



"The heir to the kingdom is taught that he may become a king in reality by first governing his own appetites."
—Plato

16-Jul-10

The High Places (Part One)

In the record of the kings of Israel and Judah, [God](#) typically inspired the writer to summarize in a sentence or two what He thought of the particular leader, such as "He walked in all the sins of his father," or "He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, as did his father David." Overall, God was not pleased with the rulers of His people, though there were some notable exceptions such as David, Asa, Hezekiah, and [Josiah](#). From God's testimony, most of the kings of Israel and Judah were mediocre at best, and many were absolutely abhorrent.

God's assessments of the kings and their reigns center around whether they remained true to Him throughout their lives or allowed—or even encouraged—His people to follow in the idolatrous practices of the surrounding nations. In particular, God often refers to the "high places" in His appraisals of the kings as a metric of whether the king pleased Him or not.

The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* observes in its article, "High Place": "The primal [sin](#) of Northern Israel was the establishment of high places ([I Kings 12:31-33](#); [I Kings 13:2](#), [I Kings 13:33](#)), and their continuance

was a chief cause of the evils that came to pass ([II Kings 17:10 f](#)). . . ." Some kings—Jeroboam, Jehoram, Ahaz, and Manasseh—cast off all restraint and built idolatrous places that became stumbling blocks to Israel and Judah. Other kings, such as Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah, were loyal to God and ordered that the high places be destroyed (though some were more thorough than others in this task).

Curiously, God specifically points out four successive kings of Judah who did *not* remove the high places. This is of note because many kings neither built high places, nor destroyed them, yet God decided to highlight this negligence only in the reigns of Joash, Amaziah, Uzziah, and Jotham. These four are fascinating studies into carnality, the nature of sin and temptation, and the proclivities of leaders not wholly dedicated to God.

Before delving into the lives of these four kings, though, it is helpful to understand the issues surrounding the high places. The Hebrew words translated as "high place" and "lofty place" (*bamah* and *ramah*, respectively) simply mean "elevation." In common usage, though, a high place is an elevation of land, natural or artificial, where worship by sacrifice or offerings was made, either to the true God or to a false one.

The first altar after the Flood was built on a mountain—a high place—as was the altar Abraham constructed for the sacrifice of [Isaac](#) ([Genesis 8:20](#); [12:7-8](#)). Laban and Jacob offered sacrifices on a mountain in Gilead ([Genesis 31:54](#)). God met with [Moses](#) on Mount Sinai—another "elevation"—rather than on the surrounding plain. God was lawfully worshipped on high places by Samuel and others ([I Samuel 9:12](#); [I Kings 3:2](#), 4; [II Chronicles 33:17](#)), and ultimately even God's physical Temple was placed on a hilltop—a "high place" in the technical sense. Interestingly, [Jesus Christ](#) was likely crucified on the Mount of Olives—another elevated setting.

The pagan peoples also typically chose elevated locations to make sacrifices to their gods, and so the high places began to take on a negative connotation. Shortly after Israel's exodus from Egypt, God instructed them to destroy any instruments of pagan worship, including the high places. Notice, for example, [Deuteronomy 12:2-4](#):

You shall utterly destroy *all the places* where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on *the high mountains* and *on the hills* and under every green tree. And you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place. You shall not worship the LORD your God with such things (emphasis ours throughout).

He also warned Israel in the "blessings and cursings" chapter that if they turned away from Him and began incorporating the gods of the nations into their own worship, He would likewise turn against them and their false worship: "I will destroy *your* high places, cut down your incense altars, and cast your carcasses on the lifeless forms of your idols; and My soul shall abhor you" ([Leviticus 26:30](#)).

A point often overlooked is that, even though the common people of Israel were frequently involved in idolatry (because they ignored God's words about being separate), the high places and associated pagan rites did not have *official* acceptance until the later years of Solomon—a king whose reign began so well:

For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not fully follow the Lord, as did his father David. Then *Solomon built a high place for Chemosh* the abomination of Moab, on the hill that is east of Jerusalem, *and for Molech* the abomination of the people of Ammon. And *he did likewise for all his foreign wives*, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods. ([1 Kings 11:4-8](#))

Solomon set an example that many later kings followed, and the high places remained a facet of the societies of both Israel and Judah—a thorn in their spiritual sides—until their violent subjugations by Assyria and Babylon. This

was no small matter. Because Solomon turned away from God and embraced the high-place paganism of the heathens, the [northern ten tribes of Israel](#) were torn from the line of David in Judah, and the two kingdoms have yet to be re-united ([1 Kings 11:9-13](#); see [Ezekiel 37:15-26](#)).

For us today, burning incense to a pagan god on top of a hill is probably not a temptation. However, the lessons and warnings still apply because, symbolically, a high place can represent anything that leads one away from the true God—anything that leads to spiritual weakness or distracts us from our high calling. It need not be anything as blatantly pagan as [Christmas](#), [Easter](#), or [the occult](#). Just as the natural elevations of the Promised Land were not of themselves evil, so also many of the things we encounter in life and participate in may not be morally objectionable. But the way they are used becomes the critical issue: If they lead us to embrace [the world](#) and its ways, our rightfully jealous God begins to be squeezed out of our minds. Left unchecked, the end will be just as disastrous as that of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Next week, we will take a look at Jehoshaphat (also called Joash), a promising young king who nonetheless failed to rid God's land of the high places.

- David C. Grabbe

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

Malachi Martin's book, *The Final Conclave*, claims that, not only are 60% of the College of Cardinals not firm believers, but that 27% are functional but prudent agnostics, hedging their bets. Some of us, facing the stress and uncertainties of the time, may also be going through the motions but losing every vestige of faith. The Day of the Lord, like a claw hammer, has both a business end (return of Christ) and a wrecking end (destruction, mayhem,

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by Mike Ford

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