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The "High Place" in Biblical Archeology Part 1

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World of archeology and science

A regular feature sponsored by Siegfried H. Horn.

LAWRENCE T. GERATY

GENERATIONS of Bible students have puzzled over the unfamiliar practices associated with the "high places" mentioned in the Old Testament. What were they and where were they located? What really went on in mountain-top "groves"? What were the "asherim"? Were the "pillars" phallic symbols? Tourists to the Holy Land in our own generation are often fascinated by sites such as Petra and Gezer. When they recount their experiences, either in family circles or public meetings, they often illustrate their visits to such sites with their personal slides and commentary borrowed from innovative guides. What accurate information *do* we have concerning the ancient high place?

No recent comprehensive study exists, though there are several good brief articles in various Bible dictionaries—one of the best still

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being Siegfried H. Horn's article, "High Place," in the *SDA Bible Dictionary*.¹ In this treatment, we propose to look first at the Biblical evidence; then the archeological evidence will be dealt with.

Etymology of "High Place"

The English term, "high place," is a translation of the Hebrew word, *bamah*. The Hebrews undoubtedly borrowed the word (as well as the installation) from the Canaanites, who in turn derived it from the common Semitic vocabulary where (in Akkadian and Ugaritic) it meant literally, "back," or "ridge." It is now recognized that it could have the same literal meaning in Hebrew. Among the nearly one hundred occurrences of *bamah* in the Hebrew Old Testament, at least a dozen of them are best understood in this literal sense. Interestingly enough, each of these examples occurs in poetry.²

Prose Usage

In the majority of Old Testament (mostly prose) occurrences, however, *bamah* is correctly translated by a meaning derived from the original, "back" or "ridge." The term was first applied to the summits of either natural or artificial hills or mounds, which were set aside for cultic purposes. As the cult at these open air sites became more institutionalized, shrines were sometimes built and operated by cultic functionaries. The designation "high place" then came to refer not so

much to the elevation of the site but rather to denote the entire installation wherever it was located.

The Pre-Monarchical Period

The earliest chronological reference to such high places is found in the Amorite victory song of Heshbon (Num. 21:28), "A fire went forth from Heshbon, A flame from the city of Sihon. It consumed the cities of Moab, Engulfed the high places of Arnon."³ It was undoubtedly from a similar high place that Balak and Balaam surveyed the camp of Israel (Num. 22:41; cf. Joshua 13:17), during their passage through Moab. Toward the end of Israel's existence, these Moabite high places still existed (Isa. 15:2; 16:12; Jer. 48:35). Just before the Israelites crossed over the Jordan to Jericho from the Plains of Moab, Yahweh warned Moses of the high places in Cis-Jordan, "You shall dispossess all the land's occupants as you go, and destroy all their carved stones and all their molten images . . . and all their high places" (Num. 33:52; cf. Deut. 7:5).⁴

Apparently it was what went on at the Canaanite "high places" that was proscribed to Israel rather than the use of such sites themselves. At least this is the implication derived from one of the sanctions at the end of the so-called "Holiness Code" in Leviticus 26:30, where Yahweh says, "If you don't obey me, *then* I will destroy your high places, and knock down your incense altars, and throw

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your corpses on the memorial stelae of your idols, and my spirit will loathe you." In any case, the high place seems to have survived as a legitimate site for sacrifice and worship in Israel until, ideally, the building of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 3:2, 3), but, in practice, till the reforms of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18) and Josiah (2 Kings 23).

The United Monarchy

Three Israelite high places are mentioned by name in connection with permissible worship: Ramah (modern er-Ram) and Gibeath-elohim (Tell el-Ful) both figure in the account of Saul's quest for Samuel in 1 Samuel 9 and 10. Both David and Solomon patronized the high place at Gibeon (modern el-Jib, though the actual high place was very possibly the nearby Nabi Samwil or the traditional tomb of Samuel) where at the "tent of meeting" the priestly family of Zadok sacrificed on an altar and Solomon burned incense (1 Chron. 16:39; 21:29; 1 Kings 3:2-4; 2 Chron. 1:3, 13). All three of the sites are in Benjamin just north of Jerusalem. Neither Ramah nor Nabi Samwil have been excavated. Though Gibeah was partially excavated by Albright and Lapp, only an Israelite fortress was found.

But Solomon supported not only the worship of Yahweh, for on the hill opposite Jerusalem, he built high places to Chemosh of the Moabites, Molech or Milcom of the Ammonites, and Astarte of the Sidonians (1 Kings 11:7, 8; 2 Kings 23:13). If not before, then certainly now, high places became associated with traditions and practices that tended to degrade Israelite religion.

The Northern Kingdom

With the division of the king-

dom, Jeroboam I, too, built high places in the north. To prevent his subjects worshiping at Jerusalem where he would run the risk of losing their political allegiance as well, he encouraged shrines complete with illegitimate priests at the local high places, setting up calves as pedestals for Yahweh at Dan and Bethel (1 Kings 12:31, 32; 13:33). This activity resulted in an oracle from an unnamed Judean prophet predicting the overthrow by Josiah of the shrines with their altars at the northern high places (verses 2, 32). Much later, Amos prophesied the desolation of these high places (Amos 7:9), and the Bethel high place was especially singled out by Hosea as deserving of condemnation (Hosea 10:8; cf. chap. 4:13). In summary, 2 Kings 17:9-12 attributes the fall of the northern kingdom and the Israelites' captivity in Assyria to the fact that "they built themselves high places in all their cities . . . and set themselves up pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every flourishing tree and they burned incense there at all the high places just as the nations whom Yahweh removed from before them; and they did evil things . . . and served idols." Even during the exile, however, the high places had their devotees because the Assyrians settled foreigners in the territory of the northern kingdom who repopulated the high places with priests to officiate in their shrines (2 Kings 17:29-32).

The Southern Kingdom

In the meantime, the kingdom of Judah was not free from the same syncretistic practices that helped to bring the downfall of the north. In the reign of most of the kings, high places were built and their cults patronized; those specifically mentioned in Kings

and Chronicles include Rehoboam, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Jehoash, Amaziah, Azariah or Uz-ziah, Jotham, and Ahaz. Though Asa and Jehoshaphat apparently made some effort to stem the tide, the first real reform is attributed to Hezekiah, who destroyed the high places and their appurtenances throughout the land and attempted to centralize the cult in Jerusalem. The reform was short-lived, however, because his son, Manasseh, rebuilt the high places, equipping them with the customary altars and Asherim. Jeremiah 7:31 (cf. chap. 19:5) adds that they built the high place of Topheth in the valley of Ben-Hinnom, where they sacrificed their children by fire. Obviously, by now "high place" had lost its connotation of "height" and connoted instead the standard cultic installation. After the captivity, conversion, and restoration of Manasseh, the people continued to sacrifice at the high places, but only to Yahweh. This reform, too, was a fleeting one. It was left to Josiah to effect reforms that would really make an impact on the nation. He purged all the high places from Samaria in the north to Beersheba in the south (including the Bethel high place in fulfillment of prophecy), destroying their altars, incense stands, Asherim, pillars, carved and molten images, and slaughtering their priests. Again, as prophets looked back over the history of Israel, the high places were constantly adduced as primary evidence for Yahweh's displeasure with His chosen people (Ps. 78:58; Eze. 16:16; 20:28, 29).

Deities Worshiped at High Places

Though the worship of Yahweh appeared to predominate in many periods of Israel's history, syn-

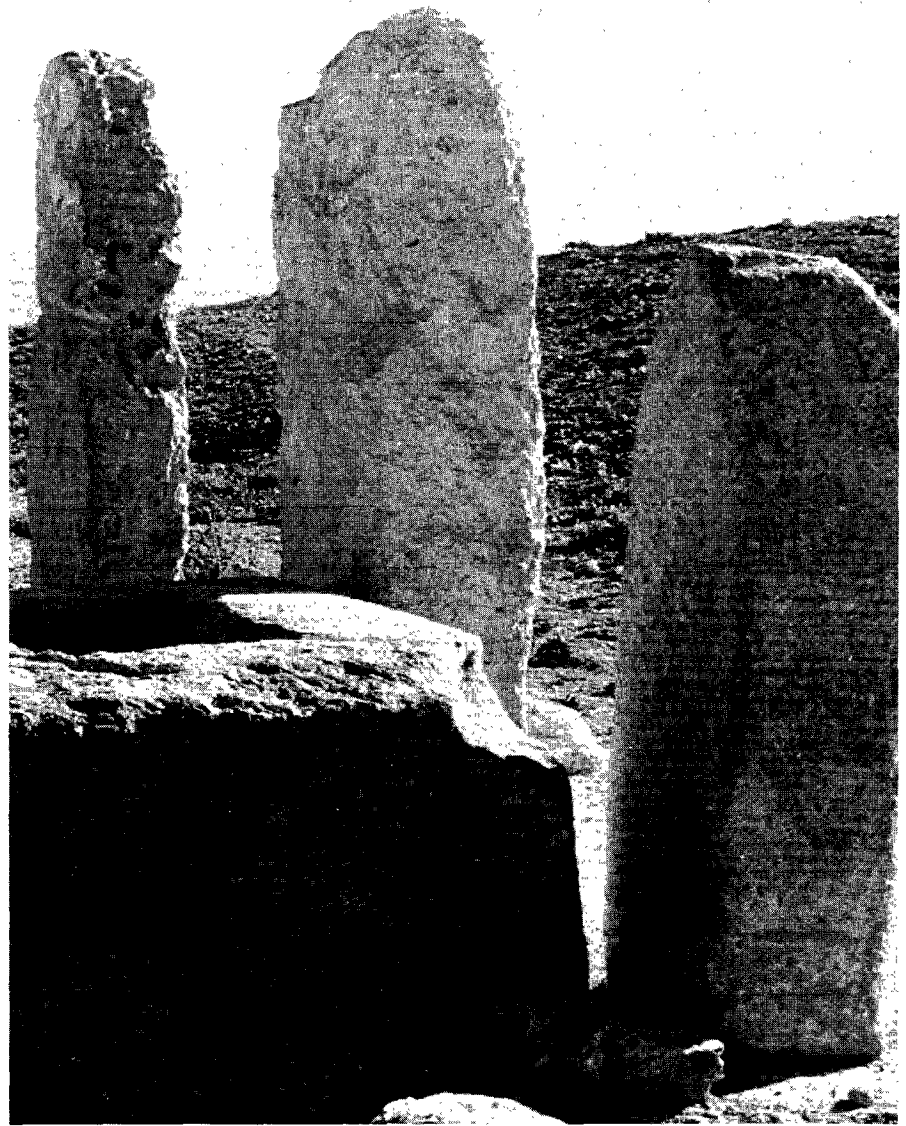
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cretistic tendencies were usually present and often fostered by what went on at the high places. Among the other deities worshiped there was Baal (Jer. 19:5; 32:35), the storm god bringing fertility to the land of the Canaanites. His proper name was Hadad, though he was popularly referred to as Baal, meaning "lord." Later he was identified with Greek Zeus Helios (the sun) who in turn was identified with the Roman Jupiter. Child sacrifice by fire, undoubtedly for votive offerings, was practiced in his cult.

1 Kings 11:5-8; 2 Kings 23:13 mention the worship of Chemosh, Milcom or Molech, and Ashtoreth. The latter was the chief Semitic fertility goddess who was worshiped throughout the ancient East, though in Mesopotamia, where she was also an astral deity,⁵ she was called Ishtar. Later she was identified with Greek Aphrodite and Roman Venus. Palestinian excavations often produce images of Ashtoreth that depict her as a nude woman with her sexual features accentuated; these artifacts are usually referred to as Astarte figurines or plaques (Astarte being the Greek transliteration of Ashtoreth), though it is now thought that this is often a misnomer for archaic figures which actually represented Asherah, the supreme Canaanite mother goddess whose memory was obliterated in the Iron Age through the spread of Ishtar's cult due to Mesopotamian influence.

Chemosh was the name or probably the title of the god of the Moabites which (in line 17 of the Moabite Stone) is compounded with Athtar, the astral deity. Again, Molech or Milcom is probably not the name but the title of the national god of Ammon. From Judges 11:24 in the context of Jephtha's words to the King of Ammon it is apparent that these two deities were actually one. Both, then, were local manifestations of the astral deity, the Venus star, Athtar. Demons as well as deities were worshiped at certain high places (2 Kings 23:8).

In general, one detects a strong interest in fertility and the reproductive powers of nature at the high places, and of course it was this that called forth strong de-



The High Place at Gezer.

PHOTO BY ORLEY M. BERG

nunciations from the prophets (Hosea 4:13, 14; Isa. 57:3-10; Jer. 3:2; 1 Kings 14:24).

Features of a Typical High Place

From such references as Leviticus 26:30; Numbers 33:52; Deuteronomy 12:2, 3; 1 Kings 14:23; and Ezekiel 6:3-6, we may identify the essential features of a typical *bamah* which was usually (though not always) situated on the wooded heights of a hill or mountain.

Standing stones (Heb. *maššebot*, singular *maššebah*, usually translated "pillar") were commonly associated with the high places. Etymologically, a *maššebah* could be any stone that is "set up"⁶; its unnatural position

would then serve the purpose of being some kind of a reminder. From the Biblical point of view, the practice was both permitted (Gen. 28:18; 31:45-52; Ex. 24:4) and denounced (Deut. 16:22; 2 Kings 23), depending, of course, on the purpose for setting up the stone. Though these stones have been variously interpreted as phallic symbols, sacred abodes of animistic spirits, and idols or representations of deity, a comprehensive new study of standing stones by Carl F. Graesser, Jr., suggests that they normally perform one of four different functions:⁷ 1. Memorial, to mark the memory of a dead person or the position of his grave (2 Sam. 18:18; Gen. 35:20); 2. Legal, to mark a legal relationship between two or

more individuals, such as boundary and treaty stones (Deut. 19:4; 27:17; Gen. 31:45-52; Ex. 24:4; Joshua 24:26, 27); 3. Commemorative, to commemorate an event and especially to call to mind its participants (1 Sam. 7:12; 15:12); 4. Cultic, to mark the sacred area where the deity might be found or even the exact point where the deity is cultically immanent—that is, where worship and sacrifice will reach the deity (2 Kings 3:2; 10:26, 27; Gen. 28:16-18; 35:14). Naturally, the standing stones erected at the high places were most closely associated with this last function. As Graesser further notes, "Cultic stones had a special tendency to assume transferred functions so that for many these stones 'enabled' or 'effected' the deity's presence."⁸ That is why certain Biblical writers could consider standing stones to be a variety of idols (Lev. 26:1; Micah 5:13). At times, *massebot* may even have been set up to serve as surrogates for worshipers themselves who wished to be continually represented before their deity at the "high place."⁹

Another object common to the high places was the *peger* (plural, *pegarim*), usually translated "corpse." There is no doubt that one meaning for *peger* is "corpse" but how such a meaning related to the *bamah* has been enigmatic till the word *peger* itself was found on two Ugaritic stone stelae recording a sacrifice to Dagon. David Nieman suggests the word refers to the stones themselves and that it appears with this meaning in such Biblical passages as Ezekiel 43:7, 9, and Leviticus 26:30.¹⁰ This suggestion allows us to include "memorial stones" or "stelae" among the cult objects to be found at the "high place."

Two kinds of altars are often mentioned in connection with the high places. The word *mizbeah* is the commonest designation for "altar" in the Old Testament. Derived from the verb, "to sacrifice," it does not further specify the type of sacrifice made on it. *Hammanim* (a plural) were also altars, but a type used exclusively for the burning of incense at the high places. Till fifty years ago, this term was misunderstood and

usually translated as "sun statues" or, as in the King James Version, "images." Known from excavations as small limestone altars with a "horn" or projection at each corner, their identification was finally assured by the appearance of the word itself on an example from Palmyra.¹¹ Thus the meaning "incense altar" suits the etymology from the verb, "to be hot, burn," quite nicely.

Another essential feature of the typical *bamah* was the *'asherah* (plural, *'asherim*, a term that has been translated by a variety of words, including "grove" and "sacred pole." Avoiding the problem altogether, the Revised Standard Version just transliterates the term. It has been the subject of a thorough study by William L. Reed,¹² who has clarified a number of difficulties. Basically, *'asherah* refers either to the proper name for the Canaanite goddess of vegetation (the female counterpart of Baal) or the cult object that symbolized her. The latter was usually found at the high places dedicated to Baal (Judges 3:7; 6:30; 1 Kings 16:32, 33; 2 Kings 23:5, 6). Unfortunately, the form of the cult object and its use at the high place is not described in the Bible, nor has any object been found in an excavation that can be confidently called an *'asherah*. But from a study of the Biblical references to the object it is clear that it was both constructed and destroyed by man. Though it was not a tree it was upright and made of wood, or at least contained wood, and could be burned. Reed suggests that as in the case of Dagon (1 Sam. 5:2-4), it is probable that the cult object—in this case a wooden one—was an image of the fertility goddess, *'Asherah*.¹³

Finally, there are the various types of images associated with the high places: 1. *pesel* (plural, *pesilim*), derived from the verb *psl*, "to hew," and usually translated "graven image"; 2. *massekah* (plural, *massekot*), derived from the verb *nsk*, "to pour out," and usually translated "molten image"; 3. *selem*, (plural, *selamim*), derived from the verb *slm*, "to cut," but usually translated merely "image"; 4. *gillulim* appears only in the plural; though

its derivation is uncertain, it is usually translated "idols"; 5. *maskit* (plural, *maskiyyot*), perhaps from *skh*, "to look out" and usually translated, "carved stone."

Summary

To summarize what can be said about the high place from the Bible, we noted that the poetic usage of *bamah* was very close to its etymological derivation as "back" or "ridge," but that its meaning in prose usage developed from "natural or artificial height," to include the entire cultic installation on that height and later, to wherever it was, without reference to elevation. Borrowed initially from the Canaanites, high places were frequented throughout the history of Israel—both in the service of Yahweh, as well as in the service of the deities of the surrounding peoples. Features of a typical high place included standing stones, memorial stones, altars for sacrifice and burning incense, cult objects symbolizing *'Asherah* (the mother goddess of Canaan), along with several other types of images. Next month we will take a look at the archeological evidence that illustrates the Biblical data. □

To be continued

FOOTNOTES

¹ Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1960, pp. 468-470.

² 2 Sam. 1:19, 25; Micah 3:12; Jer. 26:18; Isa. 14:14; Job 9:8; Amos 4:13; Micah 1:3; Deut. 32:13; 33:29; Isa. 58:14; Ps. 18:33; 2 Sam. 22:34; Hab. 3:19.

³ The translation is that of P. D. Hanson in "The Song of Heshbon and David's Nir," *Harvard Theological Review* 61:3 (July, 1968), pp. 300, 301, 306, 307. In textually corrupt verse 30, Hanson also suggests, "Desolated are the high places of Chemosh." Such high places are known to have existed later (in the ninth century B.C.) from line 3 of the famous Moabite Stone (Mesha's Stele): "I made this high place for Chemosh."

⁴ Translations are directly from the Hebrew text if not otherwise indicated.

⁵ As such, she was undoubtedly the female counterpart of the male astral deity, *Athtar*.

⁶ Since it derives from the verb *nshb*, "to set up, erect."

⁷ C. F. Graesser, Jr., "Standing Stones in Ancient Palestine," *Biblical Archaeologist* XXXV:2 (May, 1972), pp. 34-63.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁹ S. Eugene Stockton, "Stones at Worship," *Australian Journal of Biblical Archaeology* 1:3 (1970), pp. 59, 81.

¹⁰ D. Nieman, "PGR: A Canaanite Cult-Object in the Old Testament," *JBL* LXVII (1948), pp. 55-60.

¹¹ G. E. Wright, "Sun-Image' or 'Altar of Incense?'" *Biblical Archaeologist* 1:2 (May, 1938), pp. 9, 10.

¹² W. L. Reed, *The Asherah in the Old Testament* (Forth Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1949), a study which he conveniently summarized in "Asherah," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1 (New York: Abingdon, 1962), pp. 250-252.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 251.