The noun נַחַל (plural: נְחָלֶים) occurs 100 times 1) in the Hebrew Bible (MT). The basic idea which it signifies is held to be, in De Vaux's words, "something which stands out in relief from its background". 2) This idea can be expressed both geographically ("elevated ground, hill") and anatomically ("back, torso"), 3) a range also manifested by the word's supposed Semitic cognates. 4) Functionally, however, the primary meaning of נַחַל found in the Old Testament is "cultic installation, sanctuary" (cf. Amos vii 9) for which there is no cognate support. 5) To reconcile these two not entirely compatible ideas scholars have opted instinctively for the quite logical—but unverified—assumption that sanctuaries so designated must either be located upon geographically high places or evince some sort of physical elevation in their construction or composition. De Vaux's estimation may be considered representative of the current consensus: "The one and only meaning which suits all the references is 'a mound or knoll' for purposes of cultic worship". 6)

1) Omitting those few passages wherein the word forms part or all of what appear to be proper names.


3) Deut. xxxii 13; xxxiii 29; 2 Sam. i 19, 25; xxii 34 (= Psm. xviii 34); Job ix 8; Isa. xiv 14; lviii 14; Ezek. xxxvi 2; Amos iv 13; Micah i 3; iii 12 (= Jer. xxvi 18); Hab. iii 19. Cf. Num. xxi 28. For a recent discussion see J. L. Crenshaw, "'וֹדְרֵךְ 'אֲל-בָּאֶמְתּ 'זֵרֶשְׁ,'" CBQ, XXXIV (1972) 39 ff.


5) Consequently, many scholars have sought the origin of נַחַל in the Greek βυθός: Cf. J. D. Michaelis, Supplementa ad Lexica Hebraica, VI (Göttingen, 1792) 190, and more recently R. De Vaux, Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice (Cardiff, 1964) 49.

6) De Vaux, Ancient Israel, 284.
A picture of these bāmāh-sanctuaries 7) has been developed around this assumption from bits and pieces of information found scattered throughout the Old Testament, information routinely supplemented by archaeological discoveries and cross-cultural parallels. The well-known result needs only to be briefly outlined: A bāmāh-sanctuary is fundamentally an open-air sacred precinct situated atop a natural elevation or associated with a man-made elevation, whence its name. Roofed cult buildings may be present on occasion, but they are auxiliary and typologically secondary features. Its basic accoutrements are altars, massēbōṯ, and sacred trees or the surrogate ashērîm. A bāmāh-sanctuary thus is a typically Canaanitish cult place of local importance and ubiquitous provenance expressive of a markedly fertility-oriented religiosity. This Canaanite heritage and concomitant orgiastic character necessitated their prohibition and ultimate eradication by the official religion of Israel.

It is a curiosity of the discipline that this theoretical reconstruction has never been subjected to a probing critical analysis. Scholarly unanimity on this question is virtually without equal. 8) An important exception is the thesis revived by ALBRIGHT in 1957 9) according to which bāmāh-sanctuaries were installations of a pronounced funerary character which functioned within an ancient Palestinian (i.e., Canaanite-Israelite) cult of the dead. Although it deviates considerably from the traditional view, ALBRIGHT’s proposal has attracted a substantial following over the years; no critical analysis has been forthcoming. The evidence is far from conclusive and ALBRIGHT’s argument, upon closer inspection, leaves much to be desired. 10)

7) This translation is preferable to the conventional “high-place” which adds a somewhat misleading and prejudicial geographic nuance to cult places so designated.

8) This can be easily demonstrated by comparing the relevant articles in the standard encyclopedic reference works published over the years; cf. most recently K.-D. SCHENCK in TW AT, I : 6-7 (Stuttgart, 1972) 662 ff.


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