"THE HIGH PLACES OF THE GATES"
IN 2 KINGS XXIII 8

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The second half of 2 Kings xxiii 8 is translated as follows in the Revised Standard Version:

... and he [Josiah] broke down the high places of the gates that were at the entrance of the gate of Joshua the governor of the city, which were on one’s left at the gate of the city.

Commentators have found the phrase "the high places of the gates (et-bamōt haššē‘ārim)" difficult. The plural "high places" is strange where the reference seems to be to one place, and it is not clear what is meant by "the gates"—also in the plural—in this context, which also speaks of the "gate" in the singular. The purpose of the present article is to look again at this problem, though it will also be necessary to consider some other questions concerning this part of the verse.

I

The first problem to be considered is the plural noun bamōt, conventionally rendered "high places"—and it is convenient to continue to use the familiar English rendering, whether or not it represents the true meaning. Much work has been done on the subject, but the precise meaning remains obscure. It was evidently some kind of shrine of which the Deuteronomists disapproved; sacrifices could be offered at it (e.g. 1 Kings iii 2), and so it could have an altar (e.g. 1 Kings iii 4). It is also said to have been built (e.g. 2 Kings xvii 9), and could be broken down (as in the verse

1 A list of works cited will be found at the end of the article. I am indebted to Dr G.I. Davies for reading a draft of this article and for making a number of helpful suggestions.

2 E.g. the works of Vaughan, Barrick and Whitney.
under discussion) or even burned (2 Kings xxiii 15). It could have a staff of priests (e.g. 2 Kings xxiii 8a, 9), and in 1 Sam. ix 22 it is said to have been close to a hall (lishkā)—though it is not certain that the hall was part of the bāmā or that a bāmā always had a līškā.

Many scholars would probably accept Albright’s opinion that it was an “elevated platform on which cultic objects were placed” (1953, p. 105), but that understanding of it has not been proved. Barrick’s articles point out the weaknesses in method of those who offer interpretations of bāmōt on the basis of either a theory about the etymology of the word or an attempt to identify them with particular discoveries by archaeologists, even though none of the objects discovered is actually labelled bāmā. It may be doubted whether it is justifiable, on the basis of the evidence at present available, to go beyond what was said in the previous paragraph.

As was noted above, it seems strange that the MT of 2 Kings xxiii 8 speaks of a plurality of bāmōt in one place. The MT is supported in its plural reading by the Vulgate’s aras, “altars”, and by Quinta (here, however, the Syro-Hexaplar’s lrm[t] is shown to be plural only by seyame, not by the consonantal text). The Targum’s consonants bmt can be vocalized as either plural or singular; the Peshitta has the unambiguously singular ʾlt, “altar”. The LXX too has a singular noun, but it is “the house” (τὸν ὀἶκον), which perhaps implies bōt instead of bμωτ, whereas it has “high places” (τὰ ὑψηλὰ) in verse 8a, and also in verses 5, 9, 15. The LXX also has “the house” in verse 13, where the MT has hbmwt. Here, however, the reference is to what Solomon has built for Ashtoreth, Milcom and Chemosh near a mountain to the east of Jerusalem (presumably, the Mount of Olives), and 1 Kings xi 5-8 shows that “high places”—probably in the plural—are meant. The MT’s bāmā in 1 Kings xi 5 is here rendered “high place” (ὕψηλον) by the LXX in contrast to its rendering in 2 Kings xxiii 8b. The only support for reading the singular bāmat in 2 Kings xxiii 8b is thus the Peshitta. Nevertheless, the needs of the context strongly suggest that the singular should be read here, and the change of vocalization should probably be accepted. The MT’s plural reading may have arisen by assimilation to bμωτ in verses 5, 8a and 9.

II

Some have attempted to solve the problem of haššeʾārim by abandoning the pointing found in the MT. The least plausible sugges-