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The Cave of Elijah on Mount Carmel: A Co-Produced Multi-Religious Site



The entrance of Elijah's cave

Located on the outskirts of the city of Haifa, at the bottom of the northwestern slope of mount Carmel (Israel), the "cave of Elijah" has long been considered a holy place by believers from various religions, among them Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Studying the cave's history helps us understand the appearance of pilgrimage outside of Jerusalem among Jews and Christians against the background of Greek and Roman divination practices. How far back does the religious co-production of the cave of Elijah go and how did it happen?

During the Middle Ages, in Syria, Palestine, Arabia and Egypt, several pilgrimage sites were associated with the prophet Elijah, commonly referred to as al-Khadir in Muslim sources. Many of those included a "hidden enclosure," since, according to the Bible, Elijah spent quite a lot of time inside caves.

Benjamin of Tudela, a Jewish pilgrim from Spain, was the first to associate the name "cave of Elijah" with a religious building located on mount Carmel. Travelling through the area around 1170, he wrote that the Christians (meaning the Crusaders) had built a church there bearing the name San Elias (the Latin name of Elijah). During the 13thcentury a "cave of Elijah" on mount Carmel was alternatively defined as a synagogue or as a chapel by Jewish and Christian travelers respectively. Those may be rival

designations, or they may be referring to two different caves associated with the prophet: one near the bottom of the mount and another on the hilltop, where a monastery established in the wake of the first Crusade gave its name to the Carmelite order.



Aerial view of Mount Carmel

In the 17th century the cave located near the bottom of the mount, which is 14 meters long and 8 meters large, was reportedly converted into a mosque. However, it was revered and visited not only by Muslims from various ethnic backgrounds (Turks, Berbers, Arabs), but also by Christians and Jews. Apparently, under Ottoman rule, people of different religious affiliations could visit the cave of Elijah, with many making requests of him and asking for his “blessing” (Heb. *berakha*, Arab. *baraka*). Records of miracles and of women visiting the place hoping to become pregnant are numerous from the 18th century onwards.



Inside of the cave in 1910

Thousands of people did pilgrimage there at appointed times, especially in the summer during the shabbat following Tisha b’Av (a Jewish holiday commemorating the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple). Witnesses from the 19th and early 20th century described a procession attended by Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druze, and Baha ʾis. On

this occasion, a statue of Elijah was taken out and prayers for fertility were offered. People also slept inside the cave at other times as well, praying for fertility and for mental health. Nowadays, the cave of Elijah is outfitted as an Orthodox synagogue and open to visitors. Candles are lit and figcaption offerings of pictures or head-coverings are deposited inside.



Fabric offerings inside Elijah's cave

How did the site come to be revered and then shared by believers from so many religions? The answer may lie in the site's history, beginning with the status of mount Carmel during the Greek and early Roman periods.

Mount Carmel: An Oracular Site of the Roman Period

Mount Carmel was already imbued with religious significance in Antiquity. A travel account from the mid-4thcentury BCE (Pseudo-Scylax, *Periplous* 104.3) claimed it was "a mountain sacred to Zeus." According to historians from the early 2nd century CE, Vespasian, the Roman general charged with suppressing the first Judean revolt against Rome (66-70 CE), went up the mountain. There, he received news that any endeavor he undertook would be successful; he ended up becoming the next Roman emperor. The two authors that relayed this event disagreed slightly on how Vespasian came to know about his own destiny. Tacitus (*Histories* 2.78.3) described a traditionally Roman form of divination with a priest reading the entrails of a sacrificed animal. Suetonius (*Life of Vespasian* 5.6) reported that there was a well-known oracle located on the mount. Nevertheless, both defined the site as prophetic.

Archaeological sources corroborate the existence of a Roman sanctuary somewhere on the mount. A monumental marble foot dated to the late 2nd or early 3rd century CE was recovered on the hilltop. It was inscribed with the name "Carmel" and a dedication to Zeus.



The monumental marble foot with its inscription (photograph by Asher Ovadiah)

Some interpret this find as a fragment from a lost statue, but others suggest that it may have been a votive offering. The donor, named Gaius Julius Eutychas, would have gifted it to the god after his foot was healed. Asking a deity for a cure and thanking them by offering an image of the healed organ was a pervasive practice in the Greek and Roman worlds. The sick would often sleep in a sanctuary waiting for a god or goddess to send them a medical prescription through a dream; this ritual became known as "incubation," from the Latin "to lay down inside" (*in-cubare*). Incubation could be either therapeutic or divinatory. It was mainly practiced in specialized sanctuaries dedicated to healing deities, like Asclepios and Isis. However, all the gods and goddesses could send such a dream to anyone anywhere if they so wished; any sanctuary could thus be considered a good place to ask for a cure.

Based on the archaeological findings on mount Carmel, the site may have been visited in Antiquity by people petitioning Zeus for a cure: a striking parallel with 20th-century pilgrims sleeping in the cave of Elijah asking to be healed. But when did Jews begin to consider mount Carmel a place where one could communicate with supra-human entities and/or learn about their future?

In his account of the connection between Mount Carmel and Vespasian, the 5th century CE Christian author Orosius suggested that they may have done so since the 1st century CE. Compared to Tacitus and Suetonius, Orosius gave a slightly different account of the connection between mount Carmel and Vespasian. He wrote that the prophecy did not explicitly mention the general's name, but rather stated that "leaders coming out of Judea would take possession of things." The Jews from the province of Judea applied the prophecy to themselves and rebelled against the Roman authority. In response, emperor Nero dispatched Vespasian to suppress the Judean rebellion. Orosius clearly wanted to disparage the Jews, whom he defined as "completely destitute of the grace of God." He depicted them as "misled" (Latin *seducti*) by trickery. But we must ask: did he invent the story to denounce the Jews' eagerness to embrace Pagan rituals? Or did he possess any indication that at least some Jews went up mount Carmel expecting to hear about their future? If so, did the Jews go there during the 1st century CE or during Orosius's time in the 5th century?

To put it another way, was Orosius's description of mount Carmel as a site of divination co-produced between "Pagans" and Jews a complete invention intended as a polemical statement, or did it preserve a kernel of truth about the identity of its visitors?

While we cannot answer this question, there is a strong possibility that the site later known as the "cave of Elijah" was already deemed auspicious by "Pagans", Jews ,and possibly Christians during Late Antiquity.

The Cave on Mount Carmel during Late Antiquity: An Auspicious Site for "Pagans", Jews, and Christians

Indeed, a series of decorated niches were carved in the cave's walls at some point between the 1st and 3rd century CE. While we cannot be certain that the cave was part of the Roman sanctuary located on Mount Carmel, it seems highly probable. Scholars who argue that the marble foot found on the hill originally belonged to a statue, point out that such a sculpture would have fit in the highest niche in the cave, which is 2.4 meters tall.

In addition, the eastern and western walls of the cave are covered with 225 inscriptions, the vast majority written in Greek. Their dating is not certain. Based on the letters' design, some inscriptions appear to be from the 1st-3rdcenturies, while others may be from the 6th century. Most legible inscriptions follow the same pattern: they associate personal names with the phrase "be remembered" (*mnêsthê*) or "be successful" (*euthychei*). Such phrases were used by people of all religious communities to commend oneself to a deity during Late Antiquity. They are found in synagogues, churches, and Roman sanctuaries, in Greek or in other languages (Aram. *dakor letov*, Lat. *bene memoria*) and were often inscribed by pilgrims who wished to leave a trace of their passage in specific sites. In addition, at least one inscription asks for "health" (*hygieia*).

Interestingly, none of the inscriptions include an explicit statement about the visitors' religious identity. No one is claiming to be a Jew, a Christian, or anything else, and nothing about their religion can be deduced from their name. According to some, the contents of the longer inscriptions could give us some clues. For instance, one inscription (n°24) includes a phrase that could translate as the "god's image" (*theou ikasian*), possibly alluding to the statue of a Roman god. Another one (n°101) asks for "soul of the son of God (*Theoteknos*) [to] be saved": while some interpret this wording as Christian, the phrase "son of god" was commonly used in Late Antique Roman religions. In addition, the inscriptions were badly damaged by the cave's continued use. Their exact spelling and subsequent meaning are intensely debated.

The absence of any explicit religious self-definition inside sites visited for religious purposes is not unheard of. However, such inscriptions were commonly associated with a drawing which functioned as a religious identity marker: usually a *menorah* (seven-branched candelabra) for Jews and a cross for Christians. Yet only a few ancient *menorot* were etched on the walls between the 4th and 6th century CE. As for crosses, there may be one, but its design dates it to the Middle Ages. In addition to the *menorot*, at least one scene is depicted on the western wall of the cave, but it is heavily mutilated. Some argue that it originally showed a Roman priest kneeling before the statue of a god, as well as a vessel used for sacrifice; similar iconographies are found on Roman coinages.

Some of the cave's inscriptions and drawings were also carved on top of each other: the seemingly sacrificial scene appears to have been engraved over something else. At some point, the beginning of the Islamic *basmala* (an Arabic phrase meaning "In the

name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful") was inscribed over a Jewish *menorah*. Those superimpositions may reveal a wish to erase or cancel the marks left inside the cave by visitors from other religions. Nevertheless, the fact remains that during Late Antiquity, the site was visited by people from various religious groups. Most of them did not feel the need to specify their religious identity and did not state which entity they were invoking when asking for health or for success.



Basmala *inscription (110 cm long) above two* menorot *on the east wall of the cave* (Ovadiah and Pierri 2015, Fig.26)



Basmala *inscription (110 cm long) above two* menorot *on the east wall of the cave* (photograph by Yoav Avneyon)

There is no way to explain why people tended to specify their religious affiliation in some sites and not in others. It may be that before the 4th and 5th centuries, the notion that a place could become holy and thus acquire some therapeutic and/or divinatory properties was not sanctioned by Rabbinic or by ecclesiastical authorities. Thus, people may have felt that coming to the cave on Mount Carmel seeking a blessing did not have anything to do with their religious identity.

In any case, the cave's architecture, its *décor,* and the inscriptions on its walls do point out that its auspiciousness was co-produced. By Late Antiquity at the latest, "Pagans" and Jews visited it, and at some point, Christians and Muslims joined as well. However, none of the inscriptions mentions Elijah. So, when did the cave become associated with him?

The Cave's Connection with Elijah: A Later Development?

A "cave of Elijah" is mentioned in the Aramaic version of *Toledot Yeshu* (literally "the generations of Jesus"), a Jewish parodic retelling of the Gospels tentatively dated to the 5th century. According to this polemical text, Jesus actively tried to escape death: he

sought refuge in the cave of Elijah (*ma'arata de-Eliahou*) whose mouth he managed to shut by speaking "words of sorcery." A rabbi named Yehuda the gardener then went after him and ordered the cave to open; Jesus flew out to Mount Carmel but was finally caught. If *Toledot Yeshu* was indeed composed during the 5th century, then by this time, a cave associated with Elijah was already located on Mount Carmel. While the narrative does not define it as a pilgrimage site, the cave is presented as a bone of contention between Jews and Christians; it is also depicted as a place where uncommon things happen, be it through magical means or through the action of a righteous rabbi whose power came from his status as "a messenger of the great God."

Setting such a story in the cave of Elijah may be a clue that Jews and Christians were fighting over the site, or rather, than the Rabbinic author of the text desired that they do so, so that Jews could become the sole owners of the place. Conversely, the mention of sorcery could be interpreted as a sign of distaste for the Jews who went there. Indeed, at the time, the rabbis had only begrudgingly begun to concede that miracles could happen at places associated with major Biblical figures.

But why was the cave associated with Elijah? The prophet famously defeated the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (*1 Kings* 18) but none of the caves he hid in were located there. In addition, Elijah did not really cure anyone in the Bible; he "only" resurrected the son of a widow (*1 Kings* 17:17-24). His pupil Elisha, "the man of God at Mount Carmel" (*2 Kings* 4:25) who also resurrected a child, was the one who cured Naaman from leprosy (*2 Kings* 5:1-19).

However, Jewish and Christian sources from Late Antiquity did credit Elijah with therapeutic powers. According to a story from the Palestinian Talmud (*Ketubot* 12.3), written down around 400, Elijah visited a famous rabbi and healed his 13-year-old toothache through touch. Elijah's name was also associated with at least two famous healing sanctuaries. In a poem she wrote praising the baths of Gadara (today in Israel), a "holy place" (*hagios topos*) where people of all religions went to be cured, the empress Aelia Eudoxia (421-443), the wife of the Roman emperor Theodosius II, mentioned that one of the hot springs was named after the prophet. Around 575, a Christian pilgrim who toured Palestine described the "baths of Elijah," a few kilometres away from Gadara (Piacenza pilgrim, *Itinerary* 7). There, lepers underwent incubation: they spent the night immersed in the baths hoping to receive a vision, a sign that they would be "cleansed."

The absence of Elijah's name from the inscriptions inside the cave suggests that the site was visited by Jews (and maybe by Christians) before it became associated with him. Since Mount Carmel was originally renowned for its prophetic function and later for its general auspiciousness, including curative powers, the cave was progressively linked with the prophet because he was already associated with the mount and had become a healing figure. At some point, on-site incubation was continued or rekindled by non-"Pagan" pilgrims. As for the cave's fame among women seeking pregnancy, it may have sprung from the story of Elijah resurrecting the son of the widow.

Between Co-production and Competition

The story of the cave of Elijah exemplifies the co-production of pilgrimage and of its rituals, such as incubation, during Late Antiquity. All the available documentation attest to a general awareness of the site's co-production, which was alternatively rejected and embraced through history. Some modern religious authors have valued the consensus over the cave's holiness positively, interpreting it as a proof of authenticity and efficacy. But the fact that, after several centuries of sharing, another cave of Elijah emerged on top of Mount Carmel, this one controlled by the Christians, suggests that there were those who sought to maintain religious boundaries by avoiding mixing. The location of

the newer site on the hilltop, as opposed to the traditionally shared one, down the slope near the bottom, could be interpreted as an attempt as topographical supersessionism. Today, the two sites are often mixed up: searching for “the cave of Elijah on mount Carmel” online leads to many websites that conflate them. Such confusion may be purposefully maintained by some who wish to appropriate the oldest pilgrimage site.

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