SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE “HIGH-PLACE” IN THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL

I have read with satisfaction the excellent paper of Dr. W. Boyd Barrick, “The Funerary Character of ‘High-Places’ in Ancient

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Palestine: A Reassessment”, VT 25 (1975), pp. 565-95. Dr. Barrick has successfully refuted the theory of Albright that the “high-place” had a funerary character. As shown by Dr. Barrick, neither Scripture nor any outside testimony supports such a conjecture.

Now I should like to stress another point, which, to my knowledge, has never been given the full attention it deserves. The word bāmāh possesses two different meanings, which seem semantically to be interconnected. However, at least in the Biblical text, they appear in entirely different sections. The one in the sense of BACK is found almost constantly in poetical sections: Deut. xxxii 13, xxxiii 29; 2 Sam. i 19, xxxii 34; Isa. xiv 14, lviii 14; Jer. xxvi 18; Ezek. xxxvi 2; Am. iv 13; Micah i 3, iii 12; Hab. iii 19; Ps. xviii 34; Job ix 8. The same meaning is likewise known from Babylonian and Ugaritic texts. The other, of a cultic connotation, is frequently mentioned in the prose parts of Scripture. However—and this is the point I wanted to stress—setting apart all the bāmōth in Israel or in Judah that served cult objects, we shall see that all the others are associated only with Moab, and with no other people or country. So 1 Kings xi 7; Isa. xv 2, xvi 12; Jer. xlviii 35; and so in the Mesha Stone 11.11, 13. Similarly, it is only in Moab that the term bāmot (bmt) is common as a topographical noun. So in Num. xxi 19-20 (“... from Nahliel to Bamoth and from Bamoth to the Valley that is in the country of Moab”), and again in verse 26 (“for fire went out from Heshbon ... it devoured Ar of Moab; the lords of the Bamoth Arnon”); and similarly in xxii 41 (“In the morning Balak took Balaam up to Bamoth-baal”). The same holds good for the Mesha Stone, where we have in line 27 again Bmt Bʾl. Against that, there is not a single bmt of cultic connotation, either in Ugaritic or in Phoenician, and there is likewise no single topographical noun associated with the term bmt. The Canaanite word for altar was simply mēḇēh. That is true for the Phoenician (or Punic) inscriptions (cf. the Theasaurus of Phoenician Inscriptions, by Prof. N. Slouschz, 1942), and alike for the terms used in Scripture (cf. Exod. xiv 13; and Deut. xii 3). Bamoth as a place of Canaanite worship is mentioned in the Bible only once: Num. xxxiii 52: wʾt kl bmwtn tšmydw (“and all their high-places you shall destroy”). But, as can be shown from the context, the word is embedded in a text referring explicitly to the age when the people still encamped “in the plains of Moab” (ib. xxxiii 50). Clearly, the term used in that region affected the expression even when applied to the Canaanites, though semantically “wrong” in this connection. The