

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF MOUNT CARMEL

*And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.*

—ISAIAH 2:2

If Carmel's stones could speak, they would tell tales of miracles, victories, and defeats, describe the tread of prophets and pagans, princes, and paupers, and whisper in quiet reverence of God's destiny for this majestic mountain. Mount Carmel, held sacred by Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Bahá'ís alike, has been at the crossroads of human history for as long as humankind has record. Cromagnon skeletons were found in caves hollowed out of the limestone walls. Pythagoras stayed in these hills on his way to Egypt; the prophet Elijah made his home in two of Carmel's caves; Jesus' family is said to have paused here on their way back from Egypt; and the Crusaders made pilgrimage to this holy mountain in 1150 CE. Druze settled here in the sixteenth century, coming from Lebanon; in 1868 the German Templers built a colony of sturdy brick homes at the base; and in 1891 Bahá'u'lláh pitched His tent at the base of the mountain, making it a holy place for Bahá'ís of the world.

Carmel's sacred nature is noted as early as the middle of the second millenium BCE in a list of places conquered by Egyptian King Thothmes III. The mountain is referred to as "the sacred promontory." In the fourth century BCE, neo-Platonic philosopher Iamblicus described Carmel as "sacred above all mountains and forbidden of access to the vulgar." Indeed, all the military campaigns of Syrian and Israeli history have treated this mountain as a place to be avoided, sweeping past on either side on the way to or from battle.

It is perhaps the story of Elijah with which we are most familiar. Elijah, who lived in the mid-ninth century BCE during the reign of Ahab and his successor Ahaziah, fought the Baal priests in order to maintain the integrity of monotheistic Judaism. As recounted in 1 Kings 18, Elijah called all the peoples of Israel to gather on Mount Carmel at a site on its eastern face. This group included the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets who served Queen Jezebel. Elijah asked them to choose who they worshiped, either God or Baal. As the crowd was silent, Elijah called for two bulls to be brought to him. He asked the Baal prophets to choose one, butcher it, build an altar for it, and call upon Baal to light the fire for the sacrifice. The priests prayed, appealed, and danced to no avail. Then Elijah built his altar and prepared his sacrifice, asking that water be poured onto the mound until the trench he had dug around it was filled. In the Bible account, Elijah prayed to God, asking Him to prove to the people that there is only one God. God caused the sacrifice to burn until even the water was evaporated. The false prophets were put to death.

Elijah is reported to have lived in two caves during his time on Mount Carmel, one of which is at the crest of the hill and is sheltered by the Carmelite monastery. The lower cave is directly below, at the base of the mountain. These two caves have had religious uses since early times. The upper chapel became either a mosque or maqám (small shrine) during the Arab period, when a mihrab, or a prayer niche facing Mecca, was added. In 1226 CE Crusaders received permission from Rome to form what is now the Carmelite Order. The first institution

of Carmelite nuns was founded in 1452. In 1826 the monastery was rebuilt at this ancient site on Mount Carmel, where it stands today.

Others from Europe were enticed to settle on Carmel's fertile plains. In the mid-1800s Christoph Hoffmann, Georg David Hardegg, and Christoph Paulus founded the Temple Society in Germany. Their dream was to establish communities that would realise the idea of creating God's kingdom on earth. Hoffmann and Hardegg arrived in Haifa in 1868, leading an influx of families that settled in Haifa and Jaffa between 1868 and 1875. Settlements grew and expanded to Bethlehem, the Galilee, and areas surrounding Haifa. Some of these hard-working Templers built their homes and farms at the base of Mount Carmel, along what is now Ben Gurion Avenue in Haifa. There they carved religious quotations into the lintels above their doorways and awaited the return of Christ.

The north face of the mountain began to change from that time. The catalyst for this transformation was Bahá'u'lláh, Who, during an afternoon in 1891, pointed out to His son 'Abdu'l-Bahá the spot that should serve as the permanent resting-place for the remains of the Báb, His martyred Forerunner. Following these instructions, 'Abdu'l-Bahá erected the initial structure of the mausoleum and interred the remains of the Báb there in 1909. The ornamental superstructure, which makes this Shrine one of Haifa's best known landmarks, was constructed between 1949 and 1953 under the supervision of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's grandson and head of the Faith, Shoghi Effendi, who developed the extensive formal gardens. The Shrine sits at the center of the mountain's north face with the cave of Elijah to the west and the hills of the Galilee to the east. The plains of Sharon lie to the south, and the Shrine faces the ancient city of Acre and the tomb of Bahá'u'lláh, across the bay, overshadowing the Templer colony.

Now, after 10 years of construction, magnificent Terraces ascend this once barren face, embrace the Shrine like a jewel, and transform Carmel for all time. The mountain has come full circle, from the fertile, forested mountain known to the ancient Hebrews as a symbol of fruitfulness and prosperity, to a dry, rocky landscape caused by mass deforestation during the Ottoman occupation, to terraced gardens and informal landscaping that recall and amplify Carmel's former beauty. Once again, she embodies her Hebrew name "kerem," meaning vineyard or fruitful garden.

*It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory  
of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon,  
they shall see the glory of the LORD, and the excellency of our God.*

— ISAIAH 35:2

## THE MOUNTAIN

HIGHEST POINT: 546 meters (1,791 feet) above sea level

LENGTH: 26 km (16 miles)

AREA: 245 square km (95 square miles)

SHAPE: triangular

COMPOSITION: limestone

MAIN CITY: Haifa, a city founded 1800 years ago by Jews and non-Jews.

The name Haifa comes from the Hebrew "Chof Yaffeh," or, beautiful shore.

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