

HIGH PLACES

“High places,” or *bāmôt* (sg., *bāmâ*), were cultic installations found in a variety of locations in Israel and used by the population before and during the monarchy. Making sacrifices and burning incense were recurring activities held in or at *bāmôt*. *Bāmôt*, along with the tabernacle and the temple, were human-made structures where worshipers encountered Yahweh. Thus *bāmâ* is a generic term related to places where sacrifices were offered.

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1. Survey of *bāmôt* in the Old Testament

Prior to the monarchy, *bāmôt* were considered legitimate worship spaces and received no condemnation, neither for their existence nor for their use. *bāmôt* met the religious needs of the fluid environment of the tribal confederacy along with the “temple” or “house” of Yahweh at *[Shiloh](#), a semipermanent structure perhaps built around the ancient tabernacle ([1 Sam 1:7](#), [24](#); [3:15](#); [1:9](#); [3:3](#)). Even though a plurality of *bāmôt* existed, there is no hint in the narrative that the people were sacrificing indiscriminately.

During the monarchy, however, *bāmôt* were considered illegitimate worship spaces and received considerable condemnation for their existence and use. After the building of *[Solomon’s temple](#), their inadequacy should have been apparent. Yet people continued to sacrifice at and multiply *bāmôt* as if no temple existed. The text mentions four categories of *bāmôt*: (1) Yahweh’s *bāmôt*; (2) foreign deity *bāmôt*; (3) “high places of the gates,” *bāmôt haššē’ārîm*; (4) “houses of the high places,” *bêt bāmôt*. All these construction projects received condemnation. This situation resulted in a heightened expectation for the kings to remove *bāmôt*, particularly in the Judean kingdom. Although *[Hezekiah](#) removed Yahweh’s *bāmôt*, it was *[Josiah](#) who finally destroyed all foreign deity *bāmôt*, including those built by *[Solomon](#), and Jeroboam’s northern “houses of the high places,” *bêt bāmôt*, with its associated personnel. The story line in Kings would not be complete until all the threats to centralized worship in *[Jerusalem](#) were eradicated from the entire land (see Provan).

2. Problems of Research

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Since the etymology of the term remains unknown, Hebrew *bāmâ* (sg.) or *bāmôt* (pl.) usually appears as “high place(s)” in English versions on the basis of the ancient witnesses (the LXX and the Vulgate). This is the first difficulty one encounters when trying to understand *bāmôt*. The second problem arises due to the relatively silent archaeological record about physical descriptions of *bāmôt*. The third issue concerns the biblical texts themselves, in that they offer only limited details pertaining to *bāmâ* usage, activities, size, location and associated personnel. Thus, regardless of their importance, especially in the books of Kings, little evidence about *bāmôt* actually exists.

3. Etymology

The root *bmh* is not attested in biblical Hebrew, although some have posited *bhm* or *bwm* as possibilities (Emerton, 117–18). Therefore, one must consider cognates in other Semitic languages for suggestions. Ugaritic (*bmt*) most likely refers to the back of the body. Akkadian (*bāmtu/bamātu*) carries the meaning of “high ground” or “hilly.” Thus both indicate a notion of elevation but without any religious associations (Vaughan, 121). Moabite (*bmt*), however, speaks of a type of cultic structure(s) ([COS 2.23:137–38](#)), even though some read this reference as a geographical name (see [4.3](#) below). Some LXX recensions transliterated the lexeme without providing further interpretive nuances. *Bāmâ/bāmôt* in the LXX also has the semantic range of “high” or “lofty” in either a physical or metaphorical sense, perhaps on the basis of poetic *bamôtê*, “heights,” found in [2 Samuel 1:19, 25; 22:34](#). In a few instances the LXX substituted *bāmâ* with terminology referring to cult objects (LaRocca-Pitts, 274–84). Largely based on context, the LXX equated *bāmôt* with “high places” and understood them as cultic installations positioned on an elevation. Thus the Vulgate and also modern translations take their cues from the LXX.

4. Physical Considerations

4.1. Provenance of *bāmôt*. Before the building of [*Solomon’s temple](#), we do not know who the originators of these installations were. The texts simply mention the presence of *bāmôt* (e.g., [1 Sam 9:14, 19; 10:13; 1 Kings 3:4](#)). The term is associated with the introduction of [*Saul](#) to [*Samuel](#) ([1 Sam 9:11–27](#)) and Saul’s encounter with a band of prophets ([1 Sam 10:5–8](#)). [1 Kings 3:3–4](#) announces Solomon’s preference for the Gibeon *bāmâ*, and [1 Kings 3:2](#) notes that *bāmôt* were used by the general population. These passages presuppose the existence of *bāmôt* without stating their origin.

In the narratives dealing with the period following the building of the temple, another picture emerges. Now the texts explicitly indicate who built *bāmôt* and detail their multiplication throughout the land. In the south, *bāmôt* were built or torn down—a reflection of their human-made nature ([1 Kings 11:7, 14:23; 2 Kings 17:9](#)). Besides building Yahweh’s temple, Solomon engaged in the ad hoc project of building *bāmôt* for foreign gods, including Molech and Chemosh ([1 Kings 11:7; 2 Kings 23:13](#)). Under the leadership of [*Rehoboam](#), however, it was the people (assuming the general public) who built *bāmôt*, presumably for Yahweh ([1 Kings 14:23](#)).

The narratives of the northern kingdom focus on structures that originated with [*Jeroboam](#). Besides the sanctuaries at [*Dan](#) and [*Bethel](#), Jeroboam constructed numerous “houses of the high places,” *bêt*

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bāmôt ([1 Kings 12:25–33](#)). The fact that Jeroboam built *bêt bāmôt* and not merely *bāmôt* distinguishes northern from southern *bāmôt*. As was the case under Rehoboam of Judah, the people followed in Jeroboam’s footsteps and built *bāmôt* for themselves ([2 Kings 17:9](#)). Thus, in contrast to the premonarchical period, the text clearly communicates that *bāmôt* originated with certain monarchs and people. And now two categories of *bāmôt* existed: foreign deity *bāmôt* and Yahweh’s *bāmôt*.

4.2. Locations of *bāmôt*. The available linguistic data indicate that some *bāmôt* were built on elevations ([1 Sam 9:11–14](#), [27](#); [10:5](#)). The passages in Samuel show participants ascending to or descending from the *bāmâ* ([1 Sam 9:13–14](#), [19](#); [1 Sam 10:5](#)). By virtue of its lexical connections to *gib’â*, “hill,” the **Gibeon bāmâ* most likely was situated on an elevation ([1 Kings 3:3](#); cf. [2 Sam 21:1–11](#)). The *bāmôt* that Solomon dedicated to Molech and Chemosh were erected on the mountain east of Jerusalem ([1 Kings 11:7](#)). This geographical indicator highlights two things. Foreign deity *bāmôt*, like Yahweh’s *bāmôt*, could be built on or at an elevation; but more pertinent to the plot in Kings, the notification of location signals their competition with Yahweh and his Jerusalem residence. In addition, the people under Rehoboam built not only *bāmôt*, but also *maššēbôt*, “pillars,” and *’ăšērîm*, “sacred poles.” The text pinpoints the location of all these items, “on every hill and under every green tree” ([1 Kings 14:23](#)). This latter phrase, while possibly alluding to two types of open-air or countryside cult locations (Zevit, 260), reveals more about the excessive multiplication of *bāmôt* as well as pillars and sacred poles.

The phrase, however, does not prove that *bāmôt* had to be on elevations, since many texts reveal otherwise. At the time of Josiah’s reforms *bāmôt* dotted the land in “cities of Judah” ([2 Kings 23:5](#), [9](#)). Sanctuaries called “high places of the gates,” *bāmôt haššē’ārîm*, also appeared ([2 Kings 23:8](#)). This latter designation positions *bāmôt* specifically at the city gate—a reflection of their publicly accessible nature. Likewise in the north, Jeroboam’s *bêt bāmôt* were located “in all the cities of Samaria” ([1 Kings 13:32](#)). And the *bāmôt* built by those of the northern kingdom were placed “at all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city” ([2 Kings 17:9](#)).

Thus *bāmâ* is not synonymous with “high place.” Each situation must be examined in its context. Furthermore, no specific ethnic interpretation can be derived from the location of a *bāmâ*. Based upon Deuteronomic sources that link worship on high ground to practices of the nations ([Deut 12:2–3](#)), the conclusion is sometimes drawn that much of Israelite cultic activities performed on hilltops must represent an illegitimate form of Canaanite worship in Israel (Nakhai, 18–29). Or conversely, it is argued that an installation found on mid-slope should be identified as a legitimate form of Israelite worship (Elitzur and Nir-Zevi, 35; for a similar discussion concerning a Transjordan find see Rainey, 85). However, the mere location of a cultic item on mid-slope does not automatically make it a legitimate Israelite *bāmâ*. As Z. Zevit (262) has warned, *bāmâ* labels should be the exception when identifying cultic structures in the archaeological record because the lexical data remain unclear.

4.3. Descriptions and Perceived Stature of *bāmôt*. Based on limited descriptions in the OT, not all *bāmôt* are equal in size and importance. The Samuel *bāmôt* were sizable structures that accommodated a banquet of thirty or more in an accompanying “room,” *liškâ* ([1 Sam 9:22](#)), and a band/company of

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prophets ([1 Sam 10:5, 10](#)). The *bāmâ* described in [1 Samuel 9:22](#) has architectural affinities to the later sanctuary, which reflects the substantial nature of the former. *Lěšākôt* (pl.), “rooms” or “chambers,” that served a variety of functions are also found connected to Solomon’s temple ([2 Kings 23:11](#); [1 Chron 9:33](#)) and to the postexilic second temple ([Ezra 8:29](#); [Neh 10:38–39](#)).

The *bāmâ* at Gibeon must have represented one of the largest in town either in size or reputation, since it is designated as *haggědôlâ*, “the great” or “the principal” *bāmâ* ([1 Kings 3:4](#)). It accommodated Solomon’s lavish worship to Yahweh, which consisted of one thousand sacrifices ([1 Kings 3:4](#)). It also stood as a place of revelation. Yahweh spoke to Solomon in a dream at Gibeon ([1 Kings 3:5–14](#)). Chronicles reveals that by David’s design, the *ark of the covenant and the tabernacle were in or at the *bāmâ* at Gibeon ([1 Chron 16:39–40](#); [21:29](#); [2 Chron 1:3, 13](#)). For this reason, Solomon sacrificed and sought God there. Thus the Gibeon *bāmâ* earned its reputation as “great” and stood apart from all others. Unfortunately, there is nothing in the archaeological record from the site to support these claims.

Solomon’s Molech and Chemosh *bāmôt* should also be noted for implicit descriptions of them offered in the text. First, the passage highlights them by name, as opposed to the other *bāmôt* that he built “for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods” ([1 Kings 11:8](#)). Second, they appear to have stood in close proximity to the Jerusalem temple. Perhaps both these announcements attest to the significance of their size.

Jeroboam’s *bêt bāmôt*, “houses of the high places” ([1 Kings 12:31–32](#); [13:2, 32–33](#)), are found only in narratives concerning the northern kingdom. This designation (contra Judah’s “house of Yahweh”) probably boasts about the size of these installations. They seem to be sanctuary complexes rather than “utilitarian structures” along the lines of a *liškâ*, “room” or “chamber” (Barrick 1996, [623](#)). Most likely they were more sophisticated than their southern *bāmâ* counterparts and stood in direct competition with the temple of Yahweh because they were part of a larger, illegitimate system of worship, one synonymous with the name of Jeroboam son of Nebat.

In the case of *bāmâ* descriptions from extrabiblical sources we know that King Mesha of *[Moab](#) built and dedicated a *bāmâ* to his god Chemosh at Qarhoh ([COS 2.23:137](#), line 3b). This *bāmâ* was also human-made and used for religious purposes. Likewise, Mesha might have rebuilt a cultic installation at Aroer called a *bêt bāmôt* (lines 26–27). Most commentators assume that the latter phrase refers to a place name, but the structure of this section of the inscription argues against this reading. According to lines 22–30, Mesha rebuilt Qarhoh, Aroer and Beser. After mentioning Qarhoh and Aroer, a list of specific reparations to those places ensues. For example, in Qarhoh he repaired the walls, gates, towers, the royal palace and hewed ditches (lines 22–30). Then it says that he “rebuilt Aroer.” His work there consisted of making a highway and rebuilding the *bêt bāmôt*. It is entirely possible that *bêt bāmôt* refers not to a rebuilt town, but to a sanctuary complex, not unlike Jeroboam’s *bêt bāmôt* in [1 Kings 12:31](#) (so Barrick 1996, [623](#)). Current excavations in *[Moab](#) are continuing to produce exciting material culture that begs to be interpreted with some of Mesha’s projects in the area, but more analysis is needed.

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Excavations at Tel [*Dan](#) purport to have features descriptive of a biblical *bāmâ* (see Biran). The first feature is a podium, or raised platform, built three meters high, whose south side contained a staircase ascending to the top. The second feature associated with a *bāmâ* installation is three sets of pillars within the gate chambers. A. Biran interprets the podium, the entire complex and the sets of pillars as examples of a *bāmâ*, *bêt bāmôt* and *bāmôt haššē'ārîm* respectively. He likens them to Jeroboam's complexes in the north ([1 Kings 12:28–31](#); [2 Kings 23:8b](#)), even though the texts do not specifically mention Dan as possessing these buildings. Although we do have material cultural data relating to cult places such as the temple in Khirbet el-Mudei-yineh (Transjordan), the temple complexes in [*Arad](#), [*Megiddo](#) (Early Bronze), the cult complex of Ebal and the Bull site (an early Iron Age cult site where a miniature bull statue was discovered), to equate these with *bāmôt* goes beyond the evidence at these sites.

4.4. Activities, Usages and Associated Personnel. Activities in or at *bāmôt* before the temple was built included sacrifices ([1 Sam 9:12–13](#); [1 Kings 3:2–3](#)), incense burning ([1 Kings 3:3](#)), ceremonial feasts ([1 Sam 9:1–26](#)), prophetic inspiration ([1 Sam 10:5–8](#)) and divine revelation ([1 Kings 3:5–15](#)). Other than Samuel, who blessed the sacrifice in [1 Samuel 9:13](#), and the cook in [1 Samuel 9:23–24](#), no specific *bāmâ* personnel are highlighted. Thus a common purpose for *bāmôt* was to provide adequate places of Yahweh worship for the people. However, [1 Kings 3:2](#) suggests that *bāmôt* usage was intended as a temporary measure.

Even with Solomon's temple at center stage, sacrificing at Yahweh's *bāmôt* continued ([1 Kings 3:2](#); [2 Chron 33:15–17](#)). In fact, each Judean king, starting with Asa through Jotham, was suspect because he did not remove or tear down the *bāmôt* ([1 Kings 15:14](#); [22:43](#); [2 Kings 12:4](#); [14:4](#); [15:4](#), [35](#)), and by association probably continued using them for sacrificial purposes. The text's emphasis on the kings and their inability to remove *bāmôt* reflects the expectations articulated in [1 Kings 3:2](#): *bāmôt* should have been discarded, presumably because they were obsolete and replaced by the Jerusalem temple. However, it was not until the arrival of Hezekiah that these hopes were met ([2 Kings 18:4](#)). He destroyed Yahweh's *bāmôt* and altars in order to ensure worship at the Jerusalem temple ([2 Kings 18:22](#)). Thus one sees the enduring nature of *bāmâ* usage as late as the eighth century BCE.

bāmôt activities expanded, however, with certain monarchs. Some of Ahaz's and Manasseh's *bāmâ* rituals may have included human sacrifices—a practice of former occupants of the land ([2 Kings 16:3](#); [21:6](#); [2 Chron 28:3](#); [33:6](#)). The “high places of the gates,” *bāmôt haššē'ārîm*, built before Josiah's reign, probably were utilized by travelers desiring a blessing or by those wishing to consult or swear to the deity with respect to legal matters (Rainey, 85). In addition, *āšērîm*, “sacred poles,” and *maššēbôt*, “pillars,” were set up and used in conjunction with some *bāmâ* activities ([1 Kings 14:23](#); [2 Kings 17:9–10](#); [18:4](#); [2 Chron 14:3](#); [31:1](#); [34:3](#))—customs that provoked the Lord to anger.

We learn of *bāmâ* personnel from the reigns of [*Manasseh](#) and [Josiah](#). Manasseh's long reign included, among other things, the rebuilding of *bāmôt*. Attached to the rebuilt *bāmôt* was an establishment of priestly personnel. Josiah's reforms targeted both, but of note are his dealings with three varieties of *bāmâ* personnel. In the south he found and deposed “idolatrous priests,” those whose

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job descriptions included burning incense to Baal in the high places built in the cities of Judah ([2 Kings 23:5](#)). He also encountered “the priests of the high places,” those who were merely officiating sacrifices in places other than Jerusalem ([2 Kings 23:8–9](#)). Josiah evacuated this group from the premises and restricted them from future temple services, either as a disciplinary measure or because they did not come from Levitical stock. Finally, in his aggressive northern reforms he slayed priestly staff serving the *bêt bāmôt* in the cities of Samaria ([2 Kings 23:19–20](#)). Thus at the time of Josiah large numbers of personnel were associated with these sanctuaries.

5. Perceptions from Chronicles

The perspective of the Chronicler concerning the attitudes and actions of various monarchs toward *bāmôt* testifies to the selective nature of the material in Chronicles. In general, the Chronicler adopts the negative views of *bāmôt* presented in Kings. However, for the purpose of highlighting the bright spots of the nation’s past, in some regnal accounts he chooses not to emphasize the wrongness of *bāmôt*. This is achieved by making subtle distinctions between foreign *bāmôt* and Yahweh’s *bāmôt*. Thus some of the Chronicler’s adaptations appear as a justification of the monarch’s association with *bāmôt*.

For example, in the reign of Solomon, Chronicles avoids a Deuteronomic condemnation ([1 Kings 1:3; 11:6–13](#)) by clarifying that the *bāmâ* used by Solomon at Gibeon was indeed Yahweh’s ([1 Chron 16:39–40; 21:29; 2 Chron 1:1–13](#)). Likewise, in documenting Manasseh’s repentance and resulting return to Yahweh worship ([2 Chron 33:10–17](#)), the Chronicler makes a substantial qualification about actions that clearly were negative in Kings ([2 Kings 21:2–5](#)): “The people still sacrificed at the *bāmôt*, but only to the LORD their God” ([2 Chron 33:17](#)). Although Chronicles and Kings agree that Asa failed to remove *bāmôt* from the land ([1 Kings 15:14; 2 Chron 15:17](#)), Asa receives merit from the Chronicler for the successful removal of “foreign” altars and *bāmôt* ([2 Chron 14:2–4](#)). In context, it is not inconceivable that both altars and *bāmôt* are viewed as foreign. Thus from these texts, it appears that the Chronicler is mirroring a premonarchical perspective of *bāmôt*, yet without denying the Deuteronomic prohibition reflected in Kings.

6. Conclusions

In the biblical text *bāmâ* does not appear to have the status of a technical term, but serves instead as a generic designation for whatever is not the central place of worship, either tabernacle or temple. Because of the heterogeneous religious environment present during the monarchy, it is difficult to apply a generic term to specific and varied cultic installations. We cannot assign the label *bāmâ* to every cultic installation emerging from the archaeological record. To set up criteria, even in the cautious manner of Z. Zevit, is asking too much of the term. Zevit remarks that *bāmôt* are “publicly accessible places with *massebot* [pillars]” (Zevit, 262). Although *maššēbôt* are associated with some *bāmâ* texts, they are not a standard feature. In fact, they are a part of a larger grouping of cultic items that may or may not be connected to *bāmôt* (LaRocca-Pitts, 148). The texts show that *bāmôt* are found in a variety of religious and geographical contexts without a fixed set of associated cultic items.

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In this pluralistic milieu there may have been other names to characterize the variety of the material evidence that we possess. As indirect support, we have no epigraphical data linking a particular cultic installation or object to the biblical *bāmâ* (Emerton, 129). Thus we should be content to accept the biblical record, which takes a generic term to describe what the archaeological record reveals as a diversified and complex religious landscape.

See also [CANAANITE GODS AND RELIGION](#); [SOLOMON'S TEMPLE](#).

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