *Eternal* of Hosts: My towns shall yet overflow with bounty. For the *Eternal* will again comfort Zion; *God* will choose Jerusalem again. (Zech 1:17 NJPS)³³¹

Although this text does not specifically mention Mount Zion, it does refer to Zion and Jerusalem.

Similarly, the psalmist speaks of the election of God’s mountain:

¹⁶ הַר־אֱלֹהִים הַר־בָּשָׁן הַר גְּבֻנִים הַר־בָּשָׁן: ¹⁷ לָמָּה | תִּרְצְדוּן הָרִים גְּבֻנִים
הַהָר חֲמַד אֱלֹהִים לְשִׁבְתּוֹ אֶף־יְהוָה יִשְׁכֵּן לְנֶצַח: ¹⁸ רָכַב אֱלֹהִים רַבְתַּיִם
אֶלְפֵי שָׁנָאן אֲדָנִי בָּם סִינִי בִקְדֹשׁ:

¹⁶ O majestic mountain, Mount Bashan; O jagged mountain, Mount Bashan; ¹⁷ why so hostile, O jagged mountains, toward the mountain God desired as *God’s* dwelling? The *Eternal* shall abide there forever. ¹⁸ God's chariots are myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands; the *Eternal* is among them as in Sinai in holiness. (Ps 68:16-18 NJPS)

³³⁰ Levenson, “Zion Traditions,” 6:1100.

³³¹ For other cases of the election of Zion, see also 1 Kings 11:13; Zechariah 3:2; Psalm :16-18; and others.

This text presents a few noteworthy details. First, as discussed in Chapter 3, the psalmist speaks *to* the mountains, personifying them in a poetic call. Indeed, this text imagines Mount Bashan, a mountain in the north, to be envious of Mount Zion.³³² Moreover, although verse 18 mentions Sinai, overall Psalm 68 praises the God of Zion, who brought Israel from Sinai to Zion.³³³ While the psalm never explicitly quotes “Mount Zion,” it does allude to it in a few ways. In the above verses (Ps. 68:16-18), for instance, the psalmist mentions “the mountain God desired as God’s dwelling,” which, as previously noted, refers to Zion. Additionally, verse 25 mentions הקודש (בקדש), frequently interpreted as “sanctuary,” a reference to the Temple.³³⁴ Verse 30 even explicitly mentions the Temple in Jerusalem. The implication, then, is that these verses (Ps. 68:16-18) connote God’s “desired” mountain, signifying that God has designated Zion above the other mountains. This election may relate to Talmon’s theory of YHWH being a nomadic mountain God, indicating that God finally stopped moving and chose Zion to settle down.³³⁵ God choosing Mount Zion also implies that the Israelite cult developed the belief of God choosing permanent dwelling-place.³³⁶ Indeed, the Bible even mentions rejecting other places in favor of Zion.³³⁷

³³² Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 296.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 295-296.

³³⁴ *HALOT*, s.v. “קודש/קדש.”

³³⁵ Talmon, “הר (*har*),” 3:444.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*

³³⁷ See Psalm 78:67-68, in which God rejects other places and instead chooses Mount Zion.

Moving Mountains

One of the ways that the Bible displays God's might is through God's interactions with mountains.³³⁸ Job, for instance, describes God as moving mountains:

הַמַּעֲתִיק הָרִים וְלֹא יָדְעוּ אֲשֶׁר הִפְכָּם בְּאַפּוֹ:

God who moves mountains without their knowing it, Who overturns them in God's anger. (Job 9:5 NJPS)

Job personifies mountains, attributing them the ability to know (ידעו). Additionally, Job speaks of God's might—the ability to move mountains—although in this case Job implies that God abuses said power.³³⁹

The most common association between mountains and God's strength, however, comes in the form of mountains trembling or moving before God. In the Song of Deborah, for instance, the mountains “quake” before God:

הָרִים נָזְלוּ מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה זֶה סִינַי מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

The mountains quaked before the Eternal; the one of Sinai, before the Eternal, God of Israel. (Judg 5:5)³⁴⁰

The mountains tremble “before God,” indicating the mountains somehow react to God's presence. Indeed, it seems that the biblical authors viewed God as having the power to affect nature.³⁴¹ Many other verses also convey some version of mountains trembling

³³⁸ As mentioned at the start of this chapter, although many of the following passages may be considered metaphorical, I found no evidence that indicated they were such. Thus, I have included them here as a reference to God and the theology of the Bible, rather than as human ways of interpreting God.

³³⁹ Gruber, “Job,” 1516. For other verses on mountains and God's might, see Psalm 104:13, in which God waters mountains, and Psalm 144:5, in which God touches mountains and causes smoke, evoking Sinai imagery.

³⁴⁰ Note that while HALOT interprets נָזַל to mean “trickle” or “flow” (*HALOT*, s.v. “נָזַל”), both NJPS and NRSV translate it as “quake,” which coincides with the earth trembling in v. 4. Note also that this verse expresses the notion of God being “of Sinai,” as mentioned in the previous section.

³⁴¹ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 233.

before God, such as Isaiah 63:19-64:2, in which quaking mountains reflect God appearing and causing miracles on earth; Ezekiel 38:20, where the prophet predicts a future destruction that includes mountains collapsing before God; and in Psalm 18:8, the foundations of the mountains shook when God came to David's aid.³⁴² Moreover, God compels movement in both mountains and other large rocks, as the prophet Nahum describes:

גֹּעֵר בַּיָּם וַיִּבְשֻׁהוּ וְכָל־הַנְּהָרוֹת הִחָרִיב אִמְלֵל בְּשָׁן וְכִרְמֶל וַפָּרַח לְבָנוֹן⁴
 אִמְלֵל: הָרִים רָעֲשׁוּ מִמֶּנּוּ וְהַגְּבָעוֹת הִתְמַגְּגוּ וַתִּשָּׂא הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵיו וַתִּבֶּל⁵
 וְכָל־יֹשְׁבֵי בָהּ: לִפְנֵי זַעַמּוֹ מִי יַעֲמֹד וּמִי יִקּוּם בַּחֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ חֲמַתּוֹ נִתְּכָה⁶
 כָּאֵשׁ וְהַצֵּרִים נִתְּצוּ מִמֶּנּוּ:

⁴God rebukes the sea and dries it up, And God makes all rivers fail; Bashan and Carmel languish, And the blossoms of Lebanon wither. ⁵The mountains quake because of God, And the hills melt. The earth heaves before God, The world and all that dwell therein. ⁶ Who can stand before God's wrath? Who can resist God's fury? God's anger pours out like fire, And rocks are shattered because of God. (Nah 1:4-6 NJPS)³⁴³

Here, not only do mountains quake and hills melt before God, but God also shatters rocks.

These verses convey a great deal about the biblical theology of God. God's might correlates very closely to nature, as previously seen with natural phenomena occurring during theophanies. Indeed, the imagery of mountains moving before God may recall these theophanies.³⁴⁴ The fact that mountains tremble before God also indicates just how powerful God is; God seems to be the force behind the mountains' movement.³⁴⁵ While

³⁴² Cf. 2 Samuel 22:8. See also Exodus 19:18; Jeremiah 4:24; Habakkuk 3:6, 10; Job 14:18; 18:4; Micah 1:4; Psalm 29:6; 97:5.

³⁴³ Note that this passage uses הרים, גבעות, and צורים, as well as the named mountains Carmel and Bashan.

³⁴⁴ Ben Zvi, "Obadiah," 1191.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 1523.

some verses could imply that the mountains themselves quake in response to God's presence (rather than directly because of God),³⁴⁶ other passages dictate that God wholly causes the movement.³⁴⁷ Either way, these descriptions act as doxologies, using natural phenomena to praise God.³⁴⁸ Remember from previous chapters that certain qualities of mountains attracted biblical poets, such as their massive size, proximity to the heavens, seemingly permanent endurance, and life-giving traits. Indeed, the Bible tends to view rocks and mountains "as the quintessence of stability and constancy."³⁴⁹ These geological structures inspired awe and wonder. Yet, as the Bible teaches, they are nothing compared to God, before whom the mountains quake.

Mountains and Creation Myths

Mountains relate to how God created the world. In addition to mountains symbolizing God's might and mastery of the natural world, mountains also play a role in biblical creation myths. Although the Genesis creation stories do not mention mountains specifically, peaks do appear in certain texts from the Prophets, Psalms, and Wisdom Literature.³⁵⁰ In Psalm 65, for instance, the psalmist describes God as one who created the mountains:

מִכֵּין הָרִים בְּכֹחוֹ נֶאֱזָר בְּגִבוֹרָה:

God affixed the mountains through God's strength; God is girded with might. (Ps 65:7)

³⁴⁶ E.g. Judges 5:4-5; Isaiah 63:19-64:2; Nahum 1:4-6; Psalm 97:5.

³⁴⁷ E.g. Jeremiah 4:23-26; Job 9:5; Psalm 18:8; 29:6.

³⁴⁸ Ben Zvi, "Obadiah," 1191.

³⁴⁹ Fabry, "צור (*sûr*)," 12:315.

³⁵⁰ Talmon, "הר (*har*)," 3:440.

Verses 7-14 describe God as creator, and making the mountains was one of God's creative acts.³⁵¹ The Hebrew מכין, here translated as “affixed,” implies “created.”³⁵² Mountains may be massive, immovable, impressive structures, and yet, as the psalmist proclaims, they only exist because of God who created them.

Furthermore, Isaiah speaks of God measuring the different aspects of creation, including mountains:

מִי־מִדַּד בְּשַׁעְלוֹ מַיִם וְשָׁמַיִם בְּזֶרֶת תִּזְנֶן וְכָל בְּשָׁלֶשׁ עֶפְרָא הָאָרֶץ וְשָׁקָל
בְּפָלֶס הָרִים וּגְבָעוֹת בְּמֵאזְנֵי:

Who measured the waters with the hollow of a hand, And gauged the skies with a span, And meted earth's dust with a measure, And weighed the mountains with a scale And the hills with a balance? (Isa 40:12 NJPS)

In this case, mountains appear alongside the typical creation elements of water, earth, and heavens.³⁵³ Isaiah employs a rhetorical question to emphasize God's control over creation and influence over history.³⁵⁴

The psalmist speaks of mountains to explain creation, too:

בְּטֶרֶם | הָרִים יֵלְדוּ וְתַחֲזֹלֶל אֶרֶץ וְתִבְלָ וּמַעֲזֹלָם עַד־עוֹלָם אַתָּה אֱלֹהִים
Before the mountains came into being, before You brought forth the earth and the world, from eternity to eternity You are God. (Ps 90:2 NJPS)

While the creation myth of Genesis does not explicitly mention mountains, one can assume that God created them at the start of time, during the formation of the earth; God, in contrast to these hills, endures outside of time. The mountains represent all of creation, and God existed before it all. Furthermore, the mountains once again serve as a sign of

³⁵¹ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 284.

³⁵² *HALOT*, s.v. “כִּין.”

³⁵³ Talmon, “הַר (har),” 3:440. For these creation elements, see also Psalm 90:2 (below); 104:5-6; Proverbs 8:24-29.

³⁵⁴ Shalom Paul, *Isaiah 40-66: Translation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 138.

stability, and thus by comparing God to mountains, the Bible establishes God's even stronger steadiness.³⁵⁵ Mountains are massive, geologically ancient elements that had existed long before and continue to exist long after the ancient Israelites and biblical authors lived in the land. Mortal minds cannot easily grasp their timelessness. Yet God, the creator, exists even before them. As Brueggemann puts it, "The appeal is to the largeness and wonder of creation, all of which is small when seen in relation to Yahweh."³⁵⁶ Isaiah asks a rhetorical question, "Who weighs the mountains?" and the answer can only be, "God."³⁵⁷

Another striking example of mountains and creation comes from Ezekiel 28, a dirge for the king of Tyre.³⁵⁸ In this passage, Ezekiel mentions the garden of Eden, a rare reference outside of Genesis.³⁵⁹ The prophet uses prophetic language to describe creation, and then portrays the king of Tyre as living on God's holy mountain:³⁶⁰

אֶת־כְּרוֹב מִמְּשַׁח הַסּוֹכֵךְ וַנִּתְּיֵךְ בְּהָר קֹדֶשׁ אֱלֹהִים הָיִיתָ בְּתוֹךְ אֲבִינִי־אֵשׁ
הַתְּהַלֵּכֶת:

I created you as a cherub With outstretched shielding wings; And you
resided on God's holy mountain; You walked among stones of fire. (Ezek
28:14 NJPS)

³⁵⁵ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 392.

³⁵⁶ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 23.

³⁵⁷ Paul, *Isaiah 40-66*, 138.

³⁵⁸ Marvin A. Sweeney, "Ezekiel," in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford, 2004), 1096.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Although the text does not specify which mountain, Greenberg suggests that it is Zion (Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37*, 591). Block disagrees relating the term "God's holy mountain" to הַר מוֹעֵד in Isaiah 14:13, indicating a mountain of the assembly of the gods (Block, *Book of Ezekiel*, 114). Clifford takes this even further, indicating that the text (Ezekiel 28:11-19) is an ancient Canaanite poem that references an archaic, Canaanite mountain, possibly El's (Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 168-70).

The prophet calls the king a cherub, indicating the king's political stature and power, and noting that this cherub lived on God's holy mountain.³⁶¹ Thus, the prophet seems to connect earlier creation myths to theologies of God's mountain.

Similarly, the book of Job identifies mountains with creation:

הָרָאִישׁוֹן אָדָם תּוֹלֵד וְלִפְנֵי גְבֻעוֹת חוֹלְלָתָּ:

Were you the first *person* born? Were you created before the hills? (Job 15:7 NJPS)

In this verse, Eliphaz asks a series of rhetorical questions meant to challenge Job's assertion that he is wise.³⁶² The answer to Eliphaz's question is obviously, "no"—Job was not created before the hills (גְּבֻעוֹת). However, this question further implies the notion that the mountains have existed long before Job and may have been among the earliest of God's creations.³⁶³

The conception that later creation myths incorporated mountains while Genesis did not may reflect the origins of these texts. The Genesis creation stories share many elements with Mesopotamian mythologies such as the *Enuma Elish* and the epic of *Gilgamesh*. As noted in Chapter 3, the Mesopotamians did not use mountains in the same way as the ancient Canaanites and Israelites.³⁶⁴ For Mesopotamians, mountains did not play a central role in their culture or religion; in fact, mountains existed on the periphery of their region, and thus evoked thoughts of foreign invasions.³⁶⁵ Therefore, the Genesis

³⁶¹ Sweeney, "Ezekiel," 1096.

³⁶² Gruber, "Job," 1524.

³⁶³ Talmon, "הַר (*har*)," 3:430. For other texts relating to mountains and creation, see Isaiah 51:1; Psalm 89:27; 104:5-6, 18; Proverbs 8:25.

³⁶⁴ Levenson, "Genesis," 9.

³⁶⁵ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 9-10. Note that, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the *Gilgamesh* flood epic *does* use mountains. However, if mountains did represent a sense of foreignness and danger, then perhaps it makes sense that the Mesopotamian flood

creation stories, if they did indeed originate from Mesopotamian myths, reflect a people that did not hold mountains as a core part of their identity. The later biblical writers, on the other hand, including the psalmists and prophets, did live in a land that included mountains: the biblical land of Israel. In fact, the center of cultic life, the Temple, sat on a mountain. Hence, the later creation myths do incorporate mountains, reflecting the authors' later geographic and societal situation and the importance of mountains in their lives.

El Shaddai

One last God-related component of mountains involves one of God's names, El Shaddai. This name occurs approximately eight times in the Bible, as when God reveals God's name to Moses:

וַיִּדְבֶּר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי יְהוָה: ³וַאֲרָא אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אֶל־
יִצְחָק וְאֶל־יַעֲקֹב בְּאֵל שַׁדַּי וְשְׁמִי יְהוָה לֹא נִודַעְתִּי לָהֶם:

²God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the *Eternal*. ³I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name YHWH." (Exod 6:2-3 NJPS)

This name for God could mean "God Almighty."³⁶⁶ However, as Nahum Sarna points out, "there are no convincing traditions as to its meaning and little etymological justification for that particular rendering," indicating why the JPS *Tanakh* transliterates the name into "El Shaddai."³⁶⁷

story, which involves gods bringing harm, would use mountains to represent the dangers of a distant, godly realm.

³⁶⁶ Exod 6:2-3 NRSV. Sarna, *Exodus*, 31.

³⁶⁷ Sarna, *Exodus*, 31.

Some scholars claim that שדי is pre-Israelite and originated from Canaanite mythologies.³⁶⁸ Another analysis says that the word may relate to the Akkadian *šadû(m)*, meaning “mountain” or “mountain range,” or even “mountain dwelling” or “mountain dweller.”³⁶⁹ Thus, אל שדי may have originated as the name for an unknown, pagan mountain deity.³⁷⁰

Moreover, Genesis 49:25 associates אל and שדי (separately) with שדיים, “breasts.” Indeed, some scholars claim that the original meaning of שדי was not “mountain” but “breast,” perhaps even referring to a Canaanite fertility god, although other academics believe the evidence behind that interpretation lacks plausibility.³⁷¹ Hence, while not every academic agrees, there could be a connection between God, mountains, and breasts. Just as breasts provide life-nourishing milk, so, too, do mountains and God provide protection and nurturement for Israel (see Chapter 3). Indeed, the blessings related to El Shaddai in Genesis involve fertility.³⁷²

Even excluding the possibly inaccurate mountain-breast theory, there remains a connection between God and mountains. El Shaddai could mean, “mountain dweller.”³⁷³ Additionally, if Talmon’s nomadic mountain-god theory is correct, then perhaps this Akkadian mountain-god was an early form of what eventually became YHWH who dwells on Zion. Ultimately, if שדי does originate from some ancient word for “mountain,”

³⁶⁸ *HALOT*, s.v. “שדי II.”

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁷¹ Steins, “שדי (*šadday*),” 14:422.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 14:430. See Genesis 17:1, 20; 28:3; 35:11; 48:3-4.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 14:421.

then God is not just a God who dwells on mountains and has power over them, but also is a God *of* mountains.

Conclusion

In conclusion, God uses or relates to mountains in a variety of ways. God frequently chooses to present God's self to humans on mountaintops in acts of theophany. Moreover, God often elects and dwells on mountains, making them holy. Sinai and Zion stand out as the two key mountains of God's divine habitation. Furthermore, mountains often represent God's might, a key aspect of biblical theology. Finally, one of God's names, אֱלֹהִים, may indicate that God's very nature intimately associates with mountains. All in all, mountains indicate much about the Bible's views of God and how God operates in the world.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Applications

Conclusions

This thesis has explored how the Bible presents mountains in a myriad of ways, from physical use to religious purposes to divine aspects. The unique geological and topographical features of the biblical land, including the vast difference in heights caused by the Great Rift Valley, led to biblical writers focusing on mountains in narratives and poems, prophecies and psalms. The mountains in the Bible served as sacred space, becoming a “focusing lens” to hone the relationship between Israel and the land, as well as between Israel and God. Furthermore, the biblical presentation of mountains leads to multiple implications about the role mountains played for the biblical writers and may lend insight into how modern Jews and Jewish professionals can use them today. Were it not for the mountainous landscape of Israel, the narratives and theological events of the Bible may have happened quite differently.³⁷⁴

Why did the Bible ultimately feature mountains so prominently? In part, ancient Near Eastern views of mountains seem to have influenced the Bible, including understanding these heights as abodes for the gods and utilizing them as sites for sacrifice. Additionally, the geography of ancient Israel, with its many peaks and valleys, drew in those who lived there; the grand features of mountains provided readily available symbols for the Israelites and their metaphors and religious needs. As towering peaks that reached toward the heavens, mountains came to represent the cosmic connection between heaven and earth, which led to multiple ritualistic and theological implications.

³⁷⁴ Imagine, for example, if revelation did not occur on Mount Sinai; perhaps theophanies would be associated with rivers or trees instead. The Bible as we know it may not have existed without the mountains of Israel.

Furthermore, contemporary Jewish and religious sources repeatedly assume that awe frequently influences one's perspective of mountains.³⁷⁵ Heschel says that "God begins where words end."³⁷⁶ He elaborates: "Awe [as opposed to fear]...is the sense of wonder and humility inspired by the sublime or felt in the presence of mystery."³⁷⁷ As Rabbi Jamie Korngold puts it, "He [Heschel] believed that awe, surely what Moses experienced on Sinai, is a prerequisite for the contemplation of God."³⁷⁸

Did Moses feel that sense of awe when God while alone on the mountain top as God passed before him on Sinai?³⁷⁹ Did the Israelites feel that awe when finally performing their covenantal ritual on Mounts Ebal and Gerizim?³⁸⁰ Did Elijah feel awe when confronted with the still, small voice on Horeb?³⁸¹ Moreover, can we still feel this sense of awe today? As we will see in the next section, perhaps we can.

Applications

The question remains: How do biblical presentations of mountains affect Jews and Jewish professionals living and working today? How can someone use mountains to find spiritual meaning? How do they do so with depth? One could apply the information from this thesis in two main ways: for physical connection on a mountain and for figurative use based on qualities of mountains.

³⁷⁵ See, for instance, Benstein, *Judaism and the Environment*, 113; Korngold, *God in the Wilderness*, 9. Although Lane does not mention "awe" specifically, he, too, refers to a sense of mystery and wonder (Lane, *Solace*, 102).

³⁷⁶ Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 98, quoted in Korngold, *God in the Wilderness*, 48.

³⁷⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Meridian, 1959) 77.

³⁷⁸ Korngold, *God in the Wilderness*, 48-49.

³⁷⁹ Exodus 34:5-7.

³⁸⁰ Joshua 8:33.

³⁸¹ 1 Kings 19:11-12.

The modern Jewish natural and environmental movements have declared a return to the outdoors. Despite certain classical objections to the idea of a positive Jewish connection to nature,³⁸² many Jews have nonetheless accepted their call to the wilderness and have ventured into the countryside. Indeed, Jewish youth take hiking trips locally and abroad,³⁸³ Birthright Israel participants spend their free trip outdoors,³⁸⁴ synagogue small-group programs form hiking teams,³⁸⁵ Jewish professionals gather together for wilderness spirituality,³⁸⁶ and a rabbi has made a career out of leading trips into the mountains.³⁸⁷ Jews have heeded the summons to the hills and forests of the world, both in Israel and the Diaspora.

Nature can have a positive influence on Jewish spiritual seekers. As Rabbi Abraham ben Maimonides wrote, “In order to serve God, one needs access to the enjoyment of the beauties of nature, such as the contemplation of flower-decorated meadows, majestic mountains, and flowing rivers. For all these are essential to the

³⁸² See, for instance, Lynn White’s famous article, “The Historic Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” which claims that the cause of the modern environmental emergency originates in the Bible and Judeo-Christian adaptations of it. Moreover, some Jews, such as Rabbi Steven Schwarzschild, claim that thousands of years of living away from nature or agriculture have left Jews as “unnatural,” meaning they have no connection to the land. (Benstein, *Judaism and the Environment*, 14-26)

³⁸³ Synagogue youth groups may take local hiking trips, as Temple Beth David (Cheshire, CT) students did in September 2013 (“Youth Group”). Similarly, NFTY in Israel offers the chance to “hike mountains” as part of their larger outdoor adventure program and tour of Israel (“NFTY in Israel”).

³⁸⁴ “Israel Outdoors,” *Birthright Israel*, n.p. [cited 21 January 2018]. Online: <https://www.israeloutdoors.com/>.

³⁸⁵ “LT Connects,” *Larchmont Temple*, n.p. [cited 21 January 2018]. Online: http://larchmonttemple.org/Programs_Events/LT_CONNECTS.

³⁸⁶ “About,” Torah Trek, n.p. [cited 21 January 2018]. Online: <http://www.torahtrek.org/about>.

³⁸⁷ See Rabbi Jamie S. Korngold’s, *God in the Wilderness*, and website, adventurerabbi.org.

spiritual development of even the holiest people.”³⁸⁸ Nature—including mountains—holds the potential for deeper spiritual meaning.

This movement of returning to the environment reflects a broader trend within modern Judaism. Jews seem to care less and less about formalized, denominational institutions. As the 2013 Pew report acknowledges, only 31% of Jewish adults personally belong to a synagogue or congregation, and only 28% value belonging to a Jewish community.³⁸⁹ Part of Rabbi Korngold’s *Adventure Rabbi* endeavor rests on this notion that contemporary Jews desire less of the walled institution and more of the unbounded wilderness.³⁹⁰ As she explains,

Thousands of years ago, Jewish leaders tried to remove nature from Judaism. What were they so afraid of? That if people continued to worship on mountaintops they would not need the priests or large ornate temples? On top of mountains, the ancient Israelites could worship anywhere, anytime, but the high priests wanted to consolidate their power, so they built a huge temple in Jerusalem and taught that God wanted to be worshipped only within its walls.

Rabbi Korngold seems to call for a reversal of the Josianic Reforms that consolidated worship to the Temple on Mount Zion.³⁹¹ Rather than worship only on one mountain, with its formal, constructed institution, Rabbi Korngold seeks to democratize worship and bring it back to nature. Her own experiences hiking in the hills and guiding people

³⁸⁸ Rabbi Abraham ben Maimonides, *Hamaspik La’Avodat Hashem*, quoted in Matt Biers-Ariel, Deborah Newbrun, and Michal Fox Smart, *Spirit in Nature: Teaching Judaism and Ecology on the Trail* (Springfield, NJ: Berman House, 2000), 58.

³⁸⁹ “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” *Pew Research Center* (1 October 2013), n.p. [cited 21 January 2018]. Online: <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>.

³⁹⁰ Korngold, *God in the Wilderness*, 4-7.

³⁹¹ This also seems to be a reversal of the consequences of Talmon’s theory that YHWH developed from a nomadic mountain-god to a God who dwells only on Mount Zion (Talmon, “הר (har),” 3:444).

onto mountaintops informs this theological and practical approach to mountains.³⁹² The topography of the Land of Israel originally inspired the biblical authors; now, any mountain can inspire the modern spiritual-seeker.

Hence, in pursuing nature, Jewish outing teams and other groups can potentially include mountains in their endeavors. Whether gazing at a peak from afar or standing on its summit after a climb, Jews can incorporate mountains into their adventure programs. Individuals can perhaps find meaning on a mountain, as Elijah did in 1 Kings 19. Jewish professionals can also lead trips into the hills.

As Jews travel to mountains, however, they can also integrate the knowledge presented in this thesis into their own interactions with the mountains. Including information from this research can add depth to mountain experiences. For example, multiple Jewish nature books speak of hikers finding the still, small voice on the mountain.³⁹³ Indeed, the awe one may feel looking up at a towering mountain or gazing at a valley from its summit can further one's connection to the divine.³⁹⁴ Just as Moses may have experienced awe on Sinai, so, too, can modern climbers feel that wonder on peaks today.³⁹⁵ Yet, as this thesis has suggested, hearing the still, small voice does not just mean sitting in quiet; it actually involves recognizing that God does not exist in the natural phenomena but outside of them entirely.³⁹⁶ Acknowledging the different aspects of God's relationship to mountains—such as God's mastery over creation, hills praising

³⁹² Korngold, *God in the Wilderness*, 4.

³⁹³ Benstein, *Judaism and the Environment*, 141-142. Biers-Ariel, Newbrun, and mart, *Spirit in Nature*, 24-25. Korngold, *God in the Wilderness*, 106.

³⁹⁴ Korngold, *God in the Wilderness*, 49.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁹⁶ Sarna, *Exodus*, 106. See Chapter 4.

God, and even God being *of* the mountains—can guide spiritual mountain climbers as they seek God on the peaks. These examples highlight the notion that a deeper understanding of Jewish and biblical views of mountains can enhance one's relationship to and experience on them.

Moreover, recognizing the depth of material on mountains in the Bible can help Jewish professionals develop more nuanced worship. Services on a mountaintop or hillside can no doubt draw from the data presented in this thesis. Mountains, as sacred space, can serve as focusing lenses to those seeking an encounter with holiness. Just as God reveals God's self through theophanies on mountaintops to relate to humankind, perhaps worshippers can attempt to reverse-engineer the experience, trekking up mountains to find God. Sacrifice, after all, was the ancient Israelite form of worship; if sacrifice could occur on mountains, either at the Temple or otherwise, then prayer, too, can happen there.

Mountains can provide a meaningful setting for other rituals, too. As discussed, Mounts Sinai, Ebal, and Gerizim were all involved in covenantal rituals. The inspirational views, ability for a proclamation of terms, and ritualization of mountain settings added solemnity and weight to the finalizations of these pacts. Thus, mountains can serve as locations for modern covenant-making, too. A couple could stand under the chuppah atop a mountain, for instance, to enter the covenant of marriage. Perhaps a synagogue unit, such as a board of trustees or youth group, could strengthen their covenantal relationship through bonding on a mountain hiking trip. Bringing a group up a mountain and shouting something—such as a prayer or declaration of vows—and hearing it echo throughout the heights has the potential to be a powerful, awe-inspiring

experience.³⁹⁷ As today's Jewish clergy invent and reinterpret rituals for contemporary needs,³⁹⁸ performing ceremonies on mountains can add an extra layer of meaning to the practice. Ultimately, if God dwells on mountains and if mountains function as cosmic meeting-places between heaven and earth, then ascending mountains could inspire radical amazement and even potentially unite mortal humans with the Almighty.

Yet even if one cannot climb or observe mountains, either due to physical limitations or geographic distance, biblical views of mountains can still apply to the modern Jew. Just as the prophets employed figurative language of mountains to connect to God, so, too, can Jews today use mountains as symbols and metaphors; perhaps mountains can still inspire awe even when not physically present.³⁹⁹ Jewish prayer leaders can use imagery and allegories that incorporate mountains to convey their message, such as expressing God's might and eternity. God's sheltering presence, a theme expressed by rock metaphors in the Bible as well as through prayers such as *Hashkiveinu*, can serve as a soothing thought to worshippers seeking comfort. Moreover, preachers can employ mountains within figurative language to emphasize their point. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. did just that, drawing on mountains' impressive features and using biblical allusions to call for justice.⁴⁰⁰ Those who practice mindfulness can draw on the symbolism and imagery of mountains, understanding their rootedness

³⁹⁷ Korngold, *God in the Wilderness*, 8-9.

³⁹⁸ E.g. wedding ceremonies for same-sex marriages and *brit bat* rituals for newborn girls.

³⁹⁹ Rabbi Korngold, for example, relates how Walt Whitman's nature poetry and Ansel Adam's photography can provide "spiritual uplift" even from the living room—or, perhaps, the synagogue (Korngold, *God in the Wilderness*, 5).

⁴⁰⁰ See, for example, King's "I Have a Dream" and "I've Been to the Mountaintop."

and steadiness as guides for meditation and connecting body to mountains (see Chapter 3).

Additionally, there is much potential to continue this exploration into mountains and their application to Jewish spiritual life today. No single book specifically examines traditionally Jewish views of mountains and applies them to modern Judaism. In addition to the physical and symbolic uses of mountains mentioned above, one could take biblical and later Jewish understandings of mountains and adapt them to modern spirituality and theology. Belden C. Lane does so from a Christian perspective in his work, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, weaving together personal narrative, biblical views of mountains, and Christian theology to create a volume that attempts to find God in the mountains.⁴⁰¹ Perhaps this thesis can be the first step in presenting a Jewish version of this spiritual endeavor.

Ultimately, how modern Jews use mountains depends on the individual's and group's needs, abilities, and prior experience with mountains. Whether seeking God on the mountain or bringing mountains into the synagogue, these impressive heights have much to offer those who desire spiritual inspiration. Following in the footsteps of the psalmist, as we lift our eyes to the mountains, we must hope that we, too, can find what we seek.

⁴⁰¹ Lane, *Solace*.

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