THE GREEK ALTAR IN THE NEW TESTAMENT
AND INTER-TESTAMENTAL PERIODS

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In Acts 17:23 is to be found the only use in the New Testament of the word, bômos, that common Greek term used in the religious world of the New Testament and earlier times for the high built altar of burnt offering upon which heathen sacrifices were performed. The bômos in Acts 17 is an altar of the Greeks at Athens.

In the discussion of Acts 17:23, commentaries on Acts generally have little or nothing to say about the scarce use of bômos in the New Testament, although sometimes they give information about the existence of pagan altars dedicated to unknown gods. In connection with the concept of altar in general, the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament by Kittel discusses thusiastêrion at length but has little to say about bômos.

What is the background of, and evidence for, the usage of bômos in relationship to thusiastêrion? An analysis of the single occurrence of the word, bômos, in the New Testament in comparison with the usage of the word in earlier Greek literature of the Old Testament and in the Apocryphal books of I and II Maccabees and Sirach,3 as well as in selective, contemporary Greek literature of the Jewish writers, Philo and Josephus, and in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers in the period subsequent to the New Testament, is the subject of this study.

BÔMOS IN THE SEPTUAGINT TRANSLATION
OF THE HEBREW OLD TESTAMENT

It is to be observed that there are many references in the New Testament to two kinds of Jewish altars, the altar of burnt offering located outside the tabernacle or temple and the incense altar situated inside the sacred sanctuary, both of which are exclusively designated by thusiastêrion, never by bômos. What is the reason for this selectivity? An historical glance back into the inter-testamental period will give light as to the viewpoint and resultant usage of the New Testament in regard to this important religious concept of altar.

In the Septuagint, where some distinctions can be observed as to the use of words for altar, the basic terms to be observed are the Hebrew mizbeah and bamah and the Greek bômos and thusiastêrion.
In consideration of the usage of ὄμος and ἁμα, etymological theories⁴ as to whether the two words are linguistically connected or not will not help in accounting for the fact that the Septuagint uses ὄμος to translate ἁμα inasmuch as the Greek translation of the Old Testament: (1) also uses ὄμος to translate ἁμα; and (2) seems to use ὄμος more strictly for heathen altars or those perverted altars of Israel than does the Hebrew Old Testament in its use of ἁμα.⁵

In the Septuagint, generally speaking, ὄμος, when it is a translation for ἁμα, refers to pagan altars, such as those of the Amorites, Hittites, etc. (Ex. 34:13; Deut. 7:5, and 12:3), those of Balak and Balaam (Num. 23:1, 2, 4, 14, 29, 30) and the altars of Baal (Jer. 11:13). There is an interesting variation in Joshua 22:10-34 where ὄμος is used, not for a pagan altar, but for one built by the two and one-half tribes at the Jordan and which Israel thought to be perverted. Although the Hebrew throughout this section uses ἁμα for altar, the Septuagint, when the context is speaking of the altar of the Lord, uses thisiasterion (Josh. 22:19, 28, 29): but, when the statements clearly refer to what Israel thought was a perverted or schismatic altar, it uses ὄμος (Josh. 22:10, 11, 16, 23, 26, 34). Evidently the Septuagint, in the light of a Hellenistic culture, felt more strongly than the Hebrew in its earlier setting the need for distinguishing, by use of terms, the true altar of the Lord from that of a counterfeit.

In the Septuagint there are only seven examples of ὄμος being used as a translation for ἁμα, all of which are references to pagan places of worship, whether of those locations at which heathen themselves worshipped (as Moab, LXX Jer. 31:35 [Heb. Jer. 48:35]; Isa. 15:2, 16:12) or where apostate Israel falsely worshipped (the high places of Aven, Hosea 10:8; and those of Baal or Tophet in the valley of the son of Hinnom (Jer. 7:31, 32; LXX Jer. 39:35 [Heb. Jer. 32:35]). The expression in the seventh instance is peculiar, the patriarch Isaac being associated with pagan worship by the phrase, "the ὄμοι of Isaac" (Amos 7:9). Here the people of God with whom the Lord had made covenant are connected directly in terminology with the false worship of pagan ὄμοι.

The Septuagint uses another main Greek word for altar, thisiasterion in single instances for μασσεβα (standing stone, Hosea 3:4), μαδβ (Biblical Aramaic in Ezra 7:17; LXX II Es. 7:17), ἁμα (the high places of II Chron. 14:4 ([5])), and once possibly for μα (Ps. 82[83]:12), but often for μα in which numbers of times the true altars of the Lord are indicated (as, Gen. 8:20; 12:7; Exod. 17:15; Lev. 1:5; Josh. 9:27; Judges 6:24; I Sam. 2:33; I Kings 1:50; II Kings 23:9; Ps. 25 [26]:6, etc.), while in some cases thisiasterion is used for pagan altars (such as, the altars of Baal, Judges 6:25, 28, 30; I Kings 16:32; 18:26; II Kings 11:18; II Chron. 23:17; 33:3; 34:4; and the altar at Bethel beside which Jereboam stood, I Kings 13:1). II Chronicles 14:3-5 (2-4) presents an interesting variation on the usage of thisiasterion, for here both the altars (μαθοθ, verse 3) of the strange gods, as well as the high places (ḥabbathom, verse 5) in the cities of Judah are ta thisiasteria, thus in this instance indicating that thisiasteria can serve in the same context both as altars for foreign pagan worship as well as high places at which apostate Israelites worshipped, just as ὄμος was used in the same way, as shown above.

In summary, it is clear that quite generally the Septuagint shows a reticence to use ὄμος for other than pagan altars, this being true when ὄμος is used to translate the Hebrew μα.
(except for the altar of witness in Joshua 22), and also when it translates the Hebrew, בָּהָמָה, for the high places of the heathen or Israelite perverted places of worship. The Septuagint does not have any such strong feeling about thusiasterion, for, in the case when it is used to translate מזבח, it is used many times for the true altar of the Lord, as well as sometimes for the altars and high places of heathen worship.

**BÔMOS IN THE APOCYPHRA**

Bômos is not used in the Pseudepigrapha, and in the Apocrypha only in I and II Maccabees which are to be dated in the last quarter of the second century B.C. and in the first quarter of the first century B.C., respectively, and in Sirach which was probably written in its original Hebrew form about 180 B.C. and translated into Greek in the last quarter of the 2nd Century B.C.

In this Apocryphal literature bômos is used to indicate pagan altars which were established by the edict of heathen rulers (as Antiochus, I Macc. 1:46) and which were scattered in various parts of Palestine, as at Modin (I Macc. 2:23-26) and at other places (I Macc. 2:45), including altars in the land of the Philistines (I Macc. 5:68).

A sharp contrast between the pagan bômos and the Jewish thusiasterion is seen in the description of the Maccabean revolt against enforced idolatry on Israel in that the altar of the Lord at Jerusalem is called thusiasterion while those located in various parts of Judah are called bômoi (I Macc. 1:54); and further the alien bômoi which they had torn down at the temple area in Jerusalem the Maccabees replaced with a new thusiasterion (II Macc. 10:2, 3). Another instance where a sharp contrast is made occurs when heathen sacrifice is described as being made on a seemingly smaller pagan bômos which was located on the top of the thusiasterion of the Lord (I Macc. 1:59).

However, in this Apocryphal literature, although thusiasterion is generally used to indicate the altar of the Lord at Jerusalem (I Macc. 1:54; 1:59; II Macc. 10:3), sometimes the bômos is used for the true altar of the Lord, as in the case when it is the burnt offering altar at the temple in Jerusalem at the time both of the triumph of Judas Maccabæus (II Macc. 2:19) and of the downfall of that crafty high priest, Menelaus who had desecrated the altar (II Macc. 13:8). In Sirach 50 reference made to the altar at Jerusalem at which the high priest, Simeon, served is both bômos (lines 12 and 14) and thusiasterion (lines 11 and 15), this being, of course, poetic literature where variation of expression for an object might be expected.

In conclusion, in the Apocryphal literature, bômos, although still generally being the word to depict pagan altars while thusiasterion is often the true altar of the Lord, now, on infrequent occasions, is used for the true altar of the Lord at Jerusalem.

**BÔMOS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND APOSTOLIC FATHERS**

In contrast to the single use of bômos in Acts 17:23 the New Testament in rather frequent usage employs thusiasterion exclusively for the true altar of the Lord, whether it be reference
to the burnt offering altar in front of the tabernacle or temple (as in Matt. 5:23, 24; Luke 11:51; Rom. 11:3) or, less frequently, to the altar of incense within the sanctuary (Luke 1:11; Rev. 8:3, etc.).

In the Apostolic Fathers there is hardly any reference to altars at all, and when they are mentioned they are only pagan ones or those of the Old Testament Scriptures, since by this time the Jewish temple and altar at Jerusalem had been destroyed. Actually bómos occurs only once in this group of writings of the Fathers and that in connection with the altar of the sun at Heliopolis, Egypt (I Clem. 25:4). On the other hand, thusiastéron is used in reference to the altar of God at which the Old Testament priests served (I Clem. 32:2) and metaphorically to the spiritual altar of the Lord through which God's people are bound together (Ignatius, To the Magnesians 7:2).

Thus, it is clear, from what little evidence there is, that bómos in the New Testament and Apostolic Fathers was thought to be only rightly and strictly reserved for reference to pagan altars, and further, by inference that the bómos was unfit to be used for a true altar of the Lord, since thusiastéron, employed considerably in this literature, is used exclusively for such a true altar.

**BÓMOS IN PHILO AND JOSEPHUS**

**Philo**

For comparison with the usage of bómos in the New Testament and Apostolic Fathers it is well to examine the Greek writings of the generally contemporaneous Jewish authors, Philo and Josephus.

Philo, the Alexandrian Jew, departs from the general pattern of the Septuagint and Apocryphal literature and from the strict usage of the New Testament and Apostolic Fathers by employing bómos quite frequently for the true altar of the Lord that stood before the Old Testament tabernacle (Sacrifice of Abel and Cain 137, 138; On Drunkenness 129, 130; Moses II, 150, 152; Special Laws I, 125, 147; Special Laws II, 162). He even speaks of this altar of the Lord as ho hieros bómos, the sacred bómos (Special Laws I, 254). As a matter of fact, the bómos for Philo can be either the open air altar or the golden incense one (Special Laws I, 273 where using this same term he writes of these two distinct altars). It is but seldom that Philo, who, for the most part, is writing a philosophical and allegorical interpretation of parts of the Pentateuch, has occasion to employ bómos for pagan altars (as he does in Moses I, 287, or even for the perverted altars of Israel (such as he does when he refers to Israel's calf worship in the wilderness, Moses II, 270).

In addition, Philo occasionally uses thusiastéron for the true altar of burnt offering (Special Laws I, 291, 285) and sometimes for the incense altar (On Drunkenness, 127). Evidence that Philo is quite conscious of his employing bómos for the same altar which the Septuagint translates by thusiastéron is seen in Moses II, 196, when he says, "The great bómos in the open court he [Moses] usually (eiothe) calls by a name which means thusiastéron," an indication that he realizes that his usage runs counter to that of the Septuagint at this point.
In summary, although Philo can and does use _thusiastērion_ a few times for the true burnt offering altar of the Lord (as does the New Testament), more often he employs _bōmos_ for this designation, reserving _thusiastērion_ for the incense altar (when he infrequently refers to this object), a designation which the New Testament, as noted above, occasionally makes. Further, he fails to show any concern, or even realization, that by his use of _bōmos_, quite different from that of the Septuagint, he might be contributing to any perversion of the worship of the Lord.

**Josephus**

Josephus, the Palestinian Jew, of priestly ancestry, engulfed in the political as well as religious ferment of his time, shows the same tendency, as Philo, to use _bōmos_ in a way at variance with that employed by the Septuagint, Apocrypha, and especially that of the New Testament and Apostolic Fathers.

Being an historian, Josephus, of course, deals more at length with historical events not only of the Old Testament but also of the inter-testamental and contemporary periods as well, feeling free in such history to use _bōmos_ for pagan altars such as those of Balak (in Numbers, Ant. 4:113), the altars at Modin (Ant. 12:270) and elsewhere in Palestine which, in the Maccabean period, Mattathias destroyed (Ant. 12:278), and also the pagan altars in the Roman Empire dedicated to the Emperor Gaius (Ant. 18:258).

For Josephus _bōmos_ is also appropriate for the perverted or schismatic altars of Israel, as exampled by the altar of witness at the Jordan (Ant. 5:100, 101, 104), the altars of Jereboam about which Abijah castigates Jereboam and his army (Ant. 8:279) and the Jewish altar at Heliopolis, Egypt (Wars 7:428).

However, in addition, Josephus employs _bōmos_ for the true altar of the Lord, exampled by the ones erected by the patriarchs and other of God's Old Testament people, such as by Abraham as he entered Canaan (Ant. 1:157) and as he went to Moriah with Isaac (Ant. 1:224, 227, 228); by Moses on his victory over the Amalekites (Ant. 3:60); and by David at the threshing floor of Oronnas, the Jebusite (Ant. 7:329). Also he uses _bōmos_ for the true altar at the temple during the inter-testamental times (Wars 1:39; Ant. 13:372, 373; Wars 1:437).

Josephus' feeling of indifference as to whether _bōmos_ is to be used for a pagan or true altar is seen even more distinctly in examining his deliberately mixed usage of _bōmos_ and _thusiastērion_, either using the two terms interchangeably for the same altar, as in each of the cases of the altar of Jereboam at Bethel (Ant. 8:230), of Elijah on Carmel (Ant. 8:341), and of that altar at Jerusalem to which Manasses, brother of the high priest was forbidden to approach (Ant. 11:308, 9); or in departing from any unified picture of _thusiastērion_ as the true altar of the Lord, the one for burnt offering and incense, as seen in the New Testament, and frequently observed also in the Septuagint, by making the _bōmos_ in Jerusalem in the Maccabean times in a peculiar identification, the golden incense altar in distinction from the burnt offering altar which, although he at other times calls it _bōmos_, now calls it _thusiastērion_ (Ant. 12:250; 12:318, 9).
CONCLUSIONS AS TO THE USAGE OF BÔMOI

Some basic reasons which suggest themselves as to why the Septuagint and books in the Apocrypha generally avoid the use of bomos for the true altar of the Lord are, in the first place, that since the Hellenistic culture and religious ideas, spread particularly as a result of the activities of Alexander the Great, were permeating much of the known world, it is most plausible to conclude that devout Jews and especially the translators of the Septuagint who, if we believe Philo's story, were selected by the high priest at Jerusalem, being exposed to this Hellenistic culture, would resist anything, especially such a concept associated with pagan worship as bomos, which might possibly indicate a perversion of the worship of the true God.

Furthermore, the Jews of these Hellenistic times were surely conscious of the fact that altars called bomoi often were dedicated to pagan gods, whether individually or collectively, and must have felt that the very use of the word, bomos, for the true altar of the Lord might suggest recognition of such gods.

That the Septuagint particularly was conscious of this matter of upholding the pure worship of the Lord is seen also in its sparing use of another word used in worship, hieros, and even then not using it for the Hebrew קְדֵשׁ and קָדָשׁ. It has been observed on this point:

This reserve of the LXX in respect of hieros is striking and eloquent. . . . The LXX translators felt strongly the pagan and cultic sense of the term. It was too freighted to allow of its usage as an equivalent of קְדֵשׁ. On the other hand, the rarer and less definite hagios, with its more fluid meaning, was better adapted to take on a distinctive new sense.

Although Philo and Josephus show a usage of bômos far broader than that to be found in the Septuagint and Apocrypha and particularly different from that of the New Testament and Apostolic Fathers, the reasons for this broader usage can be accounted for, in each of the two authors, differently.

In the light of the Hellenistic culture of Alexandria by which Philo could not have helped being influenced, and more particularly, in the light of the Greek philosophical thought in which he was steeped, it is no wonder that this author thought it proper to couch concepts often in Greek terms used ordinarily by pagan authors and no doubt by citizens of the Greek city of Alexandria, and therefore must have thought that it was perfectly in order, even as a Jew, to employ bômos, the ordinary term to use for the object on which sacrifice was made, for Jewish and pagan altars alike.

Josephus, the Palestinian Jew, writing from a different viewpoint, not as Philo who in active and determined protest against the persecution of the Jews was a part of an embassy to the Roman Emperor, found himself able, as a Jew, to defend his own nation's position and also to work with the Roman government and defend its actions. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that Josephus' indiscriminate use of bômos, now as a pagan altar, now as a true one of the Lord, and sometimes as an equivalent of θυσιαστήριον with which he interchanges it in referring to the same altar, was done consciously and deliberately, as a part of his realiz-
tion of indebtedness to Rome and of his accommodations to pagan concepts and ideas, evidently with little or no thought that thereby he might be defiling the true worship of the Lord by using such a term.

The reasons given for the strict usage of בּוֹמָס in the Septuagint apply also to the New Testament and Apostolic Fathers. However, in addition, since these Christian writings were influenced by the Septuagint and often quote it, it is to be expected unless other strong forces to the contrary could be shown to have negated this influence, that they would follow the terminology of this Greek translation, especially in important terms, such as בּוֹמָס. Furthermore, the New Testament and Apostolic Fathers, in maintaining a true worship of the Lord in opposition to the pagan deities to whom the בּוֹמָס often was dedicated, and in realizing that Christ as priest and sacrifice of the true spiritual altar of God is preeminent over all, would naturally guard against using anything, even a term such as בּוֹמָס, which might suggest that His position is shared or taken by a pagan god. That the minds of the writers of the New Testament might be concerned with such possible perversion of the true worship of God is made more plausible by the realization that in the general Palestinian area itself, in Central Syria, there was found on or near an altar erected before a Greek temple an inscription, Zeus בּוֹמָס, which Moulton and Milligan observe to be an indication of Hellenistic as well as Syrian religious thought of that ancient time.

The New Testament and Apostolic Fathers could take the Greek term κύριος and adapt it to the true worship of God, but they could not bring themselves to do such with בּוֹמָס, since this latter term, in representing that visible and permanent structure, the altar, involved, in the mind of the average man, a more personal and practical involvement on the part of the individual with the god of that altar to whom he brought sacrifice and with whom he had fellowship.

Thus, in contrast to the far broader and different usage of Philo and Josephus, and to some extent, of the Apocryphal literature examined regarding בּוֹמָס and its relationship to θυσιαστήριον, it is to be seen that the fact that the New Testament follows the Septuagint in regard to the usage of בּוֹמָס, and, beyond, exhibits an exclusive strictness in its use of θυσιαστήριον points up again, on the one hand, the definite hostility of the New Testament, even as is exampled in the Old Testament, to the heathen polytheistic religions and its exclusive adherence, on the other, to the worship of the God of the Scriptures, and further emphasizes the importance it places on the distinctive and proper use of the very words of its own text, as well as upon the theological content of the terms so used.

DOCUMENTATION

1. F. F. Bruce mentions places in Greek literature in which reference is made to altars to unknown or unnamed gods, but doesn’t say anything about the absence of the word elsewhere in the New Testament. F. F. Bruce, The Acts of the Apostles, The Greek Text
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3. Bomos does not occur in other of the Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphical books.
5. The Hebrew, bamah, the high place, is frequently used for a heathen or pagan high place of worship, but it is also used as a place of worship of the Lord as in the times of Samuel (I Sam. 9:12, 25; 10:5, 13), David (I Chron. 21:29), and Solomon (II Chron. 1:3, 13). F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1952), "bamah."
7. The words, "high places," (habbamoth) in II Chronicles 14:3 are translated ta hupsēa.
11. That the bōmos could be of moderate, or even of a size small enough to carry see Mare, op. cit., pp. 33, 34.
12. Of course in this latter instance it is possible that the author thought that since the altar at Jerusalem in this case had been desecrated by the high priest, it therefore deserved the description, bōmos.
14. Reference is also made to this pagan altar in Herodotus 2:73 and Pliny, Nat. Hist. 10:2.
The further identification of which he indicates sometimes by the specification, 
ho ephupaithōi bōmos, the altar in the open air, or open court.

Where the reference is to be the seven altars of Balak and Balaam.

In Special Laws I, 285, Philo is speaking of the continual fire on the brazen altar, as described in Leviticus 6:9, 12, 13.

Which incense altar he sometimes calls the thumiatērion (Moses II, 101; Special Laws I, 231).

This is the term used by Thackeray to describe such altars. H. St. J. Thackeray, in Lexicon to Josephus, Parts I and II (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste, Paul Geuthner, 1933 and 1934), "bōmos."

Joshua 22.

Compare II Chronicles 13:2ff.

Exodus 17:15.


For further background as to the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes, see I Maccabees 29, 54.

In Ant. 12:250 Josephus actually uses the plural, ta thusiasteria, which Antiochus carried away from the temple area, by which the historian must have included the altar of burnt offering. In Ant. 12:318, 9 Judas Maccabeus is said to have built a new thusiasterion of stone outside the temple.

Compare also the Ant. 8:104, 105 where the incense altar is called ho chrusios bōmos, and the altar before the temple is called chalkeon thusiasterion.

Philo, Moses II, 31, 32.

Altars (bōmoi) in Classical Greek literature are associated with a number of Greek gods including the Olympians, with Zeus and Apollo heading the list. See Mare, op. cit., pp. 97-121. That bōmoi were dedicated to pagan gods in the Hellenistic and early centuries of the Christian era is seen in the archaeological remains of altars dedicated to gods in such places as Asia Minor (Priene [3rd century B.C.]; Miletos, altars dedicated to Trajan and others dedicated to Zeus, etc.; Kos an altar dedicated to the "new god," Julius Caesar; Alexandria [an altar with painted dedication to King Ptolemy]; and Dura-Europos [an altar with inscriptions in Greek and Palmyrene although the nature of the content of the inscriptions was not indicated]). See C. G. Yavis, Greek Altars (St. Louis, Mo.: St. Louis University Press, 1949) pp. 144, 156, 160, 177, 203.


Strabo, the Greek geographer of Pontus, whose life covered parts of both the first century B.C. and the first A.D., in describing areas such as Asia Minor and places on the East African coast sometimes identifies locations by naming evidently well-known altars, employing the word expected to be used, bōmos. See Strabo, Geog. 13:3.5; 16.4.9; 16.4.15.


Thackeray says he sometimes does so for variety. H. St. J. Thackeray, op. cit., on "bōmos."

