

"High Places" in the Old Testament

1 Kings 12:31-32

31 Jeroboam built shrines on high places and appointed priests from all sorts of people, even though they were not Levites. 32 He instituted a festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the festival held in Judah, and offered sacrifices on the altar. This he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves he had made. And at Bethel he also installed priests at the high places he had made. NIV

Elevated or hilltop sites dedicated to worship of pagan gods. Ancient peoples often built their shrines on hilltops. In Mesopotamia, where the land is flat, they built artificial mountains in the shape of step pyramids called ZIGGURATS. The TOWER OF BABEL (Gen 11:1-9) was probably such a ziggurat.

Most of the Old Testament references to high places indicate a form of pagan worship forbidden to the Israelites. But sometimes the Lord's people, with His approval, worshiped Him at elevated altars. This happened between the time Shiloh was destroyed and before the ARK OF THE COVENANT was installed in Solomon's Temple. For instance, Samuel blessed the offerings made at the high place which perhaps was Ramah, a word which itself means "high place" (1 Sam 9:12-14). At nearby Gibeon there was a high place. During the reign of David the tabernacle was there (1 Chron 16:39; 21:29; 2 Chron 1:3-4). At this "high place" Solomon made many sacrifices, had his dream, and asked God for wisdom (1 Kings 3:4-15).

After this early period in Israel's history, all high places mentioned in the Bible were off limits to God's people. In Lev 26:30 God promised to destroy the high places, which He knew His people would later build. They probably got the idea for such shrines of worship from the native Canaanites.

In his waning years, Solomon established high places for his pagan wives (1 Kings 11:7-8). After Solomon's death, the rebellious Northern Kingdom had its high places. The two major ones, containing golden calves, were at Dan and Bethel (1 Kings 12:28-33). Then as bad kings came to the throne in Judah they inaugurated high places, and successive good kings abolished them. During Rehoboam's reign high places appeared (1 Kings 14:23), but Hezekiah broke them down (2 Kings 18:4). Wicked Manasseh built them again (2 Kings 21:3), but righteous Josiah dismantled them (2 Kings 23:8).

The prophets condemned the high places (Jer 17:1-3; 32:35; Ezek 6:3; Amos 7:9). The authoritative word came from the prophet Isaiah: "Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near" (Isa 55:6). Isaiah's message is that God is not found on a mountaintop or at a hilltop shrine. He is everywhere, always ready to listen to the prayers of those who call on him (John 4:21-24).

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bamah OT:1116, "high place." This noun occurs in other Semitic languages, meaning the "back" of an animal or of a man (Ugaritic), the incline or "back" of a mountain (Akkadian), and the "block" (of stone) or grave of a saint (Arabic). Bamah is used about 100 times in biblical Hebrew, and the first occurrence is in Lev 26:30: "And I will destroy your high places, and cut down your images, and cast your carcasses upon the carcasses of your idols, and my soul shall abhor you." Most of the uses are in the Books of Kings and Chronicles, with the sense of "cultic high place." The word is rarely used in the Pentateuch or in the poetic or prophetic literature.

Bamah with the sense of "back" is still to be found in the Hebrew Old Testament: "So your enemies shall cringe before you, and you shall tread upon their high places" Deut 33:29, NASB. Compare this with the NEB "Your enemies come crying to you, and you shall trample their bodies [bamah] underfoot."

The Bible's metaphorical use of the "backs" of the clouds and the waves of the sea gives problems to translators: "I will ascend above the heights [bamah] of the clouds; I will be like the most High" Isa 14:14, and "[He] alone spreadeth out the heavens, and treadeth upon the waves [literally, "high places"] of the sea" Job 9:8. A similar problem is found in Ps 18:33 (cf. 2 Sam 22:34; Hab 3:19): "He maketh my feet like hinds' feet, and setteth me upon my high places." In these passages, bamah must be understood idiomatically, meaning "authority."

The word is used metaphorically to portray the Lord as providing for His people: "He made him ride on the high places of the earth, that he might eat the increase of the fields; and he made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock" Deut 32:13; cf. Isa 58:14. The idiom, "to ride upon the high places of the earth," is a Hebraic way of expressing God's protection of His people. It expresses the exalted nature of Israel, whose God is the Lord.

Not every literal bamah was a cultic high place; the word may simply refer to a geographical unit; cf. "Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the [temple] as the high places of the forest" (cf. Amos 4:13; Mic 3:12). The Canaanites served their gods on these hills, where pagan priests presented the sacrifices to the gods: Israel imitated this practice 1 Kings 3:2, even when they sacrificed to the Lord. The surrounding nations had high places dedicated to Chemosh 1 Kings 11:7, Baal Jer 19:5, and other deities. On the "high place," a temple was built and dedicated to a god: "[Jeroboam] made a house of high places, and made priests of the lowest of the people, which were not of the sons of Levi" 1 Kings 12:31. Cultic symbols were added as decoration; thus, the sacred pillars ('asherah) and sacred trees or poles (matstsebah) were associated with a temple: "For they also built them high places, and [sacred stones], and groves, on every high hill [gib`ah], and under every green tree" 1 Kings 14:23; cf. 2 Kings 16:4 (*from Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, Copyright (c)1985, Thomas Nelson Publishers*)

2 Kings 12:2-3

2 Joash did what was right in the eyes of the LORD all the years Jehoiada the priest instructed him. 3 The high places, however, were not removed; the people continued to offer sacrifices and burn incense there. NIV

