

# MOUNT TABOR

Mount Tabor is located on the northeastern corner of the Valley of Jezreel or Plain of Esdraelon. (The name “Esdraelon” comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for “Jezreel.”) Mount Tabor is about ten miles west of the Sea of Galilee and five miles east of Nazareth. The steep, round hill is made of limestone; it is not an extinct volcano, despite its shape of a symmetrical, inverted bowl. Mount Tabor reaches about 1,800 feet above sea level. From the summit, one can see Mount Carmel, Mount Gilboa, and Mount Hermon. Jeremiah 46:18 refers to Tabor as being “among the mountains.” Mount Tabor is a symbol of majesty in Scripture (Ps. 89:12).



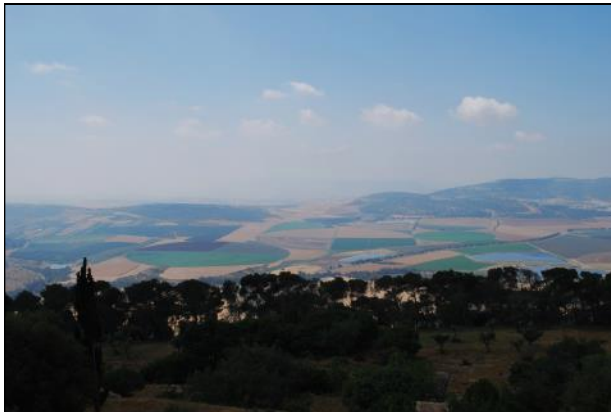
Jezreel Valley and Mount Tabor  
(View from Mount Carmel)



Mount Tabor (Close-up)

Mount Tabor was an important location in the Old Testament times. This landmark was a meeting point for the boundaries of the territories of Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali (Josh. 19:12, 22, 34). It was used as place of worship for these tribes (Deut. 33:18-19; Hos. 5:1).

During the period of the Judges, Barak gathered the tribes of Israel on Mount Tabor (at Deborah's command) for battle against the Canaanites, who were assembled at Harosheth Haggoyim on the opposite side of the Jezreel Valley (Judg. 4:12-13). Barak ("Lightning") descended Mount Tabor with 10,000 Israelite men to the plain below, attacking the army of Sisera at the banks of the Kishon River. The Lord intervened for Israel with a rainstorm that caused the Kishon to flood, bogging down the Canaanite chariots in the mud (Judg. 4:15; 5:4, 19-21). This allowed the Israelite troops to rout the Canaanite army. Later, the brothers of Gideon were slain at Mount Tabor by the Midianite leaders Zebah and Zalmunna (Judg. 8:18-19).



Looking off Mount Tabor Toward Jezreel Valley



Likely Point of Entry into Jezreel Valley

Mount Tabor was strategically located on a main north-south road. There were several roads that intersected it, including one of the main routes from Hazor and Damascus in the north to the pass of Megiddo and the coastal plain. It was the location of an important fortress during the First and Second Temple periods. Specifically, during the Hellenistic period, the Ptolemies built a fortress here. Mount Tabor was later conquered by the Hasmonean Alexander Jannaeus. The military fortress located on top of Mount Tabor was used during the Hasmonean period and during the time of the First Jewish Revolt (A.D. 66-67). In fact, Josephus built walls around Tabor to protect it from Roman attack (Josephus *Wars* 2.20.6). Placidus, the commander of Vespasian, captured the fortress by trickery (*Wars* 4.1.8). Ruins of Josephus' wall are still visible today.

Some early Christians believed that Mount Tabor was the site of the transfiguration of Jesus, including Cyril of Jerusalem, Epiphanius, and Jerome. One reason for identifying this mountain as the site may have been a misunderstanding of Matthew 17:1 to say that Jesus

took the disciples up a mountain “by itself” instead of that Jesus took the disciples up a mountain “by themselves.” Mount Tabor is probably not the location for the transfiguration because Jesus and his disciples were in the region of Caesarea Philippi just before the transfiguration—although six days had passed (Mt. 16:13; 17:1). Caesarea Philippi is located far north of the Sea of Galilee, whereas Mount Tabor is to the southwest of the sea; the distance would have taken about three days to walk. It is more likely that they ascended Mount Hermon (9,000 feet), which is nearby Caesarea Philippi. This option was suggested, along with Mount Tabor, by earlier Christian writers. Another possibility is Mount Meron (4,000 feet), which is on the way back from Caesarea Philippi to the Sea of Galilee (traveling on the west side of the Jordan River). In comparison to Tabor, both Hermon and Meron are much higher (see Mt. 17:1).

Based on the traditional identification, there have been many church buildings constructed on Mount Tabor over the years to memorialize the transfiguration. In the fifth or sixth century A.D., a Roman Catholic church was constructed that had three chapels: one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. (This should strike us as ironic, considering Peter’s suggestion of building three shelters or booths and the Father’s command to simply listen to his Son; Mt. 17:4-5.) A monastery was later built nearby the basilica. Several reconstructions took place during the Crusader period. The current Franciscan basilica, known as the Church of the Transfiguration, was completed in 1924; the adjacent monastery was built in 1873.



Church of the Transfiguration (Roman Catholic)





Church of the Transfiguration (Interior)



Transfiguration Scene



Elijah and the Fire from Heaven (Inside Elijah Chapel)



Byzantine and Crusader Ruins of Earlier Basilica



Franciscan Monastery

On Mount Tabor, not far from the Roman Catholic site, the Greek Orthodox also have a monastery and church building recalling the transfiguration of Christ. The Church of St. Elijah was built in 1845 on top of ruins dating back to the twelfth century.



The Church of St. Elijah  
(Greek Orthodox)

Mount Tabor is only accessible from the north side by a steep, winding, narrow road. For those who want to walk up the mountain side, there are 4,300 steps that were built in the fourth century to serve Christian pilgrims. On top of Mount Tabor, there are three sections: the Franciscan basilica area on the southeast side, the Greek church area on the northeast side, and the ruins of Josephus' fortifications on the west side. Mount Tabor also has other ancient structures, cisterns, and quarries. At the base of the mountain, there are several Arab communities.