

WORSHIP LOCATIONS

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In man's inner self there is a God-created sense of worship. Regardless of God's written revelation concerning how He seeks to be worshiped, men often devise their own expressions and places of worship. This apostasy in worship is brought out clearly in the Kings and Chronicles. In reference to the worship of Israel in her digression into apostasy, three key things constantly appear in the worship of the Israelites that were related to their apostasy. (1) People seek to do that which is right in their own eyes, and then create a concept of god that conforms to their behavior. This is the spirit of idolatry. The gods of the nations around Israel, which gods Israel adopted, were not really gods, but only the imagination of the people who sought to live according to their own desires. Once the false god was created in one's mind, then the natural thing to do was to relate to that god through an image or idol that one created to symbolize the god. The worshiper then established a place to which he could go in order to worship his imagined god.

(2) People seek to sanctify a place where they can act out their worship through various acts of worship or ceremonies. By doing this they are seeking to leave the environment of their daily lives in order to "go to" a place where they can worship. This gives them the opportunity to feel that they can leave their daily conduct, and then go to face God at a place where they can feel worshipful. The places that the apostate Israelites constructed for this worshipful feeling were called the "high places." These places were often associated with sexual orgies, and in some cases, human sacrifices. Regardless of the reforms that some kings made at different times throughout the digression of Israel into apostasy, these places to which people went with offerings in order to commit deplorable acts of worship, were usually not destroyed.

(3) People seem to feel closer to God on high places, and thus, the Asherah (wooded places, or groves) were built on high hills. These were sanctified places of worship. The high places were thus sacred and prevailed throughout the history of the apostasy. The high places became customary places to go for worship, and thus the reforming kings usually did not touch these places in their restoration movements.

The high places played a significant role in the apostasy of both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel. When Israel entered the promised land, God told them to destroy all the molten images, figured idols and high places (Nm 33:52). But they failed to drive out all the Canaanites (Jg 1:19-35), and thus failed to eradicate the idolatry and high places from the land. The people served the Lord all the days of Joshua and the elders who lived after them (Ja 24:31; Jg 2:7). However, after these great

leaders the worship of the Canaanites began to play a part in the worship of Israel. In the days of the judges, the worship of Baal became a strong part of Israelite worship, for the judges often had to deal with idol worship (See Jg 6:25). When Solomon became king, idol worship on high places was entrenched in the worship culture of Israel. Restorers as Hezekiah destroyed the high places (2 Ch 31:1), but apostate kings as Manasseh restored them as places to which people could go for worship (2 Ch 33:3). When Manasseh was disciplined by the Lord by captivity, and then restored to his throne, he was a changed person. However, he failed to destroy the high places to which people continually went to perform their acts of worship (2 Ch 33:17). The extent to which apostasy and restoration went in Israel depended on whether the high places were retained or destroyed in the worship culture of Israel (Compare Josiah's restoration - 2 Kg 23:1-25).

The culture of going to the high places worked against God's original plan that worship be family oriented and conducted according to the general principles of teaching that Moses stated in Deuteronomy 6. But the simplicity of God's original plan that worship be focused at home in the daily lives of every person was too simple for the people in comparison to the Canaanites who had elaborate temples and went to the high places for entertaining worship behavior. Once this Canaanite worship culture became a part of the culture of Israel, it was not possible to detour their end in captivity. The worship culture led them away from God, not closer to Him and His word.