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978-0-521-10410-4 - The Meaning of 'Bama' in the Old Testament: A Study of Etymological, Textual and Archaeological Evidence

Patrick H. Vaughan

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

In his prophecy against apostate Israelites, Ezekiel (xx 29) sarcastically puns on the meaning of the word *bāmā*. 'What is the bamah', he asks, 'to which you come (*'attem habbā'im*)?', suggesting that a bamah was a place or thing to which people 'come' – and what a worthless place to come to! The etymology is no doubt fanciful. It could hardly have been otherwise, since neither he nor his hearers were in a position to suggest any better etymology from their own language. But they did at least understand what he was referring to, since with their own eyes they had seen many a bamah. Even we moderns were in no position to improve on Ezekiel, having never seen a bamah (and so not knowing what it actually was), until recently when archaeologists claimed to have found remains of bamoth.

Naturally therefore some attempts were made to correlate these finds with the Biblical records and with the enigmatic word *bāmā*. However, no very full treatment of the subject was given until that presented by W. F. Albright in his article 'The High Place in Ancient Palestine' (*Vetus Testamentum*, Supplement IV (1957)).<sup>1</sup> This article has subsequently come to be regarded by many as the *fons luminis* on the subject, and many of his conclusions have now found their way into the article on *bāmā* in the third edition of Koehler/Baumgartner's *Lexicon* (1967).

It is unfortunate that Albright's presentation is vitiated by his theories of cults of the dead or hero-veneration in ancient Israel. Much of the evidence he gives for this is disputable, and one central point is no longer tenable. In addition, the progress of time has made further archaeological evidence available, which needs to be brought into discussion of the subject. The present monograph is an

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attempt to reconsider the whole question of the meanings of the word *bāmā* as it is used in the Hebrew texts, and in particular to attempt a description of what a cultic bamah actually was.

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## CHAPTER I

## THE DERIVATION OF THE WORD

## 'BĀMĀ'

There are many perplexities about the meaning and derivation of the word *bāmā*. Of the 101 occurrences of the word in the Old Testament,<sup>2</sup> in over 80 cases it is a technical cultic term. It is a common word in the Deuteronomic editorial passages in Kings decrying the Baal cult, and carries a similar pejorative sense in Chronicles, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and other prophets. By contrast, the occurrences of the word in Samuel stand out, because *bāmā* is there used in reference to the legitimate Yahweh cult.

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*.<sup>3</sup> 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.

In the absence of any real evidence, it has been widely assumed until recently that *bāmā* is derived from the supposed verbal root *bām*,<sup>4</sup> on the same basis that the noun *qāmā* is derived from the verbal root *qūm*. But such a verb is unknown, not only in Hebrew, but also in every other Semitic language.<sup>5</sup> It has therefore recently come to be realised that it is probably more satisfactory to regard *bāmā* as being derived not from a verb at all, but from a (? pre-Semitic) noun,<sup>6</sup> since cognate nouns exist in Ugaritic, Akkadian, Moabite and possibly also Greek. However, with the lone exception of the word *bmt* in the Mesha Inscription, there is no extra-biblical occurrence of the word in a cultic sense. How the Hebrew word came to have this cultic sense has therefore long been an enigma.

Before discussing the Hebrew word *bāmā*, it will be helpful

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to look at the cognate Ugaritic and Akkadian words, which throw light on the various derived meanings of the Hebrew word. We shall examine each in turn.

## UGARITIC 'BMT'

The word *bmt* occurs seven times in Ugaritic literature to date. Till recently, it has been generally assumed that it means 'back'.<sup>7</sup> But M. Held<sup>8</sup> has argued that 'the meaning "back" hardly fits any of these passages'. After an examination of the contexts in which *bmt* occurs, Held proposes that the word most naturally means 'the middle of the body as a whole'. While it cannot be claimed that each individual passage irrefutably points to this meaning, the fact that two passages cannot bear the sense 'back' indicates that *bmt* must have a wider meaning than was previously supposed.

The clearest evidence that *bmt* cannot mean 'back' occurs in the description of El's mourning ritual on learning of Baal's death. Gashing his chin and cheek with a stone,

he plows his chest like a garden  
harrows his *bmt* like a plain<sup>9</sup>  
(*yḥrt* / *kgn.*'*ap lb.*  
*k'mq.ylṯ* / *bmt*).<sup>10</sup>

The physical action involved makes it plain that *bmt* cannot here mean 'back', while the synonymous parallel with 'chest' suggests a synonym such as 'ribs/sides'.

Anath's mourning for Baal is described in virtually identical wording,<sup>11</sup> and *bmt* must have the same meaning here also.<sup>12</sup>

Less clear is the description of Anath's single-handed fight against her enemies,

she binds the heads to her *bmt*  
fastens the hands to her girdle  
(*'tkt* / *r'išt.lbmth.*  
*šnst* / *kpt.bḥbšh*).<sup>13</sup>

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Precisely what manoeuvre is envisaged here is not quite clear, but the parallelism of *bmt* with *ḥbš* 'girdle' suggests that *bmt* may here mean 'waist' or 'side', rather than 'back'.

The above three occurrences of *bmt* refer to parts of the human anatomy; but from a further three passages, it is clear that *bmt* could be used of animals also. Thus as Ashera prepares for a journey, there is a detailed description of how Qadesh wa-Amrur secures the complicated saddle and harnessing apparatus, and then

places Ashera on the donkey's *bmt*  
on the beautiful *bmt* of the jackass  
(*yštn. 'atrt. lbmt. 'r*  
*lysmsmt. bmt. pḥl*).<sup>14</sup>

In an identical formula, Paghat assists Daniel before a journey.<sup>15</sup> Although *bmt* is usually translated 'back' in both these cases, it could just as well refer to the whole trunk of the donkey's body (including its flanks) around which the elaborate trappings are fitted.

This possibility is strengthened by another occurrence of *bmt* (not mentioned by Held) in a tablet<sup>16</sup> which appears to be a delivery chit, listing, among other things, items for food including fat geese and oxen. Various cuts of beef are mentioned, including

ten *bmt* of fat oxen  
(*'sr. bmt. 'alp. mr'e*).

*bmt* will here refer to part of an ox's anatomy, possibly a whole carcass (i.e. the 'rib-cage'). It can hardly refer to the (exterior) 'back'.<sup>17</sup>

The seventh occurrence of *bmt* is usually taken to have an entirely different meaning. It occurs in the passage about the construction of the window for Baal's house. Baal then 'gives forth his holy voice . . . *bmt 'a* . . . ] *tḥn*,<sup>18</sup> Baal's enemies take to the woods'. The lacuna is commonly filled in to read *bmt 'ars*,<sup>19</sup> and translated 'the high places of the earth

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reel'. Thus Held confidently states, '*bmt* [arš] certainly denotes "the high places of the earth" and is to be equated with Akkadian *bāmāt šadi* on the one hand, and with Hebrew בַּמְתֵי אֶרֶץ on the other'. However, a good deal of caution needs to be exercised here, for such scanty evidence as there is in this damaged text does not rule out the possibility of *bmt* retaining its usual Ugaritic meaning here.<sup>20</sup> Our phrase may well be referring not to the effect of Baal's voice on the earth's surface, but to the bodily reactions of some of Baal's enemies, who are specifically mentioned in the next line.

Apart from one doubtful case, therefore, the seven Ugaritic occurrences of *bmt* suggest a meaning much wider than 'back';<sup>21</sup> something akin to the English word 'flank' would seem to cover all the human and animal contexts. As we shall see this is extraordinarily close to the meaning of Akkadian *bamtu*.

## AKKADIAN 'BAMTU'

The word *bamtu* occurs frequently in Akkadian in anatomical contexts, and according to *CAD*<sup>22</sup> means 'chest, front of the chest'. It can be used either of human beings or animals. For instance in a medical text

You put a bandage on the nape of his neck and on his chest [*pa-an-di-šu*];

or in an omen text

If he cries 'Woe' during his sickness, lies on his chest (stomach) [*ban-ti-šu*], and does not turn over;

or in an El Amarna letter from Akko

I prostrate myself seven times each, on the front [*pa-an-te-e*] and on the back.<sup>23</sup>

Examples of its use in relation to animals are

If the malformed animal's ears are on the left side of its chest [*ba-an-ti*];

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or from an extispicy text

If its thorax [*ba-am-tum*] is affected on the right side.

As will be seen from these examples, it is difficult to ascertain from the texts what precise part of the body is signified by *bamtu*. Help in this direction is, however, provided by the Sumerian vocabulary lists, with their Akkadian equivalents. In one of these, the Sumerian word UZU.TI.TI is explained by *bamtu*, but also by a second word *šēlu*, which means 'rib, side (part of the human and animal body)'.<sup>24</sup>

It seems therefore that *bamtu* is a rather general word, which we should avoid making too specific (as *CAD* does in its opening definition of 'chest, front of the chest'). The final discussion in the *CAD* article is clearer: 'The Sum. correspondences . . . as well as the Akk. refs. show that the word denotes the rib cage, the chest (as front of the human body), the thorax of an animal.' *bamtu* is thus very close in meaning to Ugaritic *bmt*. Much of what it signifies may be conveyed by the English word 'flank'.

## AKKADIAN 'BAMĀTU'

The word *bamātu* is classified by *CAD* (in contrast to von Soden)<sup>25</sup> as a homonym of *bamtu*, but one which occurs only in the plural. It is treated as a *plurale tantum* meaning 'open country, plain'. It only occurs in agricultural and military contexts, and obviously refers to a certain type of terrain.

Frequently it occurs as one element in the three-fold division of an area into city, cultivated land, and *bamātu*. It would thus appear to signify the wild uncultivated land bordering on the cultivated fields which surround the city, as the following 'agricultural' texts (taken from the *CAD* article) suggest:

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if a man (is bewitched) either in a field or outside (the city)  
or in the *bamātu*;

(the waters) have carried off *bamātu*, flooded the arable  
land;

*bamātu* is being put in cultivation;

(the lamb) feeds on the grass in the *bamātu*.

'Military' texts confirm *bamātu* as one element in an  
identical three-fold division of land:

I spread the bodies of their warriors throughout the *bamātu*  
of the mountains [*ba-ma-at šadī*], and around their cities;

I made (the blood of their warriors) flow over the lowland  
and the *bamātu* in the mountains [*ba-ma-a-te ša šadī*];

I collected (the scattered army) from everywhere in the  
plain and in the *bamātu*;

I dyed red the plain, the region outside the cities and all  
the *bamātu*;

The lowlands of Tuplias, plain and *bamātu*;

City and *bamātu* will be plundered.

In the last group, *CAD* translates *bamātu* as 'level ground'.  
But the expression 'level ground of the mountains' can  
clearly not be regarded as satisfactory sense. In any case  
the word occurs alongside 'plain (EDIN)', and thus will  
signify something more geographically distinct from plain  
than 'level ground'.

The evidence of these contexts suggests that *bamātu*  
described open country which is (as it were by definition)  
uncultivated, yet could be used as pasture, or cultivated,  
and is frequently a scene of battle. Hilly slopes or foot-hills  
surrounding cities at once suggest themselves. (Since battles  
are not fought on rugged mountain heights, any sense of  
high mountain peaks or ridges must be dismissed.)

These translational problems pose the question whether  
*CAD* may not be mistaken in supposing that *bamātu* 'must  
be assumed to be a *plurale tantum* and, therefore, is not



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connected with *bamtu* A [“half”] or *bamtu* B [“chest”]. We have already seen that the basic idea signified by *bamtu* is connected with the rib-cage of humans and animals. Von Soden may be justified in treating *bamātu* as the plural of *bamtu*, but occurring only in a specialised (topographical) context with the derived meaning ‘hill-slopes’. For foot-hill terrain with low undulating ridges sloping up from a plain, looking like the flanks of giant beasts, might well be thought of as ‘rib-cages of the mountains’.

Hebrew usage supports this. The Hebrew expression *bām<sup>o</sup>tē* *’ereš* is generally accepted as being equivalent to Akkadian *bamāt šadī*. But the Hebrew word *bām<sup>o</sup>tē* is used not only in topographical contexts but also anatomical ones. As will be discussed below, this is an indication that a single concept is being used in two contexts. It is likely that the same thing is happening with its Akkadian cognate.

## THE APPARENT MEANINGS OF 'BĀMĀ' IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

We may begin by noting that there are two forms of the construct plural of *bāmā* – *bāmōt* (the most common) and *bām<sup>o</sup>tē*.<sup>26</sup> The latter form is found exclusively in poetry, and only in one kind of context. This context is invariably one in which Yahweh either ‘treads’<sup>27</sup> upon *bām<sup>o</sup>tē* *’ereš* (or some other closely related phrase), or causes his favoured one (usually the king) to do so. The exact significance of these expressions is no doubt lost to us now; but it is clear that treading upon *bām<sup>o</sup>tē* *’ereš* is essentially a divine activity, possibly indicating ownership of the land.<sup>28</sup>

Expressions of this kind occur no fewer than twelve times,<sup>29</sup> suggesting that they are a stock poetic formula, probably very ancient. In each case there is no indication that the word *bām<sup>o</sup>tē* refers to any cultic object, for it invariably occurs in contexts which require an anatomical or topographical sense. This form of the word thus contrasts

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sharply with the form *bāmôt*, which invariably has a cultic sense. We shall examine each of these senses in turn.

i. *bām<sup>o</sup>tê* with anatomical and topographical senses

As already noted, the primary sense contained in the Ugaritic *bmt* and Akkadian *bamtu* is the concept of 'rib-cage', various contexts demanding slight variations in English translation (chest, side, flank, etc.). It needs to be stressed that there is no idea of *height* inherent in this concept at all.<sup>30</sup> Three passages in the Old Testament (each with the pleonastic plural) require an anatomical sense, and thus very clearly reflect the Ugaritic and Akkadian sense.

Deuteronomy xxxiii 29 is best translated:

Your enemies shall come cringing to you,  
And you shall tread on their bodies/back  
(*w<sup>e</sup>attā 'al-bām<sup>o</sup>tēmō tīdrōk*)

and not 'on their high places' as RSV and many others have rendered it.<sup>31</sup>

Similar will be the sense of the phrase

*w<sup>e</sup>dōrēk 'al-bām<sup>o</sup>tē yām*

in Job ix 8. *yām* without the article will here be a proper name – Yam,<sup>32</sup> the mythological serpent known to us through Ugaritic literature, who was conquered by Baal. The verse should therefore be translated:

And who trampled the back of Yam.<sup>33</sup>

Again Isaiah xiv 14

*'e'e le 'al-bām<sup>o</sup>tē 'āb 'eddamme le'elyōn*

is best translated:

I will rise upon the back<sup>34</sup> of a cloud,  
I will make myself like Elyon.

The RSV rendering 'I will ascend above the heights of the clouds' misses the true relationship between Elyon and the