



# HIGH

ON  
THE

# PLACES

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## BY LEON HYATT, JR.

**“HIGH PLACE”** IS THE usual English translation for the Hebrew word *bamah*. The Hebrew term most often referred to a place of worship, usually worship of a pagan god or goddess.<sup>1</sup> The term could also refer, though, to a mountain or hill (Ps. 18:33; Amos 4:13; Micah 1:3). High places as locations for worship often were on hilltops, but they also could be under evergreen trees (2 Kings 16:4), in towns (1 Kings 13:32), and at city gates (2 Kings 23:8). A high place could be a simple shrine located under a sacred tree or a large temple with several priests available to present many altar offerings (1 Kings 3:2–5).

### In the Ancient World

The ancient western nations seem to have favored building high places on hills, though they never left a written reason why. The Sumerians, Assyrians, and Babylonians, who lived in the valley between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, had no mountains; but they built tall, pyramid-shaped structures called “ziggurats.”<sup>2</sup> The ziggurats resembled hills, and the people built temples or altars on the tops of them. The Egyptians also lived on flat land along the Nile River, but they built

their largest temples at Karnak in southern Egypt, where the highest hills of the nation were located.<sup>3</sup> The Greeks believed their principal gods and goddesses lived on Mount Olympus. In Athens, they built the Temple of Athena on the city’s Acropolis (meaning, City on the Summit) and called her temple the “Parthenon.”<sup>4</sup> In Corinth, they built the Temple of Aphrodite on an extremely steep and high promontory just outside the city, which they called “Acrocorinthus.” The Romans built some of their most important temples on Palatine Hill, the central and highest of seven hills on which the city of Rome was built. All of those nations also built temples and multiple shrines on many other locations, however, besides on hills.

According to the myths and legends of these various peoples, many of the gods and goddesses the people worshiped in those temples and shrines were unashamedly

sexually immoral. Their shrines often contained images of the god or goddess that exaggerated the sexual parts of their bodies. The Greek historian Strabo (lived 63 BC–AD 23) said that in his day Corinth’s Temple of Aphrodite maintained 1,000 sacred prostitutes for the use of worshipers.<sup>5</sup>

### In Canaan

As the Israelites were journeying in the wilderness, in preparation for their entering the land God promised them, He instructed that, when they entered the land, they were to destroy all the high places” in Canaan—including the altars and all the likenesses of the gods (Num. 33:51–52; Deut. 12:2–3). That command revealed that high places dedicated to the worship of pagan gods and goddesses were located throughout the land of Canaan.

God knew these high places would arouse the Israelites’ interest and draw many to become followers of the gods and goddesses represented there. The only way to assure the



**Left:** Mount Olympus, which the Greeks considered to be the throne of Zeus.

**Above:** Terracotta statuette of Athena.

**Right:** Rising

above the city of Athens is the Acropolis; at the top were several temples, the most prominent being the Parthenon, the temple that honored Athena, the patron goddess of the city.



Israelites' purity was to completely destroy the high places. God told them to demolish the high places or the high places would demolish them. Evidently the Lord did not expect the Israelites to accomplish that feat all at once. He instructed them to drive out the Canaanites little by little (Ex. 23:20; Deut. 7:22).

## In Israel

Israel's efforts to obey the Lord's command to destroy the high places continued through many centuries. Joshua fought three major campaigns when settling in the land of Canaan, but the Book of Joshua makes no mention of Joshua's destroying high places.

In the long period of the Judges, the only possible reference to a pagan high place was in connection with Gideon's tearing down a huge altar to Baal that belonged to Gideon's father (Judg. 6:25-31). The Israelites, however, often were guilty of the offense described in Judges 10:6, "Then the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. They worshiped the Baals and the Ashtoreths, the gods of Aram, Sidon, and Moab, and the gods of the Ammonites and the Philistines. They abandoned the LORD and did not worship him" (CSB). The Baals were images of the Canaanite god Baal, and the Ashtoreths were images of Baal's

consort Ashtoreth, often depicted with sexually exaggerated features.

Saul, who was to be Israel's first king, initially met Samuel in an unnamed city on the day the prophet was to sacrifice offerings at a high place dedicated to the Lord. Samuel treated Saul and his servants to a meal at a banquet hall located there

**Below: Ruins of city walls and structures atop the Acrocorinth.**

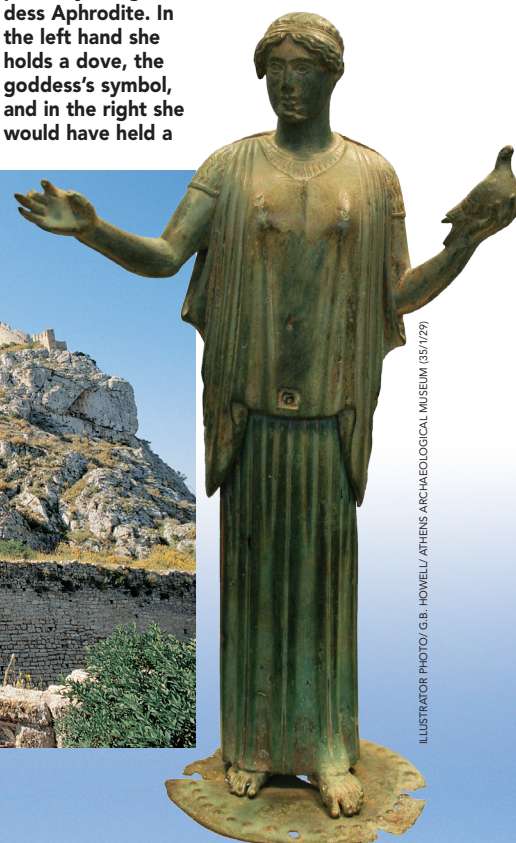
**flower. The figure stands on a round sheet of metal. Found in central Greece; dated 460-450 BC.**

**Right: Statuette, probably the goddess Aphrodite. In the left hand she holds a dove, the goddess's symbol, and in the right she would have held a**

**Below: Foundation of the ziggurat at ancient Ur. The fired-brick outer covering protected the mud-brick core. Measuring about 201 feet long, 150 feet wide, and about 100 feet tall, the original tower's construction began under the leadership of King Ur-Nammu of the Third Dynasty of Ur (about the 21st cent. BC) and was completed by his son King Shulgi. The ziggurat was built to honor Nanna, the moon god and patron deity of ancient Ur.**



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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ ERETZ ISRAEL MUSEUM/ TEL AVIV, ISRAEL (60/9341)

**Above:** The high place at Dan in northern Israel, dedicated to worship. The structure dates to the time of Jeroboam II son of Joash (8th cent. BC) and replaced an earlier structure constructed by Jeroboam son of Nebat in the 10th cent. BC.

**Left:** Face molds representing Asherah; the one of the left would be for making a figurine mold; the one on the right was for producing plaques.

king when the Northern Kingdom fell, removed the high places from Judah and tore down their images (18:1-4). Hezekiah's successor Manasseh rebuilt high places and altars to false gods (21:1-16), a policy that was continued by his son Amon (21:19-22). Josiah followed Amon, and he repaired the Temple and again tore down the high places and altars to false gods (22:3-7; 23:4-20). The people only supported Josiah's efforts in pretense, but not in their hearts (Jer. 3:6-10). Their insincerity opened the way for a final wave of apostasy in the southern nation. After Josiah's death, Judah's last four kings—Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah—rejected the Lord God. Their apostasy led to the final destruction of the southern nation. Nebuchadnezzar carried all but the poorest citizens into Babylonian captivity (2 Kings 23:28-25:21).

Only after years in captivity in Babylon did a generation return to the land with a new attitude that eventually removed high places from the land of Israel. Indeed, for 400 years, until the time of Jesus, we have no recorded evidence of any pagan high places being in the land. 6

(1 Sam. 9:5-25). Later, at the high place at Gilgal, when Samuel publicly presented Saul as Israel's first king, he offered sacrifices to the Lord (10:8; 11:14-15).

David made plans to build a temple for the Lord God, but Scripture is silent about any attempts he made to destroy high places during his reign. Soon after David's son Solomon became king, he went to the high place in Gibeon, where the tabernacle was located, and offered 1,000 "burnt-offerings." The Lord appeared to him there and promised to give him wisdom (1 Chron. 21:29; 2 Chron. 1:3-13).

However, Solomon also presented offerings at high places that were dedicated to false gods. Solomon built Israel's first Temple; but in the latter part of his reign, he also built high places that were dedicated to pagan gods in order to please his foreign wives (11:1-8).

### In the Divided Kingdom

After Solomon's death, the northern ten tribes rebelled and separated from Judah and Benjamin. Their first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam, set up a false substitute for the worship offerings and feast days that the Lord God had commanded. He erected shrines at Bethel and at Dan that contained golden images in the shape of calves (1 Kings 12:25-33). That apostasy continued through the whole history of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and opened the way for multiplying high places to pagan gods throughout the land. Multiplying high places in the Northern Kingdom eventually led to that nation's final destruction (2 Kings 17:6-20). Assyria conquered the nation and carried its people away into captivity in 722 BC.

The struggle against high places continued in the Southern Kingdom of Judah as well. Hezekiah, who was

1. "בָּמֹת" (bamah, high places) in Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), 119.
2. "Ziggurat" in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* [Britannica], ed. in chief Robert P. Goetz, 15th ed., vol. 12 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1990), 915-16.
3. "The Karnak Complex," in *Ibid.*, vol. 18, 189-90.
4. "Acropolis," in *Britannica*, vol. 1, 69.
5. Strabo, *Geography* 8.6.20.

Leon Hyatt, Jr., is a retired Louisiana Baptist pastor and missions director, living in Pineville, Louisiana.