

RIISING MOUNTAINS AND PROXIMITY TO THE DIVINE: BIBLICAL IDEAL OF *BES-RAUMA*

Benny Thettayil CMI*

Abstract: *Bes-rauma* was the spiritual and monastic ideal that the indigenous Carmelites of India lived and propagated. *Bes-rauma*, was an experience of 'a house on the hilltop', was enjoyed by the members, appreciated by the people, admired by the authorities and immensely benefitted by the people far and wide. It was not just a spiritual ideal, but also a physical expression realized in the various foundations of the early Carmelite monasteries in Kerala. The first part of the present study is an investigation into the ideal in the light of the various mountains appearing in the narratives in the Bible and their sacred significance in the Ancient Near East, both the Testaments of the Bible and in various faith around the world. The second part of the study is a closer reading of the life

***Benny Thettayil CMI** holds a doctorate in Sacred Scripture with a specialization in Johannine writings from the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. He teaches at various theological faculties. He is a prolific writer and has published several books and many articles and he was the editor-in-chief of *Herald of the East*. His publications include *In Spirit and Truth: An Exegetical Study of John 4:19-26 and a Theological Investigation of the Replacement Theme in the Fourth Gospel* (CBET 46), New York: Peeters 2007; *Spiritual Insertion in the Gangakshetra: Glimpses of the Mission in Bijnor* (ed), Bangalore 2012; *God-talk in Context: a North Indian Theological Experiment*, Bangalore 2016; *Fluid Cross: Expanding Theological Horizons* (PMRS 1) Bengaluru 2000; *Fragmented Cross: Expendable Theological Visions* (PMRS 2), Bengaluru 2020; *Versatile Cross: Mission and Visions* (PMRS 3) Bengaluru 2020 and *Father and Doctor of the Church* (TSSC 14), Bengaluru 2024. He has been engaged in guiding the students of Samanvaya both in Jagdalpur and Bhopal, has been the Dean of Studies at Samanvaya and Programme coordinator of Poornodaya, Bhopal. He was the Provincial Superior of St John's CMI Province, Bijnor. Currently, he is the Director of Samanvaya Theology College, Bhopal. Email: bennycmi67@gmail.com

and works of the early members of the Carmelites of Kerala, in the light of their aspirations expressed in various ways. *Bes-rauma*, for them was a harmonious blend of both the contemplative and active aspects of religious life, following the example of Elijah on Mount Carmel bringing together social action and mystical experience.

Keywords: *Bes-rauma*, Asceticism, Monasticism, Religious life, Indigenous religious congregation, *Vanavasa*, *Darsanaveedu*, Consecrated life, *Tapasubhavanam*, *Punyasamketam*

1. Introduction

The desire to live a consecrated life was at the heart of the founding fathers of the first indigenous religious congregation of India. Personally, each one of them had varied ideas of the life that they had dreamt of. However, their common understanding of consecrated life could be gleaned from the way they expressed their vision on the *style* of life, the *abode* of life and the *outcome* of life that they were going to live. In the local language, they termed the *style* of life that was in store for them as *vanavasa*, *othungiparkal* and *mintatakkam*. They also had a vision of the *abode* that they were to live in, and they called their future dwelling *bes-rauma*, *darsanaveedu*, *tapasubhavanam* and *punyasamketam*. They envisioned the *outcome* of the style of life that they lived the in abode as each of the members becoming a *punyathinte kannadi*.

2. The Monastic Ideal of *Bes-rauma*

Out of these, in the present reflection, we focus on their future dwelling that had to be a *tapasubhavanam*, which could be loosely translated as a 'house of austerity' where one learns, practises and lives the evangelical counsels of chastity (*brahmacharithvam*), poverty (*agathithvam*) and obedience (*cholvili*). By means of the practice of these evangelical counsels, they hoped to turn their abode into a *punyasamketam*, which translated is an abode of virtues. Their practice of virtues in turn, would make it a *darsanaveedu*, a house to behold the Lord, for themselves and for others – for themselves as they live in continuous *darsan* of the Lord, and for others, as the visitors, who come in search of spiritual help and solace, could have a reflection of the *darsan* that the dwellers of the abode enjoy.

In this ideal, the community at Mannanam is envisioned as an interpretation of the categorical and defining statement of Jesus regarding his disciples: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a

hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:14-16). The life of the first community at Mannanam, according to Thomas Kochumuttom, was going to the interpretation of abovementioned gospel text in action.¹ One of the epithets employed for the abode of the consecrated ones is *bes-rauma*, a Syriac term which means "a house on high", which has its reference to Mt 5:14, cited above.

3. The Biblical Shadows of *Bes-rauma*

Biblically, we do not have a reference to "a house on high" in the Scripture. However, there were "the high places" that the Israelites inherited from the Canaanites. In the prophetic times, these were condemned as they lured some people to fertility and other cultic practices. Josiah's reform narrated in 2 Kings 22-23//Chronicles 34-35 includes the destruction of *the high places* both in the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. However, the fascination for the mountains, which were intimately related to the revelation of Yahweh on various occasions in their history, and the recognition of the divine significance of the high mountains was maintained by the Israelites. Hence, Isaiah prophesies: "It shall happen in the latter days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills" (Is 2:2). Since in ancient Near Eastern culture, mountains were seen as the dwelling places of the gods, Isaiah pictures the mountain of the Lord as the highest, symbolizing the superiority of the God of Israel over all other deities.

The founding fathers chose a hill at Mannanam to establish the first house for the new community of the consecrated men to make it a *bes-rauma* both in the literal and spiritual sense.² They chose the hill for a few reasons. First of all, there is the visibility factor. Like the "city set on a hill", it is visible to all; it becomes a *darsanaveedu* for all the inhabitants around the hill. Secondly, there is the general notion of the sacredness attached to the heights, which is culturally and spiritually significant.

¹ Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 1), Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2017, xviii.

² *Complete Works of Chavara*, Mannanam (1990): 13-14; *Chavara Achante Sampurna Kritikal I*, Mannanam, (1981): 16-17.

And finally, away from the residential area, the community would have a literal experience of *vanavasa* and the joy of solitude. Jacob Kaniyanthara gives a narrative of the meeting they had with the bishop: "One day both of the Fathers, Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, having discussed the question of going for religious life, decided to approach the Very Rev. Bishop for permission. During a recreation time they said to him: 'Both of us would like to lead a withdrawn life. We beg to be permitted to do so.'"³

Like the custom prevalent in the biblical Ancient Near East, the early fathers knew that the hills and mountains held an important spiritual and cultural significance in India. Their fascination for the mountains is deeply rooted in the scripture where they had read countless times the narratives of the divine revelation connected to the mountain as the locale where it majestically transpires. In the following discussion, we retrace the journey of the people of Israel and the disciples of Jesus and see how the various mountains and deserts played their role in shaping the spirituality of the people of God.

4. Ancient Mountains and their Sanctity

Down through the centuries, people of all races and civilizations have associated mountains and hills with heightened sense of spirituality. The Israelites were no different. In their worldview, the cosmos was a three-part structure consisting of the heavens, the earth, and the sheol, which was the dark spiritual place beneath the earth. The higher you rose in physical spheres, the closer you got to God. Hence, it made sense to the biblical people to draw closer to God by building temples, altars, and shrines on the high places such as hills and mountains. Moreover, throughout their history, various theophanies transpired on high mountains.

The people behind the Scripture were so natural that the nature was the only means for them to get close to God and in them, they saw God manifested. Hence, the Bible is strewn with magnificent references to the nature – from the flowing rivers to the still waters; from soaring trees to sprawling, fruitful vines. The starry skies stretched above them gave them thunder, rain, and lightning and vast expanses of wilderness and lush forests below with caves, hills and valleys; mighty waters that

³ Jacob Kaniyanthara, *History of the Foundation of Mannanam Monastery* (manuscript unpublished, available at the Archives of St Joseph's Monastery, Mannanam), 7-6.

housed large fish and all of these complete the narrative of the Lord's creation seen in the Scripture.

None of the above inspired more owe in the biblical people than the high mountains, as they were close to them but were majestically high as one of them came to be immortalized as the dwelling place of the Most High, to which Micah called his people: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths" (Micah 4:2). Right from the story of the tower of Babel, the fascination of the people is evident for what is high like a mountain, because its peak is closer to God.

The association of the mountains with God was caused by the belief that the skies above are the abode of God. The Scripture has multiple references to the belief that heaven (the skies) is the place where God "dwells." The narrators of the various stories and experiences in both the Old and New Testaments referred to the heightened spiritual presence on the mountains (Is 66:1, Mt 6:9, 1 Pet 3:22). For this reason, it was natural for the people of Israel, after the building of the temple on Mount Zion, to develop a tradition of pilgrimage in which several times a year, they drew closer to God by scaling Zion, the holy mountain of God.

5. The Biblical Mountains

Mountains and hills played a very significant role in the spirituality of the biblical people. It is also a known fact that in the first part of the Book of Genesis, especially in the first nine chapters, neither mountain nor hill is seen. The purpose of God in creating the mighty mountain ranges has nothing to do with drawing humanity closer to Himself in physical proximity because he is close to the earth walking with them" (Gen 3:8-10). It is perhaps, the steadfast nature of the mountains and their physical immensity that filled the ancients with awe. The attraction of the mountains, especially their peaks is only symbolic; they further symbolize the awe-inspiring nature of God and his transcendence and unattainability. The mountainous creation reveals the nature of its Creator – the mountains reveal the grandeur of God. The symbolism behind these majestically peaked formations has a potential to draw human hearts closer to him. The story of the mountain as the place of theophany and the people's faith that God is somehow more

significantly present on high places and lonely places⁴ than in other locations made them seek the face of the Lord in these places.

The various events of theophany that unfolded the redemptive plan of God that transpired on the mountains involving the people of God, affirmed the faithfulness of God, the sovereignty of the Most High, and the all-surpassing might of the Creator. Above all, these events revealed the steadfastness of God in fulfilling his covenant promises. The following are the mountains that are related to the various divine revelations and covenants.

5.1. Ararat, the Mountain of Hope

Ararat is considered the mountain of hope. The mountain is associated with the mountain on which the Ark of Noah came to rest at the end of the great flood. Ararat, as a mountain, is sacred to the Armenians, who believe themselves to be the first race of humans to appear in the world after the great flood. The biblical story of the Mountain is related to the new creation with the family of Noah. Hence, the mountain is referred to as the mountain of hope. Ararat inspired hope because after the great chaos, it is here that the new Eden with the representatives of the entire creation was left by God to refill the earth.

In creation, God brought order to the chaos that had existed. After the repeated chaos of the deep,⁵ which manifested in the flood, it is the mountain of Ararat that humanity was finally back on solid ground – a new creation! After Noah and his family emerged from the ark and stood upon the mountain,⁶ God gave them an everlasting promise,

⁴ Benny Thettayil, "The Lure of the Desert: St Chavara and the Attempted Flight from the World, in *St Kuriakose Elias Chavara: To the Desert and Back* (HE 12/2 (2016), 167-179, characterizes the vocation to religious life as the lure of the desert.

⁵ Ppazynych Wasyl, "Why Mount Ararat entered the Bible" in https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350689009_Why_Mount_Ararat_entered_the_Bible_EN, posted on 2021/04/07, accessed on 18.12.2024, in his research, argues that this second chaos, which is called the great flood at the time of Noah, was caused by a tsunami.

⁶ Armen Petrosyan, "Biblical Mount Ararat: Two Identifications" in *Comparative Mythology* 2.1. (2016) describes the history of the biblical Ararat, the mountain on which Noah's Ark was grounded. Petrosyan makes two general identifications of the mount: They are on the Armenian Highlands: the mountain of Corduene and Masis, situated respectively in the extreme south-east and extreme north-east of modern Turkey. According to the most ancient sources, Corduene was the object of identification. However, since the 12th

establishing a covenant. "I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen 9:11). According to the biblical account, the family of Noah made burnt offering on the mount where the Ark settled. Ararat was the first of all the mountains or high places where an altar was made for Yahweh he was worshipped with a sacrifice (Gen 8:20).

There is a Persian legend that refers to the mountain as the cradle of the human race. In the Christian era, with the continued fascination for the biblical mountains, the Armenians built a monastery to commemorate St Jacob, who is said to have tried repeatedly but failed to reach the summit of Great Ararat in search of the Ark.⁷

The Bible never refers to *Ararat* as a mountain. However, probably as a later designation, Mount Ararat does exist as two volcanic cones named Greater Ararat and Little Ararat. Geographically, Mount Ararat is a snow-capped dormant volcanic mountain in the extreme east of Turkey, bordered by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran. Medieval Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi (410-90) wrote in his *History of Armenia* that Noah and his family settled in Armenia before moving to Babylon. Later, Japheth, his son returned to the area around Mount Ararat and established the roots of the Armenian nation.⁸ The Armenians consider Japheth the founding father of their nation. Mount Ararat is so sacred and significant in the history of the Armenians as a symbol of hope that it is depicted on the Armenian coat of arms.

century, Masis became more popular. Petrosyn deals with the myths and legends associated with these mountains and the history of identification of the biblical Ararat.

⁷ "Mount Ararat" in Encyclopaedia Britannica, updated: 11 Dec. 2024 in <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Armenian-people>; accessed 18.12.2024. However, it is to be noted that the biblical reference would indicate that the ark came to rest on mountains in an area called Ararat, which would mean either that Ararat was an area in which there was a mountain on which the ark came to rest, or it was a mountain range. 2 Kings 19:37 would indicate that Ararat was a land and not a mountain, and Jer 51:27, would rather recognize Ararat as one of the kingdoms.

⁸ Moses of Chorene, *History of Armenia*, B.P. Pratten (trans.), Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 2020.

Since it fell beyond the borders of the Promised Land, it seems not to have become a sanctuary for the subsequent generations of the Israelites. Moreover, unlike other high places and sanctuaries in the Promised Land, which were somehow related to one or the other Patriarch, Ararat was part of a narrative with a mythical colour and a mythical hero.

5.2. Sinai, the Mountain of the Covenant

Mount Sinai is arguably one of the most sacred places mentioned in the Bible. There are only a few covenants in the Bible made by God with his people. The most significant of them is the Mosaic covenant, which took place on Mount Sinai. For the people and for the subsequent generations, this mountain became a symbol of the covenant and a reminder that the Lord had come down from heaven to meet with his people.

Although there is no firm consensus on where exactly Mount Sinai is located, it is assumed to be located between the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba in the Sinai Desert. According to Paul, Mount Sinai is located in Arabia (Gal 4:24). Stephen knew that Moses was familiar with the area since an angel appeared to him in a burning bush, "in Horeb, the mountain of God" (Ex 3:1), which Stephen refers to as "in the wilderness of Mount Sinai" (Acts 7:30).⁹

According to the Book of Exodus, Sinai was the place where the Lord interacted with the people in a spectacular manner. The Israelites came to the desert of Sinai and camped by the mountain and there, God spoke to Moses. The people washed their clothes and were consecrated and on the third day, the Lord came down on the mountain. On the third day, God descended on Mount Sinai with a terrible display of power - amidst thunder, lightning, cloud, and a loud trumpet, as the mountain was covered with smoke, the Lord came down in fire (Ex 19:18). The people were so frightened that they asked that God might speak to Moses and let Moses be the intermediary (Ex 20:19).

Moses was called up the mountain and was given the 10 Commandments on the mountain. On account of the presence of the Lord on the mountain, the holiness of God itself was attributed to the mountain. The people were warned to stay away from the mountain itself, for it would be holy ground. And if anyone even touched the

⁹ The majority of the scholars opine that Sinai and Horeb are two names for the same location, but there is a minority that holds that these were distinct places.

bottom of the mountain, he/she would be put to death (Ex 19:12-13). Mount Sinai itself was not holy, however, it is the theophany on top of that mountain made it holy.

Sinai as the mountain of God became a unique place where a few privileged people were able to behold God.

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank (Ex 24:9-11).

God meeting with Moses and the leaders on this mountain in a collective theophany reiterated the designation of Sinai as the Mountain of God. The holiness of Mount Sinai was attested by the fact that it was here that God appeared to Moses for the first time although the narrative names the mountain Horeb. God asks Moses to treat the mountain as holy (Ex 3:5). Moreover, it was already recognized as “the mountain of God” (Ex 3:1).

The mount is also considered by the people of God as the mountain of great mercy. It was here that Moses encountered the burning bush and where God spoke to him and, out of his mercy for the slaves, sent him on a liberative mission to Egypt to bring them out of slavery (Ex 3:1-6). The mercy of the Lord was also evident in his act of the provision of the tablets of the 10 Commandments for a second time, after the destruction of the first set over the idolatry of the people. Throughout the Scripture, Mount Sinai is associated with the reception of the law as was venerated as such. After the exile, Nehemiah recognized the mountain and publicly prayed to Yahweh: “You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments” (Neh 9:13). In the New Testament times, according to Paul, Sinai metaphorically represents the law and Old Covenant (Gal 4:24-25).

The presence of the Lord is so fascinating to the one who comes in contact with him that he/she becomes oblivious to the time and space – ecstasy. On one of his ascent to Mount Sinai, Moses stayed in the presence of the Lord for a long time – for about 40 days! So much so, that the people grew restless and began to think that Moses had perished. The lapse of time in the living presence of the Lord is not comparable to

the measure of time in the ordinary world. It is this captivating and absorbing power of the presence of the Lord that kept people attracted to Mount Sinai.

Just as part of the holiness of God was attributed to the mountain, so the glory of the Lord that was manifested on the mountain was infectious. When Moses ascended the mountain for the second time, and spent an extended time in the presence of Yahweh, the glory of the Lord reflected on his face. When Moses came down the mountain, the people saw his face shining with the glory of God. The altered appearance of the face of Moses made the people afraid of him, so he put a veil over his face so he would not frighten the Israelites (Ex 34:29-35; cf. 2 Cor 3:7). Mount Sinai signified the glory of the Lord.

Sinai is also important in the tradition of the prophet Elijah, who has a direct relationship with the Carmelite tradition. Fleeing the threat of Queen Jezebel, Elijah travelled forty days until "he reached Horeb, the mountain of God" (1 Kings 19:8). At Horeb/Sinai, Elijah sheltered in a cave where he met the Lord who spoke to him with "a still small voice", which the NRSV translates as a "*the sound of sheer silence*." (1 Kings 19:12). The parallels between the experiences of Elijah and Moses are significant. Both were sustained by God for 40 days and nights. Both were in the same place, meeting with God and hearing His audible voice.

5.3. Nebo, the Mountain of Vision

Mount Nebo is the highest peak of the Abarim mountain range that passes through Jordan and which culminates in the Arabian desert. The Book of Deuteronomy tells us that geographically, Mount Nebo is in Moab, an ancient kingdom in the land now known as Jordan. Located in Madaba, East of the Dead Sea, Mount Nebo is considered to be a revered sacred mountain. It borders to the north by the "valley of the springs of Moses". Mount Nebo holds great religious significance and as a sacred mountain, it is a place of pilgrimage.

From the biblical accounts we understand that Moses who had led the people of Israel in an exodus out of Egypt across the desert for more than 40 years, went up from the plains of Moab to the summit of Mount Nebo, which is opposite Jericho.

Then, the Lord showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, the Negeb, and the plain, that is, the Valley of

Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. And the Lord said to him, 'This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, 'I will give it to your offspring.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there.' (Deut 34:1-4).

God made Moses view the land. In the vision on Mount Nebo, Moses viewed a land, which would belong to the tribes of Israel, rich with food and water and pastures and flocks and massive in its dimensions. Yahweh allowed him to see their earthly home.

We call Mount Nebo *the mountain of vision* for two reasons: First of all, what the Lord showed Moses was too vast a territory for Moses to see. It seems that God gave him a vision of what was to belong to his people; what he saw was something supernatural. Secondly, what he was shown was futuristic. He saw what was to become of the territory in the future. At the time of the vision, Israel had not crossed into the Promised Land. They had not yet settled there. Their tribal allotments were not made yet. And, although they had taken a census, yet technically, the tribal territories had not been demarcated as belonging to Gilead, Dan, Naphtali, Ephraim, Manasseh, etc.¹⁰ On these two counts, what Moses was shown was something similar to a prophetic vision.¹¹

According to the tradition, Mount Nebo also claimed the venerable remains of the prophet as Moses' life ended on the mountain and he was buried there.¹² For the Lord had said to Moses: "There on the mountain

¹⁰ This understanding does not preclude the possibility of the biblical use of *vaticinium ex eventu*, which in historiography, is a prophesy written after the author already knew the events that were being "foretold".

¹¹ Certainly, much of the surrounding landscape would have been visible as today, from the summit of Mount Nebo, you can have a view of the Dead Sea, the West of Jericho in the Jordan River valley, Bethlehem, and on a clear day, the city of Jerusalem and the hills.

¹² However, there is no biblical reference to his burial on the mount and the exact location of the burial if Moses remains unknown. To make the issue more complex, there is also a tomb to the east of Jerusalem in the Judean wilderness that claims to be Moses' final resting place! Davide Bianchi, *A Shrine to Moses: A Reappraisal of the Mount Nebo Monastic Complex between Byzantium and Islam*, offers new insights into the memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo, one of the most renowned coenobitic monasteries in the Byzantine period in Arabia. Between 2012 and 2014, the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum carried out new archaeological investigations in the monastery and in the church. The excavation in the central nave unearthed an empty tomb adorned with alabaster

that you have climbed, you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people ... You will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel'" (Deut 32:48-52; Num 27:12-14).¹³ As the final resting place of the great prophet and the liberator, the sacredness of the mountain is doubled.¹⁴

It is owing to the recognition of the sacredness of the mountain that on the highest rocky outcrop of Mount Nebo we find the remains of a Byzantine church and a monastery, built in the 4th century in honour of Moses. The church continued to be a pilgrim centre for about 600 years. The church and monastery were unearthed in excavations in the 1930s. In 1993, the area was purchased by the Franciscans and once again, they converted it into an active monastery to continue the sacred legacy of the mountain of vision and have kept it open to modern-day pilgrims.

The idea of the sacred that is cherished by human beings is a combination of the transcendence and immanence - so close, and yet so far away. That may have been the experience of Moses as God showed him the Promised Land that his descendants would inherit, but he would never enter it himself (Deut 34:1-4) - so close, yet so unreachable.

5.4. Carmel, the Mountain of Zeal

Mount Carmel is in the northwestern Israel, with the city of Haifa is on its northeastern slope. It divides the Plain of Esdraelon (east) and Galilee (north) from the coastal Plain of Sharon (south). Its seaward point, Cape

marble, placed on the highest point of the mountain. See <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358115936>. *A Shrine to Moses A Reappraisal of the Mount Nebo Monastic Complex between Byzantium and Islam*.

¹³ Moses' prayer to see the Promised Land would certainly be answered, but he would not enter the land because of what happened when he struck the rock at Meribah Kadesh (Deut 3:23-28). Some traditions hold that it was because he did not uphold God's holiness among them. For some reason, Moses or the people had flared the anger of the Lord and Moses had to take the brunt of the ire, which prevented him from entering the Promised Land.

¹⁴ Although it is not specified in the Bible, some Christians have assumed that Moses was buried on the mountain. Hence, despite the fact that there are only two references to Mount Nebo relating to the final days of Moses in the Bible, as it is considered the final resting place of Moses, it is counted amongst the sacred biblical mountains.

Carmel, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. The mountain's highest point is 1,791 feet above sea level.

Its name is derived from the Hebrew "Karem El" which means "vineyards of God." In Hebrew it also meant, "the garden" or "the garden-land." In ancient times, the area comprised of vineyards and rich grazing land. Carmel is also remarkable for its profusion of aromatic plants and wildflowers. In various places of the range, ancient wine presses can still be pointed out; but the vine is almost entirely extinct. Today, the slope of the mountain is covered with luxurious vegetation, including oaks, pines, and olives. The mountain later became a place of Christian pilgrimage and was the site of the formation of the Carmelite Order. The spiritual significance of Carmel is so great that it is considered sacred by the Jews, Christians and the adherents of the Bahá'í faith. Epiphanius, the Church Father in his *Panarion* (1:18) attests that the Essenes of the modern times consider Mount Carmel the spiritual stronghold of the northern Essene movement.¹⁵ The remains of the Bahá'í Messiah, the Báb, was laid to rest within a shrine there. The Bahá'ís around the world venerate the mountain as a sacred place and made it a worldwide place of pilgrimage.

The fame of Mount Carmel was not triggered by the biblical stories. In ancient Canaanite culture, high places were considered to be sacred, and Mount Carmel was no exception. Human habitation there dates back to Neanderthal times, and its recorded fame as a sacred site may have reached as far away as Egypt and as far back to the 15th century BC. However, except the fact that it was a high place, we do not have any evidence for considering its sacredness prior to the biblical times. It is possible that like several other sacred sites in Canaan, the people of Israel took over the high place and adapted their traditions to it.

Carmel is first mentioned in the biblical stories as the location of Jokneam, a town conquered by Joshua (Josh 12:22). At the time of the division of the Promised Land among the tribes of Israel, Carmel was made the western boundary of the tribe of Asher (Josh 19:24). The place must have been strategic that King Saul established a victory monument there after his triumph over the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:12). The

¹⁵ J. van Oort and E. Thomassen, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Bks II & III De Fide* (trans. F. Williams), Leiden: Brill, 2013. *The Panarion* is an important source of information on the Jewish-Christian gospels, early Christian heresiology, the Gospel of the Ebionites, and the Gospel of the Hebrews.

surrounding lands must have been a fertile area full of pasturelands that the wealthy, but foolish Nabal had his home there and it is there that David's wise wife, Abigail lived (1 Sam 25).

One cannot estimate how long before Elijah's time, there had been a sanctuary and an altar erected in honour of Yahweh on Mount Carmel, that its ruins had to be repaired by Elijah as soon as it was safe enough to do (1 Kings 18:30). Elijah chose Carmel for the assembly of the people, because such assemblies were usually held at some holy place (1 Kings 18:19). Again, the custom of congregating to Carmel for the celebration of the new moon and of the sabbath (2 Kings 4:23), speaks volumes for the sanctity of the place. At the time of King Ahab, the sanctuary was devoted to Baal, probably the Baal-Melqart honored by nearby Phoenician rulers such as the father of Ahab's queen, Jezebel.

Biblically, the most spectacular event in the history of the sanctuary at Carmel was the face-off between Elijah the prophet of the Lord and the numerous prophets and priests of Baal and Ashera. The point of contest was the power of the gods. The underlying issue that triggered the contest was the question of why neither Baal, the God of agriculture nor Yahweh the most powerful, both believed to be capable of producing rain, had not done so during a long period of intense drought (1 Kings 18). Here, the mountain, located in a kind of coastal no-man's-land between Israel and Phoenicia, represented a strategic high ground where the Phoenician Baal and the Israelite Yahweh were locked in a battle for superiority. Elijah repaired the ancient altar of Yahweh, and in a dramatic manner, put the prophets of Baal to shame as he produced fire from heaven to consume his sacrifice to Yahweh, which the prophets of Baal had failed to make Baal do.

Proving the spiritual point that Yahweh was the true God, Elijah proceeded to make a physical conquest as he commanded the converted crowd of onlookers to slaughter the prophets of Baal in the valley below. He then prayed to the Lord to end the drought and in response to his prayer, a rain cloud appeared in the sky and the king had to depart promptly, lest he should be stopped by the rain. Mount Carmel became the mountain of zeal because on the mountain, Elijah, on account of his unwavering faith in Yahweh, and his zeal for Yahwism, not only converted the entire people of Israel from Baal worshippers to Yahweh worshipers but also rooted out all the signs of apostasy from the land.

The zeal of Elijah was visible not only in the spectacular witness on Mount Carmel, but also in the prayers that followed depict the zeal of the prophet. After the sacrifice, the prophet “went up” again to the top of Carmel, and there he prayed fervently for the breaking of the drought. There, he naturally asked his servant to “go up and look toward the sea”.¹⁶ This was repeated seven times as if the prophet was intensifying the prayer until a sign of the clouds appeared in the sea (1 Kings 18:42-44).

The zeal for the Lord was formerly found in the inhabitants of Carmel who refused to be subject to the foreign powers. The inhabitants of Carmel were numbered among the peoples whom Nebuchadnezzar threatened with destruction, if they denied him help in his present conflict with powerful enemies (Judith 1:8). There also we are told that despite his menaces, they all, “with one mind”, refused to obey his orders, whereupon the Assyrian king swore to avenge himself of them (Judith 1:11-12).

The sacred mountain was the place of residence of Elijah (2 Kings 2:25). Elisha, the disciple and the successor of Elijah, who inherited a double measure of his zeal, later lived in Carmel (2 Kings 4:25), and according to the tradition, there was a guild of prophets and Jewish holy and zealous men who lived on Carmel well into Christian times. The cave of Elijah, which was the centre of the School of the Prophets, is still found at Carmel.

Jeremiah (46:18) and Isaiah (35:2) referred to Carmel as a symbol of majesty and Amos spoke of the mountain as a place of refuge (Amos 9:3). Jeremiah would further predict that Israel would return from exile, and that Carmel would be known as a rich pastureland for the flocks of the people of Israel (50:19). The mountain had come to be depicted in literature as occupying a prime place in the hearts of the people as the lover of the Song of Solomon tells his beloved: “Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel” (Song of Solomon 7:5).

The sacred site was a reputable sanctuary in the first century AD. According to Tacitus, Vespasian, the Roman General, who later became the Emperor, went to Carmel during the Jewish Revolt of 66-70 AD and consulted an oracle there and reports that Carmel was the name “both

¹⁶ From the place where he prayed the view of the Mediterranean Sea was blocked by an adjacent height, which could be ascended by his servant in a few minutes and a full view of the sea be obtained from the top.

of the mountain and the Deity. They have no image of the god nor any temple; the tradition of antiquity recognizes only an altar and its sacred association."¹⁷

Mount Carmel, as a sacred mountain, has a rich history of religious significance. It was sacred to the early Christians and so, Christian hermits settled there as early as the 6th century AD. Along with the already revered Jewish sanctuary, tradition has it that the Carmelite religious order was founded on Mount Carmel in the 12th century and became a global order.¹⁸ After the reformation of the order by St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross, the Carmelite mystics, the Discalced Carmelites, who emerged from the reformed tradition, reoccupied the site and built a monastery there in 1853.

Mount Carmel is a spot where the nature, faith and history remain intertwined. Apart from the biblical stories that we have considered above, the area was the stage for natural human evolution. In 1996, the caves along the western slopes of Mount Carmel were granted UNESCO World Heritage Site status because these caves hold rich archaeological evidence of human evolution and prehistoric cultures dating back thousands of years.

5.5. Moriah/Zion, the Mountain of Faith

At the highest point in Jerusalem, outside the walls of the Old City, lies modern Mount Zion. Every year, thousands of pilgrims flock to this ancient and sacred mountain to visit the biblical sites like the tomb of David, the Last Supper Room and numerous other places related to the sacred history of the Jews and Christians. Biblically, Zion can refer to one of three places: the hill where the most ancient areas of Jerusalem stood; the city of Jerusalem itself; or the dwelling place of God.

Mount Zion is mentioned for the first time in the Bible in 2 Sam 5:7, in connection with the capture of the fortress of Zion by David. Later,

¹⁷ Tacitus, "Hist." 2:78. First of all, unlike the Roman practice, according to the Jewish tradition, no image or stature of the deity could be seen in the sanctuary. Secondly, since the name of the mountain denotes "the vineyard of El", the name carries the name of the Deity.

¹⁸ The Carmelite Constitution of 1281 enshrines the following statement: "From the times when the prophet Elias and Eliseus dwelt devoutly on Mount Carmel, holy fathers both of the Old and New Testament... lived praiseworthy lives in holy penitence by the fountain of Elias in a holy succession uninterruptedly maintained."

the mountainous area came to be known as the city of David. However, the land that David captured and the mountain that he claimed for the Lord as Zion was the stage for yet another spectacular biblical drama mentioned in scripture well before David's conquest of the area. It is upon this hilly range of sacred land, where Abraham, motivated by his faith in the Lord, agreed to do the unthinkable. He bound his only son, laid him on the firewood that the young boy had carried up the mountain and prepared him for a sacrifice that was demanded by God (Gen 22:1-24). We call the mountain *the mountain of faith* because God had demanded of Abraham the most extreme proof for his faith.¹⁹

This is the part of the hill that had become the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite where David saw the avenging angel standing between heaven and earth (1 Chron 21:16). David purchased²⁰ the threshing floor, built an altar to the Lord and made burnt offerings and peace offerings which the Lord consumed sending fire from heaven (1 Chron 21:26). It is on the same site that Solomon, son of David built a magnificent temple of the Lord (2 Chron 3:1).

When Zion was declared the spiritual and political capital of the whole of Israel, it also received a much larger identity based on the Davidic covenant. The consolidation of all the powers in Zion would transform the temporal mountain into an eternal city, the city of David (Ps 89:3-4, 29, 35-37; 132:11-18). The covenant is key in our understanding of the significance of Mount Zion. In the Sainaitic covenant with Israel, God established himself as the only king and Israel was to have no other king but God. Even with the introduction of the monarchy, a human king would not replace God but represent God to the people. This covenant, foreshadowed in the blessing of Jacob (Gen 49:10), takes its full force when God furthers his covenant with David and establishes an everlasting dynasty (2 Sam 7:16). According to the biblical narratives, David was buried "in the city of David" (1 Kings 2:10)

¹⁹ Mount Zion was formerly known as Moriah. The Jews know Mount Moriah as Har haMoriyah and Har haBayit, which was translated as Temple Mount. Mount Moriah, was the place that Abraham walked in faith, followed by God's provision. The events on the Mountain on that day so long ago were a foreshadowing of things to come. God would take His one and only Son, the Son whom He loves, and sacrifice Him so that we might live forever with Him.

²⁰ There is a difference in narration between 2 Sam 5:7 and 1 Chron 21:26. While 2 Samuel claims that it was captured, 1 Chronicles will have the land purchased by David.

and today, it remains one of the most important pilgrim centres for Jews in Israel.

Far more than a sacred mountain and an important historical and spiritual landmark for Israel, from the time the Ark of the Covenant was moved into the city, and subsequently to the temple that Solomon built, Zion became a spiritual, social and political hub that represented the presence of God. This is what Prophet Isaiah sees as the future of his people in their relationship to Zion:

Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore (Is 2:3-4).

According to Prophet Joel, the people of God would come to "know that I am the Lord your God, dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain. So, Jerusalem will be holy, and strangers will pass through it no more" (Joel 3:17). And the psalmist presents it as the permanent dwelling place of Yahweh: "For the Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation. "This is My resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it" (Ps 132:13-14).

The eternal city and the eternal dynasty made the mountain loftier. In the post-Davidic era, Zion gathers an ethereal significance. The scripture has the word Zion used numerous times to describe the mountain as: the City of David (2 Sam 5:7, 1 Kings 8:1, 1 Chron 11:5), the city of Jerusalem (Is 33:20, Is 40:9, Ps 51:18), the entire Jewish nation (Is 33:14, Zech 9:13), the Millennial Jerusalem (Joel 2:32, Is 2:2-3) and the eternal or Heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22, Mic 4:7, Is 35:10). The meaning and symbolism of Zion can vary depending on the context.

The significance of Zion is not confined to the Old Covenant. In the Bible, the term "Zion" holds great significance and is used in both the Old Testament and, to a lesser extent, in the New Testament. According to the Book of Revelation, it is from Zion that all children of God can obtain an intimate and sacred view of the Almighty God – as He was, as He is, and as He will be (Rev 1:8). Zion is the essence, foreshadowing, the symbolism of the Kingdom of Heaven. Referring to Jesus, the eternal

King who has laid claim to the eternal throne, the Book of Revelation further notes that the Kingdom of Heaven is real, a physical entity with a literal cornerstone. In a metaphorical sense, Jesus is the equivalent to that cornerstone, which is important to a Christian's spiritual foundation. He is the fulfilment of the Davidic Covenant that made Mount Zion into the real eternal city.

Here are some key aspects of the concept of Zion in the Bible: Mount Zion is a term that encompasses both a geographical location in Jerusalem and a range of spiritual and symbolic meanings. First of all, Zion is the symbol of God's presence, for it is considered the dwelling place of God (Ps 132:13-14). Secondly, it is the symbol of God's kingdom. The sacred mountain is associated with the foundation of God's kingdom on earth, and it is a symbol of hope for the future reign of the Messiah. Thirdly, Zion has a futuristic reference, especially in the books of the prophets, which speak of Zion in a prophetic sense. These prophecies that refer to Zion often foretell a time of restoration and redemption for God's people, including the return of the Jewish exiles to Mount Zion, the Mountain of God and the ultimate fulfilment of plan of God. Finally, in the context of Christianity, especially in the Hebrew sense, Zion assumes a spiritual and symbolic meaning. It is associated with the heavenly Jerusalem and the assembly of believers in Christ (Heb 12:22-23).

As a temporal and a spiritual structure, Zion, the sacred mountain has played a significant role in the religious and prophetic thought of the biblical people, both in the Old and New Testaments and continues to hold importance in various religious traditions today. Associated with the Ark of the Covenant, presence of God, the future messianic kingdom and the fulfilment of His ultimate plan for salvation and redemption, Mount Zion represents the other-worldly reality.

5.6. Olive, the Mount of Transcendence

The Mount of Olives receives its name from the olive trees that covered the mount in the past. The mount rises up in the east of Jerusalem, separated from the city by the valley of Kidron. According to the data received from the archaeological surveys, the topographic structure of the Mount of Olives has remained almost completely unchanged over the centuries.

We call the Mount of Olives *the Mount of Transcendence*, because the place was the gateway to the transcendental dimension. As the gate to

another dimension, the mountain became the burial site for people prior to and after the ascension of Jesus. The mountain was extensively used for funerary purposes in and around the time of Jesus. Vast necropolises, especially from the Roman (1st c BC - 2nd c AD) and Byzantine periods (4th - 5th c AD), are found on the mountain slopes. The burials dating back to the Middle and Late Bronze Age, i.e., c1600-1200 BC could also be found there. More significant than these, is another funeral complex on the mountain slopes, which is traditionally called the *tombs of the Prophets*. The use of the Mount of Olives for funeral purposes continues to the present day.

In the Hebrew Bible the mountain is called Mount of Olives only once, as part of the end-of-days vision of Zechariah: "On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that one half of the Mount shall withdraw northward, and the other half southward" (Zech 14:4). The Bible refers to the sacred mountain also with other names. It is called "the ascent of the Mount of Olives" (2 Sam 15:30) and "the Mount of Destruction" (2 Kings 23:13). The Mount of Olives, "which is on the east side of the city" of Jerusalem is considered to be Yahweh's portal to and from heaven (Ezek 11:23; 43; Zech 14). Hence, this is the mountain of Transcendence.

The Jewish commentaries relate that for three and a half years, the Divine Presence dwelled on the Mount of Olives after having left the site of the Temple Mount in the expectation that the Jewish people would do repentance. The prophets Zachariah and Ezekiel prophesied that from there it would make its return to its proper place in the temple. In some of the references, the mountain symbolized the exile of the Divine Presence from Jerusalem. This is perhaps the background to the prophecy of Zechariah, which establishes the mountain as a place that also symbolizes the return of God into the city, at the time of the future redemption. The eschatological vision of Enoch ascribes somewhat similar significance to the mountain in the end of days (1 *En.* 26:1-3).

It is not very clear either from the biblical references or from the traditional use of the term, why the mountain was called Mount of Olives. Reasonably, one can assume that it was named so after the olive groves that grew on it from ancient times. The Rabbinic Literature holds Mount of Olives in great reverence. An alternate name for the mount found in the Talmud and the Midrash is the Mount of Anointment. It is

perhaps on account of the anointing oil that anointed kings and high priests, was prepared from the olives that grew there on the mountain that this name was given to the mount.

Numerous generations of the Jewish people are buried on the Mount of Olives. This is attested to by the burial caves and the memorial tombstones dated to the First and Second Temple periods, that are scattered over the mountain. Various Jewish traditions make a connection between the burial on the mountain with the future resurrection of the dead. *Pesiqta Rabbati* attests: "The righteous will spring up in Jerusalem ... the Blessed Holy One provides for them tunnels ... until they arrive underneath the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and the Blessed Holy One stands over them and the land cracks open for them" (*Pesiqta Rabbati* 31.9).

In the Second Temple Period, the Mount of Olives became highly significant from the cultic point of view and was somehow related to the temple mount. The rabbinic literary sources refer also to the Mount of Olives as serving various needs connected to the temple cult. Partly because the mountain was a burial site, the sacrifice of the red heifer, which was intended to purify the Jews who had come into contact with a dead body, was performed on the Mount of Olives. According to the description in the Mishnah, a bridge was even built for this purpose between the Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives, which served the priests engaged in the ceremony: "And they made a ramp from the Temple Mount to the Mount of Anointing ... along which passed the priest who would burn the heifer, the heifer, and all its attendants" (*Mishnah Parah* 3:6-8).

The Mount of Olives played an additional role at the time of the sanctification of the New Moon in Jerusalem. During the ceremony of the light, the first torch was lit on the peak of Mount Olives initiating the process through which the word went out to the inhabitants of both the land of Israel and the Diaspora (*Mishnah Rosh Hashana* 2:2). In addition to these, on the eve of Passover, the time to abstain from leavened food materials was announced from the peak of the Mount of Olives (*bPes* 14a).

In the age of the Crusaders, more sacred buildings and monasteries were built. Among these are the tomb of the Virgin Mary and the remains of the church of the Saviour, which are located at the foot of the mount. In addition, the sanctuary of the Ascension on top of the

mountain is from the period of the Crusaders. From the repeated and revered biblical references to the sacred mountain, we come to assume that although the Mount of Olives was not situated within Jerusalem, the mountain was considered a high place and a sanctuary.

We call Mount of Olives *the Mountain of Transcendence* also because Jesus' procession into Jerusalem began with his descent from the Mount of Olives (Mt 21:1-11). The mountain plays a prominent role as the place of Jesus' agony at the beginning of his passion. Matthew and Mark would have Jesus sitting "on the Mount of Olives" (Mt 24:3; Mk 13:3) from where he gave his apocalyptic discourse. However, Luke would note that Jesus gave his apocalyptic discourse first and subsequently, "went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet" *as he habitually did* (Lk 21:37). Only Luke presents Mount of Olives as a place where Jesus frequented. The night before his death, Jesus went out with his disciples to the garden of Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives to pray (Luke 22:43-44). This reference to Jesus' practice refers to the significance that the mountain had and Jesus' attraction to it. In the following chapter also, Luke notes that Jesus' repose in this location on the mountain was customary: Jesus "went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him" (Lk 22:39). Additionally, by describing the regular practice of Jesus on both these occasions, Luke is setting the stage for the arresting party to find Jesus and capture him.

The root of the appellation "Mountain of Transcendence" points to the ascension of Jesus narrated in the Acts of the Apostles. Since Mount Olives was the last place on earth Jesus walked before his ascension and is believed to be the location he will return to at the end of time, the Mount of Olives is considered a very sacred place. At the beginning of Acts, Luke states that after Jesus' ascension "they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount called Olivet" (Acts 1:12). Luke recognizes the mountain as both the mountain of the arrest of Jesus, initiating the process of his transcendence, and the mountain from where the risen Jesus ascended to his heavenly glory.

On account of the gospel stories related to the life of Jesus, Early Christian communities kept the memory and location of the gospel events on the mount alive creating various monuments. Emperor Constantine built the memorial church to mark the Ascension of the Lord. Tradition attests that there was a monastery founded on the mountain by Rufinus of Aquileia and Melania the Elder, a wealthy and

devout Roman widow. It gradually became a monastic settlement that when the Persians arrived in Palestine in 614, they found numerous priests, monks, nuns and hermits of various nationalities living in churches and monasteries that were erected on the mountain. One of the ruins of these settlements was excavated near the present-day sanctuary of *Dominus Flevit*.

After the ascension, the angels tell the disciples: "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). The disciples believed in the promise and knew Jesus will not only return, but He will one day return to that same spot on the Mount of Olives, according to the prophesy of Zechariah (Zech 14:4).

5.7. Hermon, the Mount of Transformation

Mount Hermon is a mountain cluster constituting the southern end of the Lebanon mountain range. It is located at the boundary of Israel, on the border between Syria and Lebanon, and is considered one of the most picturesque regions of the country. Mount Hermon was significant in the Bible for a few reasons. The mount marked the northern limits of the Promised Land (Deut 3:8; Josh 11:17; 12:1; 13:5). It also formed the northern boundary of the territory inherited by the half-tribe of Manasseh as well as the northern border of Israel in general (1 Chron 5:23).

"Hermon" is derived from the Hebrew *h̄rm*, which means "sacred". It rises to 2,814 metres and is the highest point on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea and it is the second highest point in Lebanon. However, it was the highest mountain in ancient Israel, boasting majestic, snowcapped peaks. Along with melting snow and the abundant rainfall on Mount Hermon, large springs at the base of the mountain form the main headwaters of the river Jordan in which the Lord was baptised.

The mountain has been a sacred landmark since the Bronze Age and has a mention in the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh, and as such, its sacred attributes predate the biblical stories. Biblically, in the Old Testament, it is the northwestern limit of Israelite conquest under Moses and Joshua and in the New Testament, at a closer analysis, it is the mountain of the transfiguration of Jesus. The epithet "Mountain of Transformation" that we give the mountain refers to the transfiguration of Jesus that took place on Mount Hermon.

In the Bible, Mount Hermon has various names. It is referred to as *Hermon* by the Canaanite worshipers of Baal, as *Sirion* by the Sidonians and Phoenicians and *Senir* by the Amorites (Deut 3:9; Ps 29:6). The Seleucids occupied the area after 200 BC. At the base of Mount Hermon, outside the city of Caesarea Philippi, there is a sanctuary called Paneas. It has a cave and a spring that is sacred to the Greeks and god Pan is worshipped there since the time of Alexander the Great. The temples on its slopes bear Greek inscriptions dating from about 200 AD.

The ruins of several ancient sanctuaries have been found on Mount Hermon's peaks and slopes and at its base. Judges 3:3 calls the mountain Baal Hermon, meaning "Lord of Hermon" (cf. 1 Chron 5:23). Aliyan, a minor Canaanite god of fountains, may have been the deity worshiped at Paneas before the Greeks arrived. This might have been the god of fertility called Baal-Hermon, the Lord of Hermon, in Judges 3:3. The Ituraeans who developed a principality in the area, and the Herodian kings Agrippa I and Agrippa II considered the mountain sacred.

Mount Hermon was also revered by the Romans too. The high temple of the ancient world was built on the summit of the mount and is known today as Qasr Antar. The sacredness of the mountain is evident from the ruins of more than 30 shrines and temples that have been found in this geographical area giving the mountain its historical relevance. Beside the Jews, Christians and Muslims, the Druze community also considers it a sacred place and they occupy several villages that surrounds the mountain. To heighten the sanctity of the mountain, the holy River Jordan has the two major sources at the foot of the mountain.

On the sacred Mount Hermon, the ancient civilizations created places of worship in harmony with the natural landscape. Today many local religious communities who are living in the area continue to experience the connection between the ancient worship and the nature. They go in processions toward the summit of the mountain in order to attain the religious experience that each group is looking for. The sacred mountain has served as a worship place for various kinds of worshipers, and it demonstrates the constancy of the divine presence in the world as various spiritual and religious cultures revered it in the remote part of the ancient Near Eastern world. Despite the countless wars and the occupation of the region by various peoples, the sacred Mount Hermon and its associated spiritual heritage has suffered little adverse impact over the years.

After the Greeks came to the Levant, Pan gradually replaced the earlier local fertility cult. Pan was the god of wild, desolate places, shepherds and flocks, music, fields, groves, and wooded glens. Pan was also linked to fertility, which influenced much of the art depicting the god in the classical world. He was not normally worshiped in the temples but in outdoor settings, like mountainous regions.

Some of the psalms praise Mount Hermon for its loftiness and majesty (Ps 42:6; 89:11-12). The psalmist compared God's people living together in unity to the dew of Mount Hermon falling on Mount Zion (Ps 133:1-3). This illustration is fitting, since the slopes of Mount Hermon, in the north, receive profuse amounts of dew. Mount Zion, in the south, is much drier. The psalmist compared the refreshing dew of Hermon to the blessings of unity in Israel, from north to south. Harmony among God's people is life-giving. Mount Hermon is also noted for its abundant wildlife (Song of Solomon 4:8).

Some of the biblical scholars hold that Mount Hermon was the site of the transfiguration of the Lord, in which Christ appeared in his true glory as the Son of God, revealing his identity as Messiah and fulfilling the law and the prophets (Mt 17:1-8//2 Pet 1:16-18). At the transfiguration, Peter, James, and John – the members of Jesus' inner circle – were eyewitnesses to the Lord's divine glory. Both the accounts of Mathew and Mark note that Jesus led Peter, James, and John up a "high mountain." Although the traditional site for the Mount of Transfiguration is identified as Mount Tabor, as Matthew places the events leading up to the transfiguration in the district of Caesarea Philippi, geographically, Mount Hermon is the closest site for the event. It occurred most probably on Mount Hermon, a short distance to the north of Caesarea Philippi – in the area where Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say I am?"²¹ As Josephus, the historian notes, in those days, the summit of Mount Tabor was inhabited and surrounded by a wall, whereas Mount Hermon afforded enough privacy and seclusion "where they were all alone" (Mk 9:2).

The significance of the event of 'transfiguration' has to be seen in the light of the historical events that forged the relationship between

²¹ The teaching of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, at the foot of Mount Hermon, was accentuated by the massive mountain peaks behind him, its beautiful snow-clad slopes, its rushing streams, and its sacred character which made the local population revere the mountain as a sanctuary.

Yahweh and his people. The *glory* of the Lord –the radiant, shining presence of God himself, the 'Shekinah' – had filled the tent of meeting in the desert (Ex 40:34), had appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex 24:16). When the temple of the Lord was built in Jerusalem, his glory had filled the temple (1 Kings 8:11). Later, it was seen leaving the temple (Ezek 10:18). At the birth of Jesus, the same *glory* of the Lord – the radiant, shining presence of God – appeared to the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem (Lk 2:9-20), indicating that God's presence had come on earth again. And it is that glory that was beheld by the community when the Word became flesh (Jn 1:14). In the event of the transfiguration of Jesus on the high mountain, the *glory* of the Lord – this radiant presence of God – appeared to Moses and Elijah, just as on several other historical occasions. However, in the present event, unlike all other events prior to this, on the mount of transfiguration, it was *Jesus* who reflected the *glory* of the Lord, which is taken to be the personal presence of God, in himself.

Mount Hermon was an ancient sacred place revered by the early Canaanites even before the Israelite conquest of Canaan. It also was one of the 'high places' during Old Testament times. It is covered with snow more than eight months of the year. It is quite probable that Jesus chose this special place to show his personal and unique relationship with God, in all the divine radiance on this resplendent mountain. He chose to have this extraordinary event witnessed by the most respected early leaders of the Jewish religion, Moses and Elijah.²² Although the name of the high mountain is not mentioned by the evangelists, this site seems

²² There is a tradition that holds that the 'transfiguration' took place after Jesus and his disciples returned from Caesarea Philippi to Galilee. If this were the case, the mountain referred to is Mount Tabor to the east of Nazareth. However, this location is unlikely, first of all, given the fact that Mount Tabor was the site of a Roman military camp at the time of Jesus and access to the mountain for Jesus and his disciples would have been hard to obtain. Secondly, Israel has plenty of mountains, but not many that can be described as high—at least not relative to the rest of the peaks in the land. Thirdly, Jesus and his disciples climbed a mountain near Caesarea Philippi. That narrows the possible area. Caesarea Philippi is located at the southwestern base of Mount Hermon. Finally, known today by its Arabic name, Jabal el-Shaiykh, meaning "snowy mountain," Mount Hermon's peaks are covered with snow most of the year and the mountain's rounded, snow-topped crests gleam in the sunlight, which gives a perfect setting for the dazzling white garments that Jesus appeared in at the moment of his transfiguration.

far more likely to be the location of Jesus' transfiguration than other possible places that are kilometres away.

The list of the biblical mountains, sacred or not, is long. In addition to the above seven famous and sacred mountains referred to be in the Bible, a cursory survey of the Old Testament would show that there are at least 29 named mountains that come to play their role in the historical narratives of the people of God. Some of them are more important for the present discussion than the others. Since the present discussion has exceeded the limit, these additional mountains and their significance in the light of the present reflection are a subject of further study.

6. Jesus and the Mountains

Mountains played a very important role in the life of Jesus and his ministry. Several of the key events in the life of Jesus occurred on the mountains. As an infant, Jesus was brought to the Temple Mount and was presented at the temple in accordance with the Law, where Simeon had been living in expectation to see the Messiah, and Anna the prophetess, led to Jesus by the Holy Spirit would come to behold him. At the age of twelve, Jesus was left behind in the Temple Mount after his parents left for Nazareth after the celebration of the Passover, and returning, they found him in the Temple talking with the great teachers, who had stood amazed.

In addition to Mount Olives and Mount Hermon, we see Jesus in the vicinity of several other mountains. According to John the Evangelist, early on in his public ministry, Jesus visited the Temple Mount during the Passover and drove the moneychangers and other traders out of the Temple precincts. Later, probably during another Passover pilgrimage, Jesus healed a lame man at the Pool of Bethesda on the Temple Mount. Matthew, placing the temple-cleansing event at the end of the ministry of Jesus, records that he healed many lame and blind people who came to him while he was on the Temple Mount. Often, he retired to the mountains to pray and on the mountain slopes, he taught people.²³ The association of Jesus with various mountains highlights the enduring legacy of the mountains as places of revelation and divine presence, bridging the ancient past with the ongoing journey of faith.

²³ Matthew, the evangelist, alone brings Jesus in touch with at least seven mountains. Since we are way above the word limit in the present discussion, these mountains are a subject of further exploration.

7. Symbolic Significance of the Mountains

Sacred mountains are central to several religions and various spiritual traditions. Around these sacred mountains, many myths and legends are formed. For most of these traditions, the most symbolic aspect of a mountain is the zenith because, as we will note further down, it is believed that it is closest point on earth to heaven or other spiritual realms. As seen above, throughout the Scripture, in addition to the proximity to the divine, we find references to mountains used as symbolic imageries to describe steadfastness, trustworthiness, immovability, majesty, strength, and faith. The biblical fascination to the mountains is not something peculiar to the Israelites and the inhabitants of the Ancient Near East who were the immediate neighbours of the people of God.

Mount Zaphon was called the "mountain of assembly" by the Canaanites (cf. Is 14:13; Ps 48:2). It was a holy site for the Canaanites who believed that Baal Hadad, the storm god lived in Mount Zaphon where the gods sat in council. Mount Olympus was holy to the Greeks with Zeus dwelling at the top of that mountain. This fascination for the mountains and their connection to the Divine is not peculiar to the biblical people; it is a universal fascination.

On a global level, there are several sacred mountains that are recognized by the World Heritage List as sacred. Mount Athos of Greece, Tongariro of New Zealand, Machu Picchu of Peru, Mount Taishan, Mount Emei, Mount Huang Shan, and Mount Wuyi of China, Sacred Kii Mountain Range of Japan, Sacred Mountain of Kyrgyzstan and several others have been considered sacred by the natives. In addition to these listed sacred mountains, there are many more sacred mountains such as mount Kailas in Tibet, Mount Everest in Nepal, Otgon Tenger in Mongolia and so on. Many of these mountains are considered sacred by the people of these lands.

Several of these mountains have both national and spiritual significance intertwined in their veneration by the people. Mount Etna in Italy, is believed to have been the home of Vulcan, the Roman god of fire and the forge. Mount Tai Shan is a symbol of Chinese nation and ancient civilization and spiritual homeland of China. Mount Athos is a self-governing monastic Republic within Greece. It is a symbol and spiritual homeland of Orthodox Christianity and its civilization. Mount Fuji is the most symbolic mountain for Japanese nation and culture and

spiritual homeland of Japan. As sacred mountains, they have exceptional religious and cultural significance in connection with the worship practices and ritual ceremonies of the respective people.

8. The Indian Carmelites and their 'Mountainous' Predilections

It is in the light of the significance of the mountains both in the Old Testament, New Testament and on a global frame, that we come to explore the implications of the mountains and the mountainous atmosphere that Chavara and his companions chose to live in. The choice of solitude in some deserted place (*vanavasa*), was motivated by the ideal of *fuga mundi*. They wanted to leave the corrupt and the corrupting world and go into a secluded place where they could be in communion with the divine. In the choice of the geographical spots, they were in spiritual and geographical continuity with their ancestors in the Old Testament and the New Testament down through the Christian centuries.

From the writings of Chavara and the various kinds of literature that he has left for he posterity, we gather the stray thoughts of the founders of the first indigenous religious congregation of India, their thoughts regarding a life that is lived close to God in the mountains, forests and wilderness. There are various references, both implicit and explicit, to the idea that testify to their ardent desire to live a life of solitude. In the following reflection, we consider these references, which are often metaphorical.

8.1. *Vanavasa*, an Eremitic Life

The idea of a consecrated life was first seen in the two senior members of the founding fathers. Fr Thomas Porukara is attributed to have voiced his desire for religious life as a *vanavasa*, which literally means a life lived in the wilderness, forest or jungle. *Vanavasa* is not strange to the Christian mind. Eremitical life that was led by hermits was one of the earliest forms of Christian religious life. The word 'hermit' comes from the Greek *eremos*, meaning wilderness or an isolated place, which in Indian ascetic terms is *vanavasa*, literally, a life in the forest. *Hermit* evokes images like John the Baptist living as a recluse in the desert, wearing a hair shirt, eating locusts and honey. The vocation of a hermit became popular among the early Christians, who, inspired by the biblical models like Elijah and John the Baptist, desired to live a life set apart and withdrew into the desert in order to live a life of prayer and penance.

Thomas Porukara speaks of *vanavasa*, as a means of securing eternal life.²⁴ The desire to be away from the society and be closer to God comes from the cultural and biblical world vision according to which, God dwells up in heaven and his creation has its place down here on earth. If this is the case, any place that is geographically high, is close to God and the higher and the more inaccessible the place, the closer to God. The farther from the society, the holier the place.

In his private deliberations, Thomas Porukara noted that life in the world was not very helpful in attaining sanctity of life. This thought was evident early on in the life of Porukara, for after his diaconate, he is said to have invited his friend Jacob Kaniyanthara, a young man of his home parish in the following words: "After my priestly ordination let us go and stay in some wilderness [*vācca-vana-vāsattinum poykalayām*]. For living in the world, it may not be easy to secure eternal life."²⁵ Certainly, as an associate of Porukara in later years, Chavara must have been influenced by the thought of *vanavasa*, for him to consider a consecrated life too.

Since there were several European missionaries who were consecrated men, and as they were giving leadership to the Church in Kerala, and as Porukara was closely in touch with them, he knew about consecrated life. Hence, the expression *vanavasa*, should not be taken literally, although the Indian mind, with a long tradition of *aranyas* (sanyasis of the forest), is inclined to take the expression literally. According to Thomas Kochumuttom, "What he meant for sure, was a life withdrawn from the worldly affairs so that he could serve God and His people without distraction."²⁶

Jesus retired into the wilderness occasionally, to be alone with the Father, and took his disciples there from time to time. It was in the wilderness that the ascetic John the Baptist appeared, and lived a life of asceticism. And perhaps, it is the same wilderness that Jesus retired for 40 days and 40 nights in preparation for the ministry of the Kingdom of God that he was to launch. It was to a deserted place that Jesus took his disciples for the much-needed rest and it is there that he gave them the

²⁴ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 81.

²⁵ Kaniyanthara, *History of the Foundation*, 1.

²⁶ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 82.

deeper lessons of their ministry. It was to a place of solitude that Gethsemane was, that he took his disciples for the last time for prayer.

A life of solitude in view of a higher goal was always guaranteed by the life in the wilderness both literal and metaphorical. *Vanavasa*, a life of solitude was chosen by the pioneers as the ideal way of living a life of consecration.

8.2. *Darsanaveedu*, a Tent of Meeting

The monastery that the founders had in mind was a place filled with the presence of the Lord that anyone who lived there and anyone who entered there would have the presence of the Lord experienced. The primary objective of the house where the consecrated people lived was the experience of God. Biblically, *darsanaveedu* is envisaged after the model of the tent of meeting that the Israelites pitched in the midst of the camp in the wilderness during their sojourn in the desert. The tent of meeting along with the Ark of the Covenant, not only signified the Presence of the Lord among the people, but also functioned as a place where Moses went in to consult Yahweh.²⁷

Only a select few would enter the tent of meeting. Moses, the leader and the mediator between Yahweh and his people, often went in, in order to meet and consult Yahweh, that the tent came to be called the Tent of Meeting. It was not to be pitched in the fashion in which other Israelite tents were built. The Book of Exodus narrates that before the tabernacle was constructed, God met with Moses in a temporary tent of meeting. "Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the 'tent of meeting.' Anyone inquiring of the Lord would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp... As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the Lord spoke with Moses" (Exod 33:7, 9).

God is relational in nature, and as the people of God, Israel was to live in a covenant relationship with Yahweh. The tent of meeting is erected for this very purpose. It was the location of divine interaction, a place where the people could place their needs before the Lord. The tent

²⁷ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 84, would interpret *darsanaveedu* philosophically and note that such a dwelling is congenial for the religious who "should be people with clear vision (*daršana*) about life and the principles of life, regarding what to do and what not to do."

of meeting became a visual representation of the availability of God throughout Israel's journey to the Promised Land.²⁸

Darsanaveedu, according to the founding fathers, was the ideal after which the monastery was to be visualized.²⁹ With regard to the idea of religious life, Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukkara were like-minded. As Kochumuttom notes, Palackal's lifestyle, even before the foundation of a monastery, for all practical purposes, was that of a monk: "deeply spiritual, prayerful and contemplative, austere, ascetic, detached, committed to the continuous study and teaching of sacred sciences, and a spiritual guide and counsellor for all."³⁰ In a similar manner, "from his younger age Porukara cherished the desire for a life withdrawn from the world and family affairs."³¹ Both of them, propelled by the desire for the *darsan* of the Lord, would want a *darsanaveedu* to be established in their land. Hence, as Chavara notes, "He (Fr Palackal) and his most intimate friend Fr Thomas Porukara had yearned to establish a house of vision (*darśana-viṣṭu*)."³² He further notes that since in the absence of such a house in Malabar, even for the spiritual leaders of the community, much good was left undone.³³

Chavara would see the *darsanaveedu* envisioned by his revered teachers as a facility established after the manner of the tent of meeting, where the presence of the Lord would be guaranteed for those who enter it and dwell in it.

²⁸ According to Sophy Rose, *darsanaveedu* denotes 'a house of *darsanam*'. "Darsanaveedu is a prayer house for religious; he (Chavara) calls the religious *darsanakkar* where they can have the vision of God. It means, the monks should see God with their eyes of faith (Vision of God) and see the realities other than God through the eyes of God (faith vision)." See Sophy Rose, "Consecrated Life: The Model of Saint Chavara", in Shaji George Kochuthara (ed.), *Living the Joy of the gospel Today: Challenges to the Family and to the Consecrated Life* (Dharmaram Chavara Studies 3), Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2017, 160.

²⁹ Chavara's vision of a monastery could be found in the pages of the chronicle of the first monastery. The title that he gives to the entry is *Darsanaveedupani Varthamanam*. While he narrates the details of the search for the locale for the *darsanaveedu*, he uses *bes-rauma* and *tapasubhavanam* to refer to the same reality. See Sophy Rose, "Consecrated Life" 160.

³⁰ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 83.

³¹ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 83.

³² CWC (1990): 1; CSK I (1981): 1.

³³ CWC (1990): 1; CSK I (1981): 1.

8.3. *Tapasubhavanam*, a Centre of Austerity

The vision of the founding fathers regarding the consecrated life they had in mind, as noted by Chavara, involves a *tapasubhavanam*,³⁴ which could be interpreted and translated as a centre for spiritual discipline, asceticism, self-denial, abstinence, piety and simplicity.³⁵

Asceticism is the practice of the denial of physical or psychological desires in order to attain a spiritual goal. All religions have at least traces of some features of asceticism and religious austerity that involves practices promoting spiritual development in a person. In some religious traditions, it emphasizes spiritual disciplines and self-restraint. In others, it refers to self-denial through ascetic practices aimed at curbing bodily desires and support spiritual advancement. Religious austerity is central to various paths leading to spiritual growth.

Tapas is a variety of austere spiritual meditation practices in Indian religions. In Jainism, it means ascetic practices of austerities and bodily mortification, in Buddhism, it denotes spiritual practices including meditation and self-discipline and in the various traditions of Hinduism, it means a spectrum of practices ranging from inner cleansing to self-discipline by meditative exercises.³⁶ Universally, the practice of *tapas* involves solitude, and it is a part of monastic practices that are a means to liberation and salvation.

In the biography of Thomas Porukara, Kuriakose Porukara, his younger brother and biographer notes the desire of Porukara: “Young Thomas lived in the seminary motivated by the desire to spend his life in the service of God without getting entangled in worldly and family

³⁴ CWC (1990): 1; CSK I (1981): 1. See also Paul Kalluveetil, “Religious Life in Chavara’s Vision”, in *St Kuriakose Elias Chavara: To the Desert and Back* (HE 12/2 (2016), 181-182.

³⁵ As Thomas Kochumuttom, “Chavara, Mystic and Mystical Theologian”, in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: For God and His People* (HE 11/2 (2015), 213-214, notes, Thomas Palackal, the senior most of the founding fathers, was “an ascetic theologian”. In that case, it is natural that they conceive the monastery as a center of austerity or a house of asceticism.

³⁶ According to Augustine Thottakkara, *Indian Philosophy, basic Concepts and Important Themes*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2015, 171, *tapas* is derived from “the verbal root *tap* (*tapati*), which means to heat up, to warm up, to burn up, etc. In biblical terms, *tapas* has to be understood in the words of Elijah who is “burning with zeal for God the Lord of hosts” (1 Kings 19:10).

affairs."³⁷ According to Kochumuttom, it is "quite natural then that Palackal and Porukara shared the aspirations for religious life in solitude."³⁸ Along with *darsanaveedu*, Chavara has recorded the common thoughts of his teachers about religious life in the following manner: Fr Thomas Palackal and Fr Thomas Porukara had yearned to establish a *darsanaveedu*, "since in the absence of a house of austerity [*tapasubhavanam*] in Malabar, even for priests, much good was left undone. They were sad at heart as there was no one to give them support, but they went on praying."³⁹

According to Kochumuttom, the ones who dwell in the *tapasubhavanam* should be "persons of austerity and ascetical practices (*tapas*), leading a life that is simple and austere."⁴⁰ By moving to such a house of vision and austerity the founders did not mean total withdrawal from the society or unconcern for the people and their needs. Instead, they wanted to do the 'many good things that in the absence of a *tapasubhavanam* were left undone.'⁴¹

The regret of Fr Porukara that there is much good that could be done for the sake of the society, for such a long time on account of the absence of a *tapasubhavanam* and *darsanaveedu*, would indicate that neither *vanavasa* nor *darsanaveedu* must be taken in a literal sense. They are metaphors for the physical distance that is created between the mundane life and consecrated life.⁴²

³⁷ Kuriakose Porukara, *Sthapaka Pithakanmar*, Mannanam, 1995, 1-2.

³⁸ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 83.

³⁹ CWC (1990): 1; CSK I (1981): 1.

⁴⁰ Later, Chavara would undertake the *tapas* for which the house was envisaged. See Mareena and Benny Thettayil, "Cardinal Virtues in the Life of Chavara", in Benny Thettayil and Naiju J. Kalambukattu (ed.), *Father and Doctor of the Church: A Theological Reading of the Life and Writings of Saint Suriakose Elias Chavara* (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 14), Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2024, 296.

⁴¹ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 84.

⁴² Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 84, notes the possibility of an earlier thought of Fr Porukara as a seminarian. He might have entertained some such romantic idea of religious life led away from the society, which as a result of further reflection and consultation with Palackal he gave up in favour of a life of freedom and detachment from the worldly affairs and interests.

8.4. *Otungi Parkal*, a Life in Solitude

There are several words that are used by the founding fathers and others to describe the religious life that they had in mind. One of them is *otungi parkal*, which would denote either a modest life or a life of solitude.⁴³ This is yet another expression that they employ in order to describe their understanding of consecrated life. According to Kochumuttom, the phrase literally means “a withdrawn life, which in effect would mean a life in solitude, keeping their distance from the noisy and distracting world so that one’s contact with God, the prayerfulness, becomes easy. By this, they meant the recollected state of mind more than one’s physical isolation from the society.”⁴⁴

When the founding fathers expressed their desire before the bishop, he retorted: “If you, who are the only knowledgeable priests we have, go away to live in silence and solitude [miṇṭ-aṭakkanmāyi vāccaṭattum otunki pārttāl], who would lead the people?”⁴⁵ His solution to the predicament that he and the people would face in the event of their departure for an eremitic life was a monastery established in the midst of their people.⁴⁶ The notion of *otungi parkal* in a community would have been inspired by the promise of the Lord’s presence: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20).⁴⁷

Otungi parkal is a form of monastic life characterized by solitariness. In this style of life, the social dimension of human existence is totally or largely sacrificed in order to attain spiritual experience. Christianity has traditionally regarded the life of solitude as one of the most perfect ways of life that is consecrated to God. Other forms of monasticism and religious life have strived to bring religious experience to bear on human relationships, a life of solitude has always been purely contemplative in its thrust. The recluses live only in order to cultivate their spiritual life in prayer, meditation, reading, silence, asceticism, manual work, and, perhaps, in intellectual pursuits. In a life of solitude, the monk goes beyond all social relationships and social interactions.

⁴³ CWCI (1990): 2; CSK I (1981): 3.

⁴⁴ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 84.

⁴⁵ CWCI (1990): 2; CSK I (1981): 3. See also Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 87.

⁴⁶ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 87.

⁴⁷ CWC I (1990): 2; CSK I (1981): 3.

It is the idea of a literal *otungi parkal* that the bishop objected to. A monk who abstains from all social relationships and avoids all social interactions will not be as useful to the people of God as an active pastor in the parish is. And as the bishop surmised, the immediate need of the church in Kerala was adequate local leadership of the people. Hence, with a few conditions attached, he granted their request about which Chavara notes:

His Excellency, who was, like a mirror of virtues, spending days in fasting and prayer, and keeping vigils, heeded to their request. Hearing it, he who was thirsting for holiness, was as delighted as does a parched land in rain. He was delighted to grant the permission and issued an order appealing to all who seek to please God to support the cause by financial assistance.⁴⁸

The desire of the fathers for a ‘modest life was not only granted by the bishop, but he also went out of the way in support of the project.

8.5. *Mint-aṭakkamāyi*, a Life of Silence

To most people, even for seasoned religious, silence is an elusive companion. They are always connected and tuned in, gulping insatiably from the incessant flow of modern social media feeds. Most of them want to stand out, speak up, find their voice and make it heard. The founding fathers, having realized the fact that there is more to life than all these, wanted to take another path in life – a life of silence! They wanted to live *mint-aṭakkamāyi*, i.e., in silence!⁴⁹

A life of silence requires discipline, time, and attention. There is so much noise in the world that is both visual and audible. People are so immersed in noise that often, they are unaware that silence is even possible. When the founding fathers aspired for a life of silence, they wanted the constant noisy interruption to be halted for at least certain times, in order to regain the composure of life and return to the centre, the true self. The ever-active minds had to be calmed.

When the founding fathers aspired for a life of silence, they were swimming against the current and were walking against the grain of most of their companions. The monastic bend of mind that could be detected in their request to the bishop, was designed to go in totally

⁴⁸ CWC I (1990): 2; CSK I (1981): 3.

⁴⁹ CWC I (1990): 2; CSK I (1981): 3.

another direction. This way of silence was not for everyone, but had to be embraced by those whom it was given in order to find purpose in life.

Silence is all around us if and when we seek it out purposefully and pleurably. This is what the founding fathers were doing. Monastic silence in its fullest reality, at least to them, was not simply the absence of noise. It was the profound presence of a reality of the Presence that is too great for expression. They wanted to experience this reality in the silence of a mysterious depth, substance, density and richness. Kochumuttom further notes that the bishop admits that the kind of religious life they proposed included not only *otungi pārkal* (life in solitude) but also *mint-aṭakkam* (silence).⁵⁰

According to Kochumuttom, the bishop appreciated their desire for a consecrated religious life. However, like any leader who would want effective and faithful lieutenants available to be deployed, he was afraid that they were planning to withdraw altogether so that their service would not anymore be available both for himself and for the faithful. "It is remarkable that he admitted that they were among the few, if not the only, learned priests in the vicariate able to teach and guide the people. He could, therefore, hardly afford to lose their active service and pastoral ministry."⁵¹ Hence, as we have noted already, he proposed that their "life of silence" should be such that it would benefit not only themselves but also those who are in need: "If you... go away to live in silence and solitude, who else will be left to teach the people. If you like, you may establish a monastery so that all people can benefit from it."⁵² The bishop is not only pleased with the proposal of the Fathers to establish a religious community, but also, he acknowledges their learning, erudition and gift for pastoral leadership.

8.6. *Bes-rauma*, a House on the Hilltop

With the official permission for the monastery obtained, when the fathers approached the people, they were given a warm welcome and the people wholeheartedly embraced the idea. With the necessary funds raised they looked for a suitable spot to settle down and to live their heart's desire. Kochumuttom notes that the search for a suitable site was both long and strenuous, but the people, both the clergy and the laity

⁵⁰ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 87.

⁵¹ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 86.

⁵² CWC I (1990): 2; CSK I (1981): 3.

alike, passionately cooperated with them.⁵³ Finally, they found a place on mount Mannanam, where a *darsanaveedu* and a *tapasubhavanam* might be established, their ideal of *vanavasa* could literally be lived and where they could pursue a life of silence in solitude.

The most significant aspect of the entire process was the choice of the place for the monastery. In keeping with the religio-cultural ethos of the country, in conformity with the biblical traditions of the various significant mountains where Yahweh revealed himself, in agreement with the invitation of Jesus to a deserted place, and in consonance with their own desire to be reasonably away from the noise of the general pastoral life, they found mount Mannanam a perfect place to launch their spiritual and ascetical monastic project. They significantly christened it *bes-rauma*, which is a Syriac phrase that meant "a house on hilltop."⁵⁴

Bes-rauma is highly symbolic. It symbolized the elevated nature of life and the height of sanctity that those who lived in the monastery should aspire for and strive to live, so that they would become a symbol of Christian life for the people around to look at and be inspired and be challenged by.⁵⁵ In the choice of both the place and the name for the place, the words of Jesus must have played a remarkable role. The Lord said: "a city set on a hill that cannot be hid ... and a lighted lamp is placed on a stand so that it gives light to all in the house. Let their light so shine before men that they may see their good works and give glory to their Father in heaven" (Mt 5:14-16).

Furthermore, in the words of the founding fathers, *bes-rauma*, the "house built on a hilltop" exists for all others to look at and be inspired; it has to be a "mirror of virtuous life" (*punyattinte kanṇāṭi*) looking at which the neighbours and visitors and even the members of the community can learn what it means to lead a virtuous life. Similarly, *bes-rauma* is meant to be a spiritual resort (*punya-sanketam*) where all the seekers of God-experience can find refuge and are spiritually refreshed and revitalized.⁵⁶

⁵³ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 91.

⁵⁴ CWC I (1990): 13-14; CSK I (1981): 16-17.

⁵⁵ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 91.

⁵⁶ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 23.

The life in the *bes-rauma* is communitarian in its outlook. As Prophet Samuel instructed Saul, in the Gibeath Elohim (the hill of God) he was going to encounter a group of holy men. And as it came to pass, Saul met the “band of the prophets” who came down from the “high place” singing with musical instruments and as they prophesied (1 Sam 10:5), in their company the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon Saul transforming him into another person (10:6, 10). This is the transformative effect of a few spirituals living together. Kochumuttom observes regarding the life of the members of the community: “A basic factor of the life in Bes-rauma... was that it was communitarian. As members of a family they lived, prayed and worked together.”⁵⁷ As Chavara reminisces, this is what the first community in the *bes-rauma* did:

On 18 June 1840, the feast of Corpus Christi, Frs Thomas Porukara, Geevarghese Thoppil and I began living as a community in Bes-rauma [Mannanam]. We were already enjoying spiritual brotherhood; but we wanted to have unity in temporal matters as well. Therefore, following the example of [the early Christians led by] St Peter, we began to hold in common all our material goods and possessions, and to keep a common account.⁵⁸

A step further, the members of the community, according to Chavara, were called *koodepirappukal* or *sahodarangal* who are born of the same mother.⁵⁹ The religious community in the *bes-rauma* becomes a supernatural family. “What a family naturally is, the religious community must in the light of faith consciously become! This was the creditable achievement of the founding community of Bes-rauma in Mannanam.”⁶⁰

So far, the talk has been made referring to the consecrated men and the *bes-rauma* that was established for them. Do all these pertain only to men? Despite the biblical stand on women from a cultural point of view, the founding fathers had a comprehensive view of consecrated life that was meant both for men and women and the good that could come from

⁵⁷ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 49.

⁵⁸ CWC I (1990): 175-176; CSK I (1981): 208-209. See also Kalluveetil, “Religious Life in Chavara’s Vision”, 193.

⁵⁹ CWC IV (1990): 70; CSK IV (1986): 99.

⁶⁰ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 55.

both the groups.⁶¹ In this regard, Kochumuttom notes that all that the founders had in mind while establishing the monastery, apply also to the convent:

The life in it is a withdrawn one (*vana-vāsam*) in silence (*mint-aṭakkamāyi*) and solitude (*otunki pārkkaḷ*); it is house of austerity (*tapasu-bhavanam*) and vision (*darśana*): it should blend contemplation and apostolic work;⁶² trust in God and His people is the unfailing resource to meet all its needs; it is a house built on hilltop (*bes-rauma*); in it the basic rules of life are the spirit and practice of evangelical counsels and common life; among its members there should exist genuine love and family spirit; it is not man's work but God's, and, therefore, no human or natural forces destroy it while the members' neglect of the divine call can; they should yield fruits like humility (*elima*), obedience (*colvili*), charity (*upavi*), religious modesty (*sannyāsa-aṭakkam*) and genuine love of God (*pattāṅgayulla-bkakti*); it should be a mirror of virtues (*punyāttinte kannāṭi*) and a resort of virtuous souls (*punyātmākkaḷuṭe samketam*); and its strength is in the members' zeal and virtue, not in the thickness of the walls!⁶³

In every sense of the term, the monastery at Mannanam, and every subsequent religious house that was established, both for men and women, was a *bes-rauma*, a house built on hilltop, to which all looked for light, direction and inspiration. It was a *punya-sanketam*, a spiritual refuge for all kinds of people in the society. The priests used to frequent Mannanam for their spiritual needs. They came to the community at *bes-rauma* to spend a few days of quiet and prayer, to make their confession, monthly recollection and annual retreat and to take necessary guidance for life. The priests in need of correction or pastoral improvement were sent to the monastery by the bishop. They would spend time under the guidance of the members of the community there and return to him with a certificate of approval. The laity came to the monastery for the daily

⁶¹ See Jossy CMC, "Religious Women in the Testament of Chavara", in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: For God and His People* (HE 11/2 (2015), 305-316, makes an appraisal of the initiatives of Chavara for the sake of the women of his time, especially in the contest of the foundations of a religious congregation for women.

⁶² According to Kalluveetil, "Religious Life in Chavara's Vision", 189, "The concept of consecration involved two ideas – separation and service." See also Kochumuttom, "Chavara, Mystic and Mystical Theologian", 216-218.

⁶³ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 101.

Mass, retreat and confession, and had the members of the community come for the anointing of the sick. The members of other faiths considered the activities in the *bes-rauma* as a catalyst of socio-cultural renaissance, and appreciated the social, educational and various other initiatives of the community.⁶⁴

In fact, it is to this kind of a life that the bishop was orientating the founding fathers. He wanted them to be in the midst of the people for them to look at, led by, learn from and thus grow in virtue. Kochumuttom notes that this expectation further points to the responsibility that the consecrated men and women of all times, have taken upon themselves, i.e., to be shining examples of Christian life in perfection.⁶⁵

After the model of Jesus, Chavara ascended the mountain, dwelt in the *bes-rauma* (house on a hill-top), entered into dialogue with the Lord in contemplation as Jesus did in the garden of Olives, to know the will of God and descended the mountain to be on the plain with the people to take care of their needs and to build up the Church in pastoral and social action.⁶⁶

9. *Bes-rauma*, a Desert in the City

In spite of all the desire that they had to flee the world to go for a *vanavasa*, for all practical purposes, they remained in the world. However, their life in the world could be compared to those disciples who 'were in the world but were not of the world' (Jn 15:19; 17:14). Or their life in the monastery was akin to the life of Elijah on Mount Carmel. Elijah had a profound mystical experience of the Lord in the cave as he was enjoying the solitude of the cave. However, he also had the same kind of an experience while he prayed to Yahweh and miraculously brought down fire from heaven consuming the entire sacrifice that he

⁶⁴ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 184. See also Kripa Maria and K.A. Thomas, "An Integral Educational Vision: Chavara and the Present Educational Scenario", in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: For God and His People* (HE 11/2 (2015), 274-279, discuss the educational initiatives of the religious community founded by Chavara and his companions.

⁶⁵ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 91.

⁶⁶ See Cherian Thunduparampil, "Universal Call to Sanctity: Consecrated Life and St Kuriakose Elias Chavara", in Shaji George Kochuthara (ed.), *Living the Joy of the Gospel Today: Challenges to the Family and to the Consecrated Life* (Dharmaram Chavara Studies 3), Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2017, 246.

made. He did it in the full view of the apostate Israelites and the prophets and priests of Baal. It is a paradox that the prophet who had such a mystical experience would take recourse to a socio-religious action.⁶⁷ The phenomenal act of God for the sake of the people in answer to the prayers of Elijah in their midst brought the entire people back to God and the generally pacific prophet exhibited the zeal for God the Lord of hosts by which he was being consumed earlier in the cave. The life that the pioneers were called to live was not a naval gazing, self-centred spirituality but a life that is other-oriented and altruistic.

The desert and the city are symbolic of the contemplative and apostolic life that the new community of consecrated men lived. Their life, on the one hand, had all that they desired to have – *vanavasa* in a *darsanaveedu*, which is lived in solitude. On the other, they would deliver what the ecclesiastical authorities expected of them, i.e., able leadership to the people.⁶⁸

The bishop's letter of recommendation⁶⁹ makes it clear to them that the pattern of life in the new community of men should blend contemplative prayer and active apostolic work. Kochumuttom summarizes the letter of the bishop in the following manner:

⁶⁷ Thomas Kadankavil, "St Chavara and the Mystic St Euphrasia", in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: For God and His People* (HE 11/2 (2015), 252-253, discusses the blend of "two Carmelite spiritual streams" that are "contemplation and action, and contemplation and silence." In a similar vein, Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2014, considers the spirituality of Chavara as a blend of interior life of mysticism and missionary work as its externalization.

⁶⁸ Saju Chackalackal, "Holistic Integration of Mystical Aspirations and Social Commitment: Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Nineteenth Century India", in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: For God and His People* (HE 11/2 (2015), 204-207, would discuss the inclusive approach that was made by Chavara combining mysticism and socio-ecclesial action. See also Navya Maria, "Chavara, a Champion of Women Empowerment: Socio-religious Situation in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Kerala", in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: Man, Milieu and Message* (HE 10/1 (2014), 83-104. Suja V.J., "Chavara: A Milestone in Women's Case", in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: For God and His People* (HE 11/2 (2015), 317-324, who discusses the social intervention that Chavara made in order to empower women in Kerala.

⁶⁹ Valerian Plathottam, *Malankarasabhamatavinte our Veerasantanam Athava Vandy Divya Sri Chavara Kuriakose Elias Acchan*, Mannanam: 1939, 49-51.

It is necessary that in this territory there are persons who are continuously engaged in *prayer* and *good works* for the greater glory of God and the edification of the Church. Even in places where the Gospel was preached much later, there are monasteries for men and women. But you, received the gift of faith from ancient times, do not yet have any of them, although you have requested the Holy Church to establish them among you. In order to open a door for religious life, these two priests, Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, desire to establish a religious house [*darśana-vitu*] with a church and other necessary provisions for those men who are willing to follow this blessed way of life... The religious will be free from all worldly affairs, and they will devote themselves entirely to spiritual things. By the zealous work of these elect souls, all possible blessings will be secured for the Church and the entire world. Their example will instruct the ignorant. It is, thus, a community of religious “persons who are continuously engaged in prayer and good works for the greater glory of God and the edification of the Church... Free from worldly affairs they will devote themselves entirely to spiritual things.”⁷⁰

The bishop cleverly brought about a win-win situation from which both the parties have their objectives met. The founding fathers, from a contemplative point of view, although in an altered manner, received what they wanted.⁷¹ From a pastoral point of view, the bishop laid out the apostolic objectives of the new community: (i) to instruct the ignorant by means of good example, (ii) to receive into the Church those who are willing, (iii) to reunite the separated Christians, (iv) to enhance the growth and wellbeing of the Church, (v) to promote peace and harmony among the nations and world religions, and (vi) to realize on earth a community of those called for the eternal kingdom of heaven.⁷² These

⁷⁰ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 89-90.

⁷¹ It would not be entirely right to claim that all the founding fathers aspired for a purely contemplative life. In spite of the *vanavasa* and the related notions that they were talking about, at least some of them had a Dominican bend of mind, with active preaching and teaching as their future ministry. Moreover, the “much good that is left undone” because of the absence of a *tapasubhavanam* in Kerala, would point to some kind of active apostolate for the sake of the people.

⁷² Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 90-91.

were the ministries that he wanted them to undertake, even as they lived in the monastery!⁷³

10. Conclusion

Bringing about a harmonious blend of both the contemplative and active aspects of religious life, the community followed the example of Elijah on Mount Carmel bringing together social action and mystical experience. They followed the example of Jesus on Hermon, the transfiguration mountain, who, along with the disciples, had an otherworldly experience but came down for the sake of the people and engaged with them. The Indian Carmelite spirituality is a blend of prophetism and mysticism – one enriching the other.⁷⁴

Bes-rauma is inspired by the spirituality of the various biblical mountains. In a spiritual sense, *bes-rauma* is Ararat, the mountain of hope, where a new beginning is made by everyone who comes into it. It is Sinai, the mountain of the covenant in which people make a covenant with God consecrating themselves in his service and that of his people. It is Nebo, the mountain of vision, where one's horizon is expanded in such a way that you peer into the future for the sake of the people. It is Carmel, the mountain of zeal, where the consecrated people, in monastic and apostolic zeal are consumed in contemplation and action. The *bes-rauma* is also Mount Moriah/Zion, the mountain of faith where like Abraham, your faith is tested by both God and the confreres to get it consolidated. It is the Mount of Olives, the mountain of transcendence, living in which the consecrated people transcend their limitations and to a great extent, themselves reaching a realm that is unattainable here below. Finally, it is Hermon, the mountain of transformation living

⁷³ This blend of ideals can be noted in the choice of the locale for the *bes-rauma*. As Chavara and his companions were looking for a suitable place for the *darsanaveedu*, he insisted that the *bes-rauma* should have *vallasaukaryam*. *Bes-rauma* would guarantee the much-desired contemplative life and *vallasaukaryam* (facility to travel by boat) would facilitate travel in order to reach out to people for the apostolic and pastoral activities. See Sophy Rose, "Consecrated Life", 160-161.

⁷⁴ Benny Thettayil, "In Defense along the Ecclesiastical Frontline: Chavara and the Ongoing Struggle", in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: For God and His People* (HE 11/2 (2015), 163-164, discusses the ecclesial action that Chavara and his confreres were engaged in, in defense of the Church in Kerala.

where, the consecrated people are transfigured into the image of Christ, which is the ultimate objective of consecrated life.

The desire that was engendered in the founding fathers for an eremitic life (*vanavasa*) was equally inspired by the biblical mountain spirituality. The *darsanaveedu* that they envisaged after the model of the tent of meeting where one could enjoy the vision of the Lord was also a centre of austerity (*tapasubhavanam*) where they would live a life in solitude (*otungi parkal*) in monastic silence (*mint-atakkamayi*). All these ideals will be realized in the *bes-rauma*, the house on the hilltop, closer to God and in the full vision of the people.

The *bes-rauma* and what was begun in that house on the hilltop was enjoyed by the members, appreciated by the people, admired by the authorities and immensely benefitted by the people far and wide. As the fame of the good that the members of the community at the *bes-rauma* were able to do, people from various parts of Kerala began to invite them to make foundations of similar monasteries among them. In response, several of the subsequent foundations were made after the model of the *bes-rauma* at Mannanam. As far as possible, the monasteries were established on the top of a hill or a place that was away from the city. Of the seven early monasteries, at least at the time of the foundation, the monastery at Elthuruth was near the backwaters, at Mannanam, Vazhakulam, Pulinkunnu and Mutholy, the monasteries are on hillocks, at Ambazhakkad, it was well away from the villages. The monastery at Koonammavu in which Chavara spent his final years, could be taken as an exception to this trend. In the case of the subsequent foundations too, as far as possible, *bes-rauma* was the pattern that was followed. The choice of these places for the foundations was in keeping with the original vision of the founders regarding the *bes-rauma* and its lofty ascetic and contemplative ideals.