

# 1911 Encyclopædia Britannica, Volume 13 — High Place



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**HIGH PLACE**, in the English version of the Old Testament, the literal translation of the Heb. *bāmāh*. This rendering is etymologically correct, as appears from the poetical use of the plural in such expressions as to ride, or stalk, or stand on the high places of the earth, the sea, the clouds, and from the corresponding usage in Assyrian; but in prose *bāmāh* is always a place of worship. It has been surmised that it was so called because the places of worship were originally upon hill-tops, or that the *bāmāh* was an artificial platform or mound, perhaps imitating the natural eminence which was the oldest holy place, but neither view is historically demonstrable. The development of the religious significance of the word took place probably not in Israel but among the Canaanites, from whom the Israelites, in taking possession of the holy places of the land, adopted the name also.

In old Israel every town and village had its own place of sacrifice, and the common name for these places was *bāmāh*, which is synonymous with *miḳdāsh*, holy place (Amos vii. 9; Isa. xvi. 12, &c.). From the Old Testament and from existing remains a good idea may be formed of the appearance of such a place of worship. It was often on the hill above the town, as at Ramah (1 Sam. ix. 12-14); there was a stelè (*maṣṣēbāh*), the seat of the deity, and a wooden post or pole (*ashērāh*), which marked the place as sacred and was itself an object of worship; there was a stone altar, often of considerable size and hewn out of the solid

rock<sup>[1]</sup> or built of unhewn stones (Ex. xx. 25; see [ALTAR](#)), on which offerings were burnt (*mizbēh*, lit. “slaughter place”); a cistern for water, and perhaps low stone tables for dressing the victims; sometimes also a hall (*lishkāh*) for the sacrificial feasts.

Around these places the religion of the ancient Israelite centred; at festival seasons, or to make or fulfil a vow, he might journey to more famous sanctuaries at a distance from his home, but ordinarily the offerings which linked every side of his life to religion were paid at the *bāmāh* of his own town. The building of royal temples in Jerusalem or in Samaria made no change in this respect; they simply took their place beside the older sanctuaries, such as Bethel, Dan, Gilgal, Beersheba, to which they were, indeed, inferior in repute.

The religious reformers of the 8th century assail the popular religion as corrupt and licentious, and as fostering the monstrous delusion that immoral men can buy the favour of God by worship; but they make no difference in this respect between the high places of Israel and the temple in Jerusalem (cf. Amos v. 21 sqq.; Hos. iv.; Isa. i. 10 sqq.); Hosea stigmatizes the whole cultus as pure heathenism—Canaanite baal-worship adopted by apostate Israel. The fundamental law in Deut. xii. prohibits sacrifice at every place except the temple in Jerusalem; in accordance with this law Josiah, in 621 B.C., destroyed and desecrated the altars (*bāmōth*) throughout his kingdom, where Yahweh had

been worshipped from time immemorial, and forcibly removed their priests to Jerusalem, where they occupied an inferior rank in the temple ministry. In the prophets of the 7th and 6th centuries the word *bāmōth* connotes “seat of heathenish or idolatrous worship”; and the historians of the period apply the term in this opprobrious sense not only to places sacred to other gods but to the old holy places of Yahweh in the cities and villages of Judah, which, in their view, had been illegitimate from the building of Solomon’s temple, and therefore not really seats of the worship of Yahweh; even the most pious kings of Judah are censured for tolerating their existence. The reaction which followed the death of Josiah (608 B.C.) restored the old altars of Yahweh; they survived the destruction of the temple in 586, and it is probable that after its restoration (520–516 B.C.) they only slowly disappeared, in consequence partly of the natural predominance of Jerusalem in the little territory of Judaea, partly of the gradual establishment of the supremacy of the written law over custom and tradition in the Persian period.

It may not be superfluous to note that the deuteronomic dogma that sacrifice can be offered to Yahweh only at the temple in Jerusalem was never fully established either in fact or in legal theory. The Jewish military colonists in Elephantine in the 5th century B.C. had their altar of Yahweh beside the high way; the Jews in Egypt in the Ptolemaic period had, besides many local sanctuaries, one greater temple at Leontopolis, with a priesthood whose claim to

“valid orders” was much better than that of the High Priests in Jerusalem, and the legitimacy of whose worship is admitted even by the Palestinian rabbis.

See Baudissin, “Höhendienst,” *Protestantische Realencyklopädie*<sup>3</sup> (viii. 177-195); Hoonacker, *Le Lieu du culte dans la législation rituelle des Hébreux* (1894); v. Gall, *Altisraelitische Kultstädte* (1898).

1. [↑](#) Several altars of this type have been preserved.
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