

The High Places and Spiritual Warfare

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Abstract

Proponents of “spiritual warfare” assert that there are demonic forces associated with “high places,” with reference to the idolatrous worship at the high places in the OT. This has been generalised to any elevated location anywhere in the world, where demonic forces are located which must be fought in spiritual warfare. However, “high places” in the OT do not necessarily refer to elevated locations. The term “high place” is misleading and should be understood as “cultic place” where some kind of platform has been constructed on which various religious rituals were performed. These “high places” are spoken of as being “built” and “destroyed,” thus indicating a human construction and not simply an elevated location. This therefore undercuts the basis for “spiritual warfare” against demons in “high places.”

High places in spiritual warfare

There is a widely-held and influential view in certain sectors of the Christian community that the “high places” mentioned in the Bible are elevated locations (the tops of hills, for instance) which are inhabited by demonic forces or are places from which these forces exercise territorial influence. Spiritual warfare then requires that these demonic forces be defeated and removed from the “high places” to eliminate their influence in human life. These “high places” can be any hill or mountain anywhere in the world. Others see the “high places” as offices of authority rather than physical locations, but still keep the idea of a territorial sphere of influence.

This idea of territorial influence appears throughout “spiritual warfare” rhetoric. For instance, Charles Kraft, a leading writer in this area, says “The Bible is clear that Satan has a powerful kingdom that Christians must reckon with at every turn. And we are living in the midst of it – in enemy territory.”¹ The idea behind “cosmic level” or “strategic level” spiritual warfare is that the “higher ranking powers of darkness are assigned to geographical territories or significant human social networks. The term ‘territorial spirits’ is frequently used to describe these forces.”²

1 Charles H. Kraft. “Dealing with demonization.” In: **Behind Enemy Lines**. Edited by Charles H. Kraft and Mark White. Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1994, 81.

2 C. Peter Wagner. “Twenty-one Questions.” In: **Behind Enemy Lines**, p. 127. David E. Stevens, “Daniel 10 and the Notion of Territorial Spirits,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (2000) 628: 410, n. 5, provides an extensive list of sources relating to spiritual warfare and territorial spirits, which he argues against. For a critique of “spiritual warfare” as promoted by Wagner and others, see Erwin van der Meer. Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare and Mission in Africa. **Evangelical Review of Theology** 34 (2010) 2: 155-166. His D. Theol. thesis was: **The Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare Theology of C. Peter Wagner and its Implications for Christian Mission in Malawi**. University of South Africa, 2008. See also Peter Aiken. Should Reformed Believers Engage in Spiritual Warfare? *Puritan Reformed Journal* 7 (2015) 1: 245-255. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (eds). **Understanding Spiritual Warfare: Four Views**. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012. Chuck Lowe. **Territorial Spirits and World Evangelisation: A Biblical, Historical and Missiological Critique of Strategic-Level Spiritual Warfare**. Sevenoaks, Kent, Great Britain: Mentor/OMF, 1998. A. Scott Moreau. Gaining Perspective on Territorial Spirits, online at lausanne.org/content/territorial-spirits gives a helpful summary of views and an extensive list of sources. Elizabeth Denham Guntrip, **A Pentecostal study of Daniel's Prince of Persia (Daniel 10:13)**. M.Phil. thesis,

Wagner holds that there are “territorial spirits controlling cities,”³ giving as an example the impact of Paul’s ministry on “Diana of the Ephesians, the territorial spirit of the region” which Wagner claims explains why Paul wrote to the Ephesians that “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers” (Eph 6:12).⁴ John Cobb says that the fact that the mob shouted in unison for two hours “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians” may indicate that there was a collective possession by a territorial spirit, although he concedes there is nothing in Scripture to suggest this.⁵ Wagner thinks that while territorial spirits are not explicitly mentioned in Eph 6:12, he feels it is highly probable that one or more of the categories mentioned there would “fit the description of territorial spirits.”⁶

Wagner suggests that “In the mind of anyone familiar with the operations of the kingdom of Satan, there could be little doubt that not only was Diana of the Ephesians a territorial spirit over the City of Ephesus and Asia Minor, but that her evil power exceeded that of most as well. Her influence had extended well beyond those boundaries. F F Bruce quotes a source indicating that she was worshipped in at least 33 places within the Roman Empire.”⁷ Wagner cites Paul Trebilco as supporting his interpretation of Diana as a territorial spirit when Trebilco says that in Ephesus “the most significant and powerful deity was Artemis of the Ephesians.”⁸ Wagner goes on:

If she were a true territorial spirit, she would control much of the life of the city. Such was the case, according to Trebilco: ‘It was the cult of the Ephesian Artemis which, more than anything else, made Ephesus a centre of religious life during our period. But the influence of the cult of Artemis extended beyond the religious sphere to the civic, economic and cultural life of the city.’ He goes on to add: ‘Any factor which sidelined Artemis would affect not only the religious, but also virtually all facets of life of the city.’ In other words, if Paul went to Ephesus to preach the kingdom of God, his most formidable opponent in the invisible world would be Diana.⁹

Australian Catholic University, 2006, gives an extensive analysis of the significance of this verse for the spiritual warfare phenomenon.

3 C. Peter Wagner. **Warfare Prayer: How to seek God’s power and protection in the battle to build his kingdom**. Ventura: Regal Books, 1992, 13.

4 Wagner. “Twenty-one Questions.” In: **Behind Enemy Lines**, 127.

5 John Cobb. “How Satan works at the cosmic level.” In: **Behind Enemy Lines**, 171.

6 Wagner. **Warfare Prayer**, 18-19. Wagner admits that the single most influential event stimulating interest in what he calls “strategic level spiritual warfare” was the publication of Frank Peretti’s novels **This Present Darkness** and **Piercing the Darkness**. Ibid., 19. See also Andii Bowsher. **Demolishing Strongholds: Evangelism and strategic-level spiritual warfare**. Bramcote: Grove Books, No. 21, 1993, 3, where Bowsher says of these novels “His contribution is to be commended for making it plain that our struggle is at different levels and the decisive one is spiritual. The peril of popularization-by-novel is that artistic licence may be mistaken for gospel truth and inappropriate models of thought and action drawn from it.”

7 Wagner. **Confronting the Powers**. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996, 211.

8 Wagner. **Confronting the Powers**, 211.

9 Wagner. **Confronting the Powers**, 211-212.

It is claimed that the “prince of Persia” in the book of Daniel is “a powerful, territorial satanic angel.”¹⁰ This reference to the “prince of Persia” is used extensively to defend the idea that demonic spirits rule over specific territories, and it would be fair to say that without that reference, the concept of a “territorial spirit” would be difficult to sustain, although not impossible, since direct Biblical support is not needed for the doctrines of “spiritual warfare.” For instance, Dean Sherman suggests:

Daniel chapter 10 makes mention of the ‘prince of Persia,’ a principality over Persia. This principality has not died of old age, nor has he retired. He’s **probably** still there, functioning in much the same way. The book of Daniel also mentions the princes of Greece. **If there are** princes of Persia and Greece, there are also princes of Scotland, Hawaii, London, Dallas and even North Dallas [my emphasis].¹¹

This is further detailed:

Cosmic-level spirits **seem to** wield their authority over territories as defined by humans. The fact that the guardian angel over Persia (Daniel 10:13, 20) and the one over Greece (Daniel 10:21) are labelled by human territorial names would point in that direction. So would the **impression gained** by those who study and deal with territorial spirits that there are national spirits, regional spirits, spirits over cities, and spirits over sections of cities [my emphasis].¹²

The Hammonds support this belief when they say:

The angel that visited Daniel reported that he had encountered and fought with ‘the prince of Persia,’ meaning the ruling demon potentate over that nation. We see this **as evidence** that Satan has assigned a powerful demon ruler over every nation of the world, and in turn, over every city and community [my emphasis].¹³

Here the mention of several specific princes with reference to Persia and Greece is stretched to full-blown speculation about spiritual territorial rulers everywhere. This is further expressed by Wagner using language which clearly indicates how speculative it all is:

There **seem to be** cosmic-level spirits that are in charge of organizations, institutions and activities... In the kingdom of God we know of angels that are assigned to children (Mt 18:10) and to churches (Rev 1-3). **Why not** also to Christian activities such as missionary and other para-church organizations? Institutions such as churches, seminaries, and Bible schools **probably** all have high-level angelic spirits assigned to them. So, **possibly**, do social

10 Tom White. “A Biblical Perspective.” In: **Behind Enemy Lines**, 160.

11 Dean Sherman. **Spiritual Warfare for Every Christian**. Seattle: YWAM Publishing, 1990, 95.

12 Kraft. “Spiritual Power: Principles and Observations.” In: **Behind Enemy Lines**, p. 60. Bowsher. **Demolishing Strongholds**, 16, suggests “there is evidence from ‘the field’ suggesting that the territorial/socio-political spirit is a reality and this lends credence to the approach.”

13 Frank and Ida Mae Hammond. **Pigs in the Parlor: A Practical Guide to Deliverance**. Kirkwood, MO: Impact Books, 1973, 17.

institutions such as marriages, governments, educational institutions, and the like (my emphasis on the speculative language).¹⁴

Bernal states “One of Satan’s best kept secrets is the importance of the ‘high places’ in the spirit world.”¹⁵ As a result, Christians are called to do spiritual battle against the spirits in “high places.” Tom White comments: “First and foremost in any spiritual warfare initiative should be God’s redemptive purposes for the city or other territory.”¹⁶ One publication promoting the concept of spiritual warfare argues: “It seems to be inherent in human nature to think of God as dwelling somewhere in the heights. From earliest times men have chosen high places for worship, both of the true God or false gods and idols invented by man. In Old Testament times these high places became the scenes of evil orgies and human sacrifice connected with the worship of false gods.”¹⁷

But is this a valid understanding of what the Bible says about the “high places”? I believe this cannot be sustained from the text and that the “high places” mentioned in the OT¹⁸ do not refer to hilltop locations but refer to human constructions for the purpose of worship, either of false gods or of Yahweh.¹⁹ If that is correct then the Scriptural basis for conducting spiritual warfare against evil powers on elevated locations falls away.

14 Kraft. “Spiritual Power: Principles and Observations” 61.

15 Dick Bernal. **Come Down Dark Prince!** Springdale, PA: Whitaker House, 1989, 5.

16 Wagner. “Twenty-one Questions.” In: **Behind Enemy Lines**, 141. However, Stevens suggests that “First, angelic princes mentioned in Daniel do *not* rule over *geographical* areas with ‘explicitly defined boundaries.’ The archangel Michael, for example, is described as ‘the great prince who protects *your people*’ (12:1, NIV, italics added). This emphasizes the protective role of Michael in relation to the *people* of God rather than with respect to a given *territory*. Michael remained the guardian angel of the people of God, whether Israel was in the Promised Land or was dispersed in exile among the nations. And in view of the parallel between Michael and the angelic princes of Persia and Greece, one can conclude that the same correspondence exists for the latter, that is, the ‘princes’ are over the *people* of Persia and Greece and their *sociopolitical structure* rather than their respective geographical boundaries.” David E. Stevens, “Daniel 10 and the Notion of Territorial Spirits,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (2000) 628: 427-428.

17 Harvestime International Institute. **Spiritual Strategies: A Manual For Spiritual Warfare.** [n.d.] <http://www.harvestime.org> 254.

18 I do not enter into the discussions concerning identification of archaeological remains as “bamoth” but limit the discussion to the indications given by the text. Vaughan comments that while Ezekiel and other prophets who spoke against the **bamoth** in Israel, he knew what he was referring to, while we did not know what one actually was until archaeologists claimed to have found remains of **bamoth**. Patrick H Vaughan. **The meaning of ‘bāmâh’ in the Old Testament. A Study of etymological, textual and archaeological evidence.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974, 1.

19 These “high places” could be constructed on an elevated location, but that is not necessarily the case, and we must not confuse the “construction” with the “location.” Vaughan points to the contrast between how the word **bamah** is used in Kings, Chronicles, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and other prophets, who condemned them, and its use in Samuel where it is used of legitimate worship of Yahweh. **The meaning of ‘bāmâh’ in the Old Testament**, 3.

Hebrew Terminology

The Hebrew terms which are generally translated as “high place” are **bāmāh** and its plural **bāmôt**.²⁰ The Septuagint transliterates the Hebrew as **bama**, and sometimes transliterates **bāmôt** or translates this as **to upselon** (a high place) or uses the Greek term **bōmos**, which means a raised platform or pedestal.²¹ It was used in Homer to refer to a raised place for a sacrifice, then subsequently for an altar. **Bōmos** is also used to translate the Hebrew **mizbeaḥ**, an altar. Some have viewed **bāmāh** as a natural high place or peak of a mountain or hill, while **mizbeaḥ** has been seen as a constructed platform or altar.²² There are also several references to “places,” **maqôm** where pagan worship was carried out, a generic word for “place” with no particular cultic significance. It could be translated as “location” [Deut 12:2]. Another term **shephi** is often translated as “high place” but it means only a barren elevated situation, with no apparent cultic significance. [Num 23:3, Isa 41:18, 49:9, Jer 3:2, 21, 4:11, 7:29, 12:12, 14:6].²³

Usage in the OT

I will not address the various places where “high places” are mentioned but no further details are given. Instead I will focus on those texts which give some indication of what sort of “place” constituted a “high place,” its location, its construction and its demolition or removal. The intention is to see whether we can learn more about the “high places” as a physical site. Thus metaphorical references to “high places” will not be discussed (e.g. Mic 1:3).

When the Israelites were preparing to enter into the land of Canaan, they were explicitly told to destroy the idols and the high places they would find there. High places [**bāmôt**] were locations where idolatrous worship was carried out by the pagan nations around [Isa 15:2]. They were told to “drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places [**bāmôt**, plural].” [Num 33:52]

20 The debates about the derivation of the term **bamah** do not affect the primary point I am making here, that “high places” are not natural heights but constructed facilities. I note the conclusion of Hardy and Thomas, whose analysis of the term concludes that it has a primary meaning of “country, hill, highland,” and a secondary meaning of “cultic sanctuary, shrine.” Humphrey H. Hardy II and Benjamin D. Thomas. Another Look at Biblical Hebrew **bāmō** ‘High Place’. *Vetus Testamentum* 62 (2012) 175-188. Vaughan comments: “The word is traditionally translated into English as ‘high place.’ But this translation is heavily dependent on the way in which the LXX understood **bāmā**. There is nothing in the word itself which gives any indication of its meaning, since no satisfactory derivation of the word can be found in Hebrew.” Vaughan. **The meaning of ‘bāmāh’ in the Old Testament**, 3.

21 The Greek term **bōmos** is generally accepted as being of non-Greek origin. It is possible therefore that the Greeks borrowed the word from the Phoenicians, and preserved the old form **bōmā**, current at the time the borrowing was made. Vaughan. **The meaning of ‘bāmāh’ in the Old Testament**, 22. Note also that while the terminology used in the OT does not change, the design and construction of the physical structures to which this term refers may have developed from simple stone platforms to sophisticated architecture.

22 Lisbeth S Fried. The High Places (Bāmôt) and the reforms of Josiah and Hezekiah: an archaeological investigation. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122 (2002) 3:438.

23 However, see J A Thompson. **The Book of Jeremiah**. NICOT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980, 187, n. 5, who suggests that these references are high points in the land where the cult of Baal was practiced. While that may be the case, the term itself refers only to high points, and the correlation with pagan worship needs to be made explicit in the text for this to be certain.

The pagans seemed to prefer hilltops for their worship, a practice which the Israelites saw and eventually imitated: “When I brought them into the land I had sworn to give them and they saw any high hill or any leafy tree, there they offered their sacrifices, made offerings that aroused my anger, presented their fragrant incense and poured out their drink offerings. Then I said to them, What is this high place [**bāmāh**] you go to?” [Ezek 20:28-29] However, these high places are of no use to anyone, pagan or Israelite: “When Moab appears at her high place [**bāmāh**], she only wears herself out; when she goes to her shrine to pray, it is to no avail.” [Isa 16:12] And again in Jer, the “high places [**bāmôt**]” are going to be given away to invaders because of the sin of the people [Jer 17:3].²⁴

In general, the “high places” have been thought to have been on the tops of hills.

Most usually bamoth were situated on high ground. Thus Samuel ‘goes up’ to, and ‘comes down from’ an unnamed bamah. Saul meets prophets ‘coming down from’ the bamah at Gibeath-elohim. Solomon builds pagan bamoth ‘on the mountain east of Jerusalem.’ The bamah at Bethel appears also to have been situated on a mountain. These four references are from widely differing periods, and all four bamoth were on high ground. They are not isolated cases, for the traditional Deuteronomic description is ‘on every high hill, and under every green tree,’ thus indicating that high ground was the most common location of bamoth.²⁵

However, there are many references to “high places” being built in the towns. “The Israelites secretly did things against the Lord their God that were not right. From watchtower to fortified city they built themselves high places [**bāmôt**] in all their towns.” [1 Kgs 17:32; 2 Kgs 17:9, 29; 2 Kgs 23:5, 8] It is said that King Asa “removed the high places [**bāmôt**] and incense altars in every town in Judah.” [2 Chr 14:5] Ahaz is said to have built high places [**bāmôt**] for sacrifice “in every town in Judah” [2 Chr 28:25].

Yet another possible reference to a high place in the towns, although it is unclear whether it refers to that, or to on the tops of hills, “Nevertheless, each national group made its own gods in the several towns where they settled, and set them up in the shrines the people of Samaria had made at the high places [**beth ha-bāmôt**].” [2 Kgs 17:29] This phrase and related ones (e.g. **bettêy ha-bāmôt**) seem to have the same meaning, and refer to a structure or structures (**beth, house or building**) on the high place, possibly a shrine building to protect the idol, or a place to store equipment for sacrificing, or inside which the sacrificial meal was eaten. In 2 Kgs 23:19 Josiah is said to have removed and defiled “all the shrines at the high places [**bethey ha-bāmôt**] that the kings of Israel had built in the towns of Samaria.” Lisbeth S Fried says

The Bible does refer to isolated open-air altars out in the countryside, but these are not called **bāmôt**. When the Biblical text speaks of either **bāmôt**, or **bettêy bāmôt**, it has cities in mind. The Biblical texts suggests, moreover, that **bāmôt** were located inside the city walls, not outside of them. Numerous verses describe the **bāmôt** as **ba’ir** [in the city]. The phrase **ba’ir** occurs 195 times in the Hebrew Bible, but only when it refers to **bāmāh** do

24 However, see Thompson. *The Book of Jeremiah*, 417, n. 7 who reads **bimhîr**, sin, rather than **bāmôteykā**, your high places, in the MT.

25 Vaughan. *The meaning of ‘bāmāh’ in the Old Testament*, 29.

translators render it as “at the city” rather than “in the city.” Yet, when the text wants to indicate a bamah at a city, but outside its walls, it has a way of doing so. 1 Kings 11:7 (2 Kings 23:13) states that Solomon built **bāmôt** ‘**al p^enêy y^erušalayîm**, “facing Jerusalem.”²⁶

Josiah removed the buildings on the high place [**bethey ha-bāmôt**] which had been built “in the towns of Samaria” by the previous kings. [2 Kgs 23:19]. Amos says that the high places [**bāmôt**] of Isaac will be destroyed [Amos 7:9]. Van Gelderen comments here that **bāmôt** is placed as a synonym in parallel with **mîqd^eshêy**, **sanctuary**,²⁷ and so they have a common meaning.

In 2 Chr 31:1, we read that “When all this had ended, the Israelites who were there went out to the towns of Judah, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. They destroyed the high places [**bāmôt**] and the altars throughout Judah and Benjamin and in Ephraim and Manasseh. After they had destroyed all of them, the Israelites returned to their own towns and to their own property.” Again the connection with towns is evident, although it may be hilltops adjacent to the towns and not a high place within the town which is referred to. In any case, we need to be cautious in assuming that a “high place” was an elevated spot outside the towns, as it may well have been some kind of built-up structure on top of which the worship was carried out, or at the most elevated spot inside the town.²⁸ In 2 Kgs 23:5 there is a reference to the “high places [**bāmôt**] of the towns of Judah and those around Jerusalem,” which again could be within the town walls or possibly outside but associated with a specific town, as with those “around Jerusalem.”

The word used for “high place” in Hebrew [**bāmāh**] could mean a cultic platform built of field stones and by extension an altar²⁹ or sanctuary which is used as a cultic place for sacrifices or other worship. This is seemingly what is referred to in Num 33:52 when the Israelites were told to “demolish all their high places [**bāmôt**].” In 1 Kings the people of Judah did evil in the eyes of the Lord, *setting up* high places [**bāmôt**, 1 Kgs 14:23]. Manasseh *rebuilt* the high places [**bāmôt**] his father Hezekiah had destroyed [2 Kgs 21:3]. Ezekiel refers to the people “*building* a mound [**rāmāh**]” and “*making* a lofty shrine [**rāmāh**] in every public square” and “at every street corner” [Ezek 16:23-25].

These then indicate that the “high place” was not merely a location on the top of a hill, but was, or included, some kind of structure which could be destroyed by demolition, in this case, structures within the towns, not on a hill outside the towns. In 2 Kgs 23:5 Josiah did away with the priests who burned incense on the “high places [**bāmôt**] of the towns of Judah and on those around Jerusalem.” Again, this does not specify where the high places were, but they are definitely associated with towns, and so may not have been on hills outside the towns. Some high places

26 Fried. *The High Places (Bāmôt) and the reforms of Josiah and Hezekiah*, 440.

27 C van Gelderen. **Het Boek Amos**. Commentaar op de Kleine Profeten. Kampen: J H Kok, 1933, 209.

28 Fried says that the “high place” in Dan is level with the rest of the city, but it is still natural to speak of “going up” to the high place and “coming down” from it. Fried. *The High Places (Bāmôt) and the reforms of Josiah and Hezekiah*, 443.

29 Menahem Haran suggests that the concept of a “**bāmāh**” includes an altar, or may be just an altar that in itself constituted a high place. “Temples and cultic open areas as reflected in the Bible.” In: **Temples and High Places in Biblical Times**. Edited by Avraham Biran. Jerusalem: Jewish Institute of Religion, 1981, 33. Haran adds that there are no temple structures associated with these altars. *Ibid.*, 34.

[**bāmôt**] were even located in valleys (Jer 7:31; 19:5-6; 32:35). Ezek 6:3 reports that God intended destruction of high places, altars, incense altars and idols on the mountains and the hills, in the ravines and valleys. While not explicit it opens the possibility of high places in ravines and valleys.

In Megiddo, located in the Carmel Ridge overlooking the Jezreel Valley from the west, a *bamah* was believed to have been found. The structure was a 24 x 30-foot oval platform, which stood six feet tall, was made of large stones and had stairs that lead to the top.³⁰

Another aspect to this is in 1 Kgs 14:23, which says that the people of Judah “set up for themselves high places [**bāmôt**], sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree.” Here there are three activities and two locations: setting up high places, setting up sacred stones, and setting up Asherah poles. This was done “on every high hill” and “under every spreading tree.” The “spreading tree” was a tree like an elm or oak with horizontal branches which spread out from the trunk to provide a sheltered space underneath. Pagan religious rituals associated with trees are condemned often in the OT. Here the “high place” was “set up” in the same way that sacred stones and Asherah poles were “set up.” The high place was then not simply a space on top of a hill, but a specific construction which was erected there. Keil and Delitzsch suggest that **bāmāh** “does not mean the height or hill generally, but throughout it signifies *the high place*, as a place for sacrifice or prayer.”³¹ 1 Kgs 14:23 could mean that a “high place” could be set up under a “spreading tree.” If the “high place” is simply a platform where pagan rituals were performed, this could indeed be built under a spreading tree. The Israelites were told not to create altars with dressed stones, but with rough stones which had not been shaped in any way.

They were also told not to build steps up to the altar [Exod 20:26].³² This could indicate something of the construction of a “high place” platform – it had steps going up to it so the priest could stand on or near the top to perform ceremonies. The “high places” then would not necessarily indicate a place on top of a hill.

However, the Israelites failed to remove all the idols and destroy the high places, and as a result these continued to be a snare for them for centuries. God had promised that if they engaged in idolatry, that they would be punished and their idols and high places destroyed. “I will destroy your high places [**bāmôt**], cut down your incense altars and pile your dead bodies on the lifeless forms of your idols, and I will abhor you.” [Lev 26:30]

30 De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, p. 284. Cited in <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-israel/high-places-altars-and-the-bamah/>

31 C F Keil and F Delitzsch. **The Books of Samuel**. Vol. 2. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1980, 91.

32 It is a puzzle as to why steps are forbidden. Exodus 20:26 says “do not go up to my altar on steps, lest your nakedness be exposed on it.” How could nakedness be exposed? The general assumption seems to be that by going up above the level of other people gathered at the **bāmāh** somehow these would catch a glimpse of the priest’s genitals [**ervah**]. But assuming the priest wore robes which came down to his feet, how could this occur? Also, the priests were to wear undergarments which covered the body from the waist to the thigh [Exod 28:42], thus precluding any sight of the priest’s genitals. The Soncino Chumash comments: “The altar was to be ascended by a ramp connecting it with the ground, so as to obviate the priest’s garments being disturbed and his limbs exposed while ascending by steps.” **Soncino Chumash: The Five Books of Moses with Haphtaroth**. Edited by A Cohen. London: Soncino Press, 1947, 464. This could perhaps be a prohibition of the re-use of Canaanite **bāmāh** platforms for the worship of the Lord, which had been used for pagan fertility cults.

Solomon is the first king of whom it is said that he practised idolatry on the high places. Perhaps this was a development from his practice of worshipping the Lord on the high places:

The people, however, were still sacrificing at the high places [**bāmôt**], because a temple had not yet been built for the Name of the Lord. Solomon showed his love for the Lord by walking according to the instructions given him by his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places [**bāmôt**]. The king went on to Gibeon to offer sacrifices, for that was the most important high place [**bāmāh ha-gedolah**], and Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. [1 Kgs 3:2-4]

However, his worship on high places is not itself a sin, since it was worship of the Lord, confirmed by the fact that on the evening of this sacrifice God appeared to Solomon in a dream and offered him anything that he wanted. This blessing is unlikely to have been offered if there were problems with Solomon offering sacrifices on the high place at Gibeon. This is the same high place where David had worshipped: “David left Zadok the priest and his fellow priests before the tabernacle of the Lord at the high place [**bāmāh**] in Gibeon to present burnt offerings to the Lord.” [1 Chr 16:39-40] Again, there is no negativity expressed about this “high place.” We read that “The tabernacle of the Lord, which Moses had made in the desert, and the altar of burnt offering were at that time on the high place [**bāmāh**] at Gibeon.” [1 Chr 21:29; cf. 2 Chr 1:3-5].

Subsequently, however, Solomon slipped into idolatry. “On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place [**bāmāh**] for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molek the detestable god of the Ammonites.” [1 Kgs 11:7] Both Chemosh and Molek were offered human sacrifices, as was Topheth, another vile idol. “They have built the high places [**bāmôt**] of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind.” [Jer 7:31, repeated in Jer 19:5 and 32:35]. These references are interesting, as it specifically states that Solomon built his “high place” on a hill, while Jeremiah says that the “high places” for Topheth are in a valley, hence would refer to platforms of some sort, but not necessarily on an elevated location. Also, these high places were “built” [**bānāh**], a term often used for the “high places,” thus indicating a human construction, not a hill, although it could be constructed **on** a hill.

Jeroboam, the first king of Israel after the division, was afraid that if the people continued to worship in Jerusalem, this would cause problems for him. So he instituted his own form of religion specifically for the people of the ten tribes of the northern kingdom. “Jeroboam built shrines on high places [**beth bāmôt**] and appointed priests from all sorts of people, even though they were not Levites. 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 [**beth ha-bāmôt**] he had made.” [1 Kgs 12:31-32, cf. 2 Chr 11:15] God sent a prophet to condemn him for this. “By the word of the Lord he cried out against the altar: “Altar, altar! This is what the Lord says: ‘A son named Josiah will be born to the house of David. On you he will sacrifice the priests of the high places [**bāmôt**] who make offerings here, and human bones will be burned on you.’” [1 Kgs 13:2] This message from God had no effect, however, since Jeroboam persisted in his sin: “Even after this, Jeroboam

did not change his evil ways, but once more appointed priests for the high places [*bāmôt*] from all sorts of people. Anyone who wanted to become a priest he consecrated for the high places [*bāmôt*]. This was the sin of the house of Jeroboam that led to its downfall and to its destruction from the face of the earth.” [1 Kgs 13:33-34]

Of the kings of Judah, a number of them followed the Lord, but did not remove the high places [*bāmôt*] and the people continued to worship there – these were Asa [1 Kgs 15:14, 2 Chr 14:3], Joash [2 Kgs 12:3], Amaziah [2 Kgs 14:4], Azariah [2 Kgs 15:4], and Jotham [2 Kgs 15:35]. There are conflicting reports about Jehoshaphat, of whom it is said that he did **not** remove the high places [1 Kgs 22:43], and that he **did** do so [2 Chr 17:6].

However, Josiah deliberately destroyed them: he did away with the priests appointed to burn incense on the high places [*bāmôt*, 2 Kgs 23:5] “The king also desecrated the high places [*bāmôt*] that were east of Jerusalem on the south of the Hill of Corruption—the ones Solomon king of Israel had built for Ashtoreth the vile goddess of the Sidonians, for Chemosh the vile god of Moab, and for Molek the detestable god of the people of Ammon.” [2 Kgs 23:13, cf. 23:8, 19 and 20, cf. 2 Chr 34:3]. Josiah “demolished” the altar and the high place [*bāmāh*] at Bethel – it says that he “burned the high place [*bāmāh*] and ground it to powder” – not something that could be done if the “high place” in this instance were the top of a hill, but could be done if it were some kind of structure or platform [2 Kgs 23:15].

Hezekiah removed these idolatrous places of worship, and even destroyed the bronze snake which Moses had had made in the desert as this was also being worshipped: “He removed the high places [*bāmôt*], smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.)” [2 Kgs 18:4]

Other kings deliberately set up high places [*bāmôt*] and other forms of idolatry and sacrificed there themselves [1 Kgs 14:23, 2 Kgs 16:4, 17:9, 2 Chr 21:11, 2 Chr 28:4], at times reversing the policies of their fathers, as is said of Manasseh: “He rebuilt the high places [*bāmôt*] his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he also erected altars to Baal and made an Asherah pole, as Ahab king of Israel had done. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshipped them.” [2 Kgs 21:3, 2 Chr 33:3] Ahaz sacrificed and burned incense on the high places [*bāmôt*, 2 Chr 28:4, 25], as well as sacrificing his sons by fire [2 Chr 28:3]. But here we read that Ahaz burned incense “at the high places [*bāmôt*], and on the hilltops [*gibe’oth*] and under every spreading tree [2 Kgs 16:4, 2 Chr 28:4]. The hilltops here are distinct from the high places, indicating that the high places were not necessarily on a hilltop. In this case, the high places could have been on lower locations or inside the city of Jerusalem. We can not translate the verse “at the high places on the hilltops” since the Hebrew does not allow this: it specifies the high places **and** the hilltops.

In the Psalms we read of the idolatry of Israel as rebellion against God, worshipping in the high places: “They angered him with their high places [*bāmôt*]; they aroused his jealousy with their idols.” [Ps 78:58]

The prophets spoke against the idolatry committed in the high places, often speaking of the lewd sexual practices which were undertaken there, or which were associated with idolatry as a metaphor for the people's unfaithfulness to God [Isa 57:7]. Jeremiah was explicit in his description of this: "Long ago you broke off your yoke and tore off your bonds; you said, 'I will not serve you!' Indeed, on every high hill [*gibe'ah*] and under every spreading tree you lay down as a prostitute." [Jer 2:20]. Again, he said: "During the reign of King Josiah, the Lord said to me, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill [*har gaboah*] and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there." [Jer 3:6] Again, Ezek speaks of the high places where they carried out prostitution (idolatry, faithlessness towards God) "You took some of your garments to make gaudy high places [*bāmôt*], where you carried on your prostitution. You went to him, and he possessed your beauty." [Ezek 16:16, cf. Also Ezek 43:7] Again, Ezekiel describes the idolatry of the Israelites in vulgar terms: "Woe! Woe to you, declares the Sovereign LORD. In addition to all your other wickedness, you built a mound [*gab*] for yourself and made a lofty shrine [*ramah*] in every public square. At every street corner you built your lofty shrines [*ramah*] and degraded your beauty, spreading your legs with increasing promiscuity to anyone who passed by." [Ezek 16:23-25] As punishment the Lord would slay the idolatrous Israelites and destroy all their high places [Ezek 6:3, 6, 13]. While these places of idolatry were on hills or elevated shrines, they were not described by Ezekiel as "high places" except in Ezek 16:16.

Amos [7:9] and Hosea [10:8] predicted that the high places [*bāmôt*] of Judah and Israel will be destroyed." Again, a structure can be destroyed but a hill-top location itself cannot.

However, high places were not in themselves evil. In 1 Sam 9:12-15 we read the narrative of how God chose Saul to be king over Israel. Saul was seeking for some lost donkeys, and went to ask Samuel the prophet where they would be found. God used this incident to bring Saul to Samuel as the man who had been chosen to be king. Samuel had just come to the town as there was to be a sacrifice at the high place, and when Saul entered the town he met Samuel "in the gateway" [1 Sam 9:18] on his way up to the high place. The sacrifice and meal then occurred, and afterwards Samuel and Saul came down from the high place to the town [1 Sam 9:25]. The high place there was obviously not a place of idolatrous worship, but a place where the people gathered for sacrifices to the Lord prior to the construction of the temple.

Vaughan suggests that 1 Sam 9:19 refers not just to the "platform" but the whole sanctuary area with its structures, since in 1 Sam 9:22 "we find Saul eating not on an open-air platform, but in a building."³³ We find a similar use in Amos 7:9, where *bāmâ* refers not just to one item at a sacred site, but the entire complex, with a meaning such as 'shrine/sanctuary.' This usage also appears in 1 Chr 16:39, 21;29, 2 Chr 1:3, 13 where it refers to the sanctuary at Gibeon.³⁴

After being anointed by Samuel, Saul was told to go to Gibeah where he would meet prophets coming down from the high place [*bāmāh*], and Saul himself would prophesy. After this happened, Saul himself went to the high place [1 Sam 10:5, 13]. Again, this high place was being used by the prophets of God, so it was also not a place of idolatrous worship.

33 Vaughan. *The meaning of 'bāmāh' in the Old Testament*, 13.

34 Vaughan. *The meaning of 'bāmāh' in the Old Testament*, 13, n. 38 (note on 61).

Similarly in the reign of Manasseh who initially committed idolatry, when he had repented after being imprisoned by the king of Assyria, and being restored to his kingdom, he cleared away the idols and altars, instructing the people to worship only the Lord. Their habits were perhaps too ingrained for them to return to worshipping and sacrificing only in the temple, since “The people, however, continued to sacrifice at the high places [**bāmôt**], but only to the Lord their God.” [2 Chr 33:17]

The judgement of the Lord will come about at the end of the age, and in OT imagery, all “high places” will be trampled down: the Lord “treads the high places [**bāmôt**] of the earth.” [Amos 4:13] The Lord will destroy them for good. Even those “high places” used by Israel will be destroyed: “The high places [**bāmôt**] of Isaac will be destroyed and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined” because of the idolatry of its people and its kings [Amos 7:9].

In Mic 1:5 we are told that Jerusalem is Israel’s “high place [**bāmôt**],” the sign of Israel’s sins and transgressions, so Jerusalem was then not the “city of the Lord” but a place of idolatry and apostasy.

It may be possible that in Isa 53:9 and Lev 17:7, what is referred to is a mound,³⁵ or a cairn of stones, built over the grave, and thus similar in construction to a **bāmôt**. Vaughan suggests that the connection is to be seen in their shape, with the meaning of “hillside” “as a very suitable word to describe a large stone cairn – a man-made hill – which commonly was heaped over a dug-grave.” Vaughan cites the instance of Absalom being buried in a pit with a heap of stones piled over it [2 Sam 18:17], Achan [Josh 7:26] and the king of Ai [Josh 8:29]³⁶ Vaughan suggests that the text of Isa 53:9 should be read in a similar way, “They made his grave with the wicked, and his burial-mound with the rabble.”³⁷ This makes better sense of the parallelism. Again, Job 27:15 should be read to refer to common graves, surmounted by a mound, usually reserved for paupers and criminals, rather than burial with their ancestors (“sleep with their fathers”). The text would then read: “His survivors shall be buried in paupers’ graves, and their widows shall not bewail them.”³⁸ Vaughan suggests that in Ezek 43:7 that **bāmôtām** should be omitted from the text, but it seems quite feasible to interpret as references to the burial of kings in their **bāmôt**, that is, in graves surmounted by a pile of rocks, with their proximity to the temple producing defilement.³⁹ The NIV translates this verse “The house of Israel will never again defile my holy name... by their... lifeless idols of their kings at their high places.” The note gives “corpses” as an alternative to “lifeless idols,” and this seems to make at least equal sense. In either case, **bāmôt** refers to either a mound of rocks (a cairn) covering a grave or a rock platform structure where idols were worshipped. Jer 26:18 (also Mic 3:12) has caused

35 Vaughan. *The meaning of ‘bāmâh’ in the Old Testament*, 12.

36 Vaughan. *The meaning of ‘bāmâh’ in the Old Testament*, 17-18.

37 Vaughan. *The meaning of ‘bāmâh’ in the Old Testament*, 18.

38 Vaughan. *The meaning of ‘bāmâh’ in the Old Testament*, 18-19.

39 Vaughan. *The meaning of ‘bāmâh’ in the Old Testament*, 19.

problems⁴⁰ but in this case the NIV seems correct: “the temple hill [will become] a mound overgrown with thickets,” or more simply, a “wooded mound.”

It seems then that **bāmāh**, **bāmôt** and related terms refer to high places in the sense of their significance or sacredness, and not necessarily to their elevated position. Gispen cites Vincent to the effect that **bāmāh** does not have the intrinsic philological meaning of “height” but refers solely to a cultic location.⁴¹ We should perhaps translate it then as “sacred” or “cultic place” rather than “high place” to distinguish it from implications of physical elevation. Such “sacred places” could be constructed on a hilltop, but it seems that when this is relevant, the text will specifically indicate that this is the case. Otherwise a location within or adjacent to a town is perhaps more likely. A “sacred place” also has some kind of construction such as a platform or terrace, with perhaps an altar on it for sacrifices.

The New Testament

The NT speaks in Eph 6:12 about “spiritual forces of evil in heavenly realms [**epouraniois**].” This has been interpreted as a reference to “high places” as we find in the OT. However, this term is also used to refer to God’s heavenly things, and so this word in itself could not refer to an equivalent of the “high places” in the OT.

In 1 Cor 15:40 it describes the “heavenly” nature of the resurrection body, while in 1 Cor 15:47-49 it refers to the nature of the heavenly man, the second Adam, who came to redeem us. In Matt 18:35 it is used to describe our “heavenly Father.” John 3:12 speaks of the “heavenly things” taught by Jesus. Phil 2:10 speaks of everyone “in heaven and on earth and under the earth” who will confess that Jesus is Lord. Paul looks forward to being brought safely to God’s “heavenly kingdom” [2 Tim 4:18]. Hebrews speaks of our “heavenly calling” [Heb 3:1], the “heavenly gift” [Heb 6:4], the tabernacle “in heaven” [Heb 8:5], the “heavenly things” which needed to be purified with sacrifices [Heb 9:23], the “heavenly country” for which all the saints long [Heb 11:16], and Mount Zion, the “heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God” [Heb 12:22].

What about the references in Ephesians, then? We have first of all the blessing in the heavenly realms which is ours through Christ [Eph 1:3], Christ has been seated in the heavenly realms at the right hand of God [Eph 1:20], and we have been seated in Christ in the heavenly realms with him [Eph 2:6]. None of these uses of **epouranios** apply to the demonic, in fact quite the opposite.

There is one reference in Ephesians which looks as if it could refer to demonic forces in high places, namely where Paul said: “His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord” [Eph 3:10-11].

40 Vaughan. **The meaning of ‘bāmāh’ in the Old Testament**, 20. See other English translations: KJ21, ASV, NASB, and others: “the high places of a forest,” RSV “a wooded height,” CEB: “an overgrown mound.” There are other variations on these translations, but the CEB seems to be the plainest and closest to what we have found of the use of the term elsewhere, implying a mound of rubble covered with weeds.

41 W H Gispen. **Het Boek Leviticus**. Commentaar op het Oude Testament. Kampen: J H Kok, 1950, 383.

But again, this reference to rulers and authorities (assumed it seems to be wicked powers, but this need not be the case – they could be servants of God) does not refer to spiritual powers based on or resident in physical locations on the earth, either high places (tops of hills) or elsewhere. They are in heaven.

Other passages in the NT referring to “spiritual powers” with which we could be at war include Rom 8:38-39, 1 Cor 2:8, 15:24-26, Eph 1:19-21, 2:1-2, Col 1:16, 2:15.

Conclusion

As we have seen from the way the “high places” are discussed in the OT, these may or may not be located on hills. They appear to be man-made structures, in or near towns, and prior to the construction of the temple were used legitimately for the worship of God, although there were also pagan high places for worship of idols in the lands round about. This pagan worship was introduced into Israel by kings in apostasy against God (beginning with Solomon) and continued off and on through the whole period of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The term “high place” could refer to a location which was esteemed or honoured, thus had special cultic significance, rather than referring to a physically elevated location.

So then, we do not find anywhere in the OT or in the NT that there are “high places” which are inhabited by demonic powers, even if idolatrous worship was carried out there. Nor do we find the suggestion that demonic powers are resident in “high places” understood generically, that is, any hill or mountain anywhere in the world. The reference to “high places” in the OT is to specific sites for worship in Israel and surrounding countries, which were part of the religious culture of the day.⁴² There are, therefore, no demonic powers resident on hills or mountains anywhere else which exercise influence and control on human beings. There is as a consequence no need to pray against demonic powers on hills and mountains.

That is not to say that there are no demonic powers, or that these do not exercise influence and control on human beings. How these function and how we are to battle against them is another story. But in studying what the Bible says about these demonic powers, we must avoid the fevered speculation and flights of imagination which invents ranks, names, distribution of responsibilities, habits, activities, and the territorial control, etc., of these demons. Only that which is explicitly taught in Scripture should direct our spiritual warfare.

42 Vaughan comments: “But as to what extent other nations used bamoth we must remain agnostic. Certainly outside the canaanite (Hebrew-)Ammonite-Moabite region there is neither literary nor archaeological evidence of their existence.” Vaughan. **The meaning of ‘bāmâh’ in the Old Testament**, 37.