

Israel & Judah: Brides & Harlots

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Text: Ezekiel 16, 23

Introduction:

- I. The issues of Ezekiel's time were ancient in their origins, a millennium or more in the making.
 - A. *Deuteronomy* (~800 years before Ezekiel) was an attempted restraint on that digression.
 1. Admonitions to “remember” and “do not forget” appear explicitly nineteen times in the book (and countless more implicitly), regarding:
 - a. Their covenant made at Mt. Sinai (4.9-10, 23)
 - b. Their history in Egypt (5.15; 15.15; 16.12; 24.18, 22)
 - c. Their exodus and wandering (6.12; 7.18; 16.3; 25.17)
 - d. God's providential care (8.2)
 - e. Their failures and consequences (9.7; 24.9)
 - f. *The Lord and His will* (8.11, 18; 25.19; 32.7)
 2. And the consequences of forgetting (7.9-11; 8.19-20; 11.16-17, 26-28; 28.15-68 [Lev 26.14-45]; 29.22-28; 30.15-20; 31.16-18; 32.15-28)
 3. Cf. Joshua's similar admonitions (Josh 23-24; esp. 23.11-16 and 24.20)
 - B. But they did not remember; they did forget:
 1. In the days of the conquest of Canaan (Jgs 1.21, 27-34; cf. Dt 7.1-6)
 2. In the days of the Judges (Jgs 2.10-15; cf. Dt 6.4-9)
 3. In the days of Solomon (1 Kgs 11.1-4; cf. Dt 17.17)
 4. In the days of the Divided Kingdom (1 Kgs 12.26-33; cf. Dt 4.15-18)
 - a. Which ultimately lead to their captivity (2 Kgs 17.6-8)
 - b. But Judah did not learn the lesson (2 Kgs 17.19)
 5. So much so, that in Ezekiel's time...
- II. “The glory of the LORD departed from the threshold of the temple” (Ezek 10.18) and “went up from the midst of the city” (11.23).¹
 - A. This judgment is the central message of Ezekiel's parables/allegories:
 1. Useless vine (ch 15)
 2. Two eagles and a vine (ch 17)
 3. Lion (19.1-9)
 4. Vine (19.10-14)
 5. Boiling pot (24.1-14)
 6. *Brides and harlots* (chs 16 & 23)

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B. Ezekiel's language in chapters 16 and 23:

1. Legal — “a special kind of judgment speech, the *rîb* . . . only two parties: Yahweh, as plaintiff, and Israel, as defendant” (Block, 1:459)
 - a. Introduction: commission of the prophet (16.1-3a; 23.1)
 - b. Summons: defendant called to attention (16.35; 23.22a)
 - c. Accusation: charges, evidence against defendant (16.3-34; 23.2-21, 36-45)
 - d. Sentence: punishment announced (16.36-59; 23.22-35, 46-49)
 - e. Conclusion: signatory formula (16.62-63; 23.49)
2. Graphic — ²
 - a. Descriptions of Ezekiel 16 & 23 language:
 - 1) “The most repellent part of Ezekiel’s prophetic utterances . . . We shudder as we read it” (Plumptre 1:270-1)
 - 2) “Revolting allegory” (Bruce, 822)
 - 3) “No one presses the margins of literary propriety as severely” (Block, 1:466)
 - 4) “The story of Israel’s sin and unfaithfulness to the love of God is told in all its sordid, vile character. The chapter is so sad and indicting that some of the ancient rabbis did not allow it to be read in public.” (MacArthur, 907)
 - b. Reservations of some commentators:
 - 1) “The prophet speaks . . . of things which we have learnt [*sic*], mainly under the teaching of Christian purity, to veil in a reticent reserve . . . the interpreter lives under other conditions than the prophet, and cannot always follow him in the minuteness of his descriptions.” (Plumptre 1:270-1)
 - 2) “Had Ezekiel spoken in such language as would have been called chaste and unexceptionable among us, it would have . . . lost at least one half of its power and effect. Let this be the prophet’s apology for the apparent indelicacy of his metaphors; and mine, for not entering into any particular discussion concerning them.” (Clarke, 462)
 - 3) “There are many of what we would call indelicate expressions . . . and surely there is no need of a *comment* to explain imagery that is but too generally understood . . . It is true that there are a few things here in the shade that might be illustrated by *anatomy*; and it would not be difficult to do it: but they are not necessary to salvation, and I shall not take off the covering. They were sufficiently understood by those for whose use they were originally designed.” (Clarke, 485)
3. Inspired —
 - a. Twenty-two explicit statements in these chapters (16.1, 3, 8, 14, 19, 23, 30, 35, 36, 43, 48, 58, 59, 63; 23.1, 22, 28, 32, 34, 35, 36, 46)³

² Regarding the *politically incorrect* and *socially insensitive* aspects of Ezekiel’s allegories, see D. Block’s “Excursus: The Offense of Ezekiel’s Gospel,” 1:467-470.

³ Unfortunately, some ignore such statements; e.g. “All ecstasies in my opinion are nothing but dresses, nothing but poetical fictions; and a poet of another age, and of another tone, of an inferior imagination and poetical endowment, would have given the same ideas quite another dress.” (Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, quoted. in Clarke, 420)

- b. “The mode of describing apostasy from the true religion to the worship of idols under the emblem of adultery, (a figure very frequent in the sacred canon,) [*sic*] is pursued with great force, and at considerable length . . . and is excellently calculated to excite in the Church of God the highest detestation of all false worship . . . to excite the utmost detestation of the crime against which he inveighs.” (Clarke, 460, 485)
- c. “The purpose of this oracle is to describe that sin in the most graphic terms, so that when the judgment falls, all who witness it will recognize the justice of God . . . The coarse speech represents an intentional rhetorical strategy, designed not only to shock the audience but also to reflect Yahweh’s disgust” (Block, 1:747)
- d. “Some people are offended by the stark realism of this chapter. However, God is always straightforward about life. The realism of Israel’s history demands an accurate and vivid analogy . . . Though the straightforward language of Israel’s perverted ‘sexual relations’ with other countries may be morally and culturally offensive to many today, God did not hedge in clearly and concisely describing the crudeness and perversion of wickedness and sin.” (R. Alexander 810, 851)

Body:

I. Ezekiel 16.1-52

A. Context: the Lord’s response to false hope (R. Alexander, 794-5; also Block) ^{4***}

1. Following the prophecy of chapters 8-11, some were apparently disinclined to believe Ezekiel’s message (12.1-2, 21-22):
 - a. “Son of man, behold, the house of Israel is saying, ‘The vision that he sees is for many years *from now*, and he prophesies of times far off.’” (12.27)
 - b. “O Israel, your prophets have been like foxes among ruins. . . They see falsehood and lying divination who are saying, ‘The LORD declares,’ when the LORD has not sent them; yet they hope for the fulfillment of *their* word.” (13.4, 6)
 - c. “‘even *though* these three men, Noah, Daniel and Job were in its midst, by their *own* righteousness they could *only* deliver themselves’ declares the Lord GOD.” (14.14)
 - d. “Pharaoh with *his* mighty army and great company will not help him in the war, when they cast up ramps and build siege walls to cut off many lives.” (17.17; cf. 19.1-14)
 - e. “The soul that sinneth, it shall die: the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.” (18.20 ASV) ⁵
2. Nevertheless, the judgment of the Lord was coming against Jerusalem:
 - a. “Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, ‘As the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem’” (15.6)
 - b. “Therefore, O harlot, hear the word of the LORD.” (16.35)

⁴ “The rebellious nation, though met by these threatenings of divine judgment, might still plead that God would not reject Israel, on account of its election as the covenant nation.” (Keil, 112)

⁵ Scripture quotations marked (ASV) are from the AMERICAN STANDARD VERSION (1901) of the Holy Bible, public domain.

- 1) “Still God is justifying himself in the desolations he is about to bring upon Jerusalem; and very largely, in this chapter, he shows the prophet, and orders him to show the people, that he did but punish them as their sins deserved. In the foregoing chapter he had compared Jerusalem to an unfruitful vine, that was fit for nothing but the fire; in this chapter he compares it to an adulteress, that, in justice, ought to be abandoned and exposed, and he must therefore show the people their abominations, that they might see how little reason they had to complain of the judgments they were under.” (Henry, 832)
- 2) “This is not merely the interpretation of a university lecturer or a traveling minstrel; it is the divine patron’s own evaluation of the nation’s past. When the prophet’s audience finally gets that picture, then the justice of God will be vindicated, and all the props on which their smug sense of security were based will be smashed.” (Block, 1:462)

B. The charges against Jerusalem (16.1-34) ⁶

1. Her lowly origins (v 1-5):

- a. “Your origin and your birth are from the land of the Canaanite, your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite.” (v 3)

- 1) Some consider this a reference to the literal geographic and ethnic origins of the city (e.g. R. Alexander, 810, Bruce, 822-3; Barker, 1174).

- a) However, “Strictly speaking, the city’s roots were Jebusite, not Amorite or Hittite. [Cf. Jos 18:28; Jdg 19:10-11; 2Sa 24:18-25; 1Ch 11:4-5.]” (Block, 1:475)

- b) “But Ezekiel is not giving a lecture in ethnography. His intention is rhetorical and sharply polemical.” (*Ibid.*)

- 2) Contextually, it is better understood as “satire to point out Israel’s moral character. In a spiritual sense Israel had become like the idolatrous heathen nations which were in the land before them” (Harkrider, 40).

- a) “It would dishonor Abraham to say that you sprung from him: ye are rather Canaanites than Israelites. The Canaanites were accursed; so are ye.” (Clarke, 460)

- b) “But the prophet has obviously chosen this explanation of the city’s origins to challenge popular perceptions of Israel’s sacred traditions, which trace the nation’s roots to the call of their ancestor Abraham from Chaldean Ur and the exodus of the nation from Egypt. Here the geographical and ethnic term Canaanite functions as a theologoumenon⁷, standing for all that is antithetical to Israel and to Yahwism . . . Although elsewhere all three ethnicons are used as shorthand designations for the enemies of Israel, for Ezekiel the names are even more ideological. In this context ‘Canaanites’ and ‘Hittites’ and ‘Amorites’ represent human depravity at its worst (cf. Eze 16:44-52). The prophet hereby announces that contrary to cherished tradition, Jerusalem’s spiritual roots derive not from the pious Abraham and Sarah but from the pagan peoples whom the Israelites had been charged to drive out (Deut. 7:1-5).” (Block, 1:474-475)

⁶ “Although Jerusalem is specifically named, it seems to stand here for the nation of Israel.” (Harkrider, 40)

⁷ “A theological statement or concept in the area of individual opinion rather than of authoritative doctrine” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theologoumenon>)

- c) “Spiritually, Israel sprang from the land of the Canaanites; and its father was the Amorite and its mother a Hittite, in the same sense in which Jesus said to the Jews, ‘Ye are of your father the devil’ (John 8:44). The land of the Canaanites is mentioned as the land of the worst heathen abominations; and from among the Canaanitish tribes, the Amorites and Hittites are mentioned as father and mother... because they were recognised [*sic*] as the leaders in Canaanitish ungodliness. The iniquity of the Amorites (אֲמֹרִיטִים) was great even in Abraham’s time, though not yet full or ripe for destruction (Gen 15:16); and the daughters of Heth, whom Esau married, caused Rebekah great bitterness of spirit (Gen 27:46). These facts furnish the substratum for our description.” (Keil, 113; cf. Benson, Henry, 832, and Plumptre, 1:271)
- b. “As for your birth, on the day you were born...” (v 4-5)
- 1) Lacking even the most fundamental care of a newborn infant, and then deliberately seeking her death. (cf. Ac 7.19)
 - a) “This is an allusion to the custom of some heathen and barbarous nations, who exposed those children in the open fields to be devoured by wild beasts who had any kind of deformity, or whom they could not support.” (Clarke, 461)
 - b) “Ezekiel’s story draws on a pagan perversity that was widespread in the ancient Near East. In spite of the high value generally placed on children and the tenderness with which they were customarily handled, poverty or fear of disgrace often drove parents to abandon their newborns, especially unwanted daughters... In classical sources, philosophers and lawgivers recommend exposure as a means of disposing of sickly and ill-formed infants . . . No human infant is viable in this condition. Abandoned in the open field, under the hot Palestinian sun, the foundling would have died within hours.” (Block, 1:477, 480)
 - 2) Seemingly a description of Israel’s sojourn in Egypt
 - a) “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are ignored by him, and he starts from a time of misery and shame. It is obvious that the only period which corresponds to this is that of the sojourn of Israel as an oppressed and degraded people in the land of Goshen.” (Plumptre, 1:271)
 - b) “The design of the prophet is to mark out that state of impurity wherein the Hebrews were found in Egypt, plunged in idolatry and ignorance, and oppressed with cruel servitude.” (Benson; cf. Henry 833 and Keil, 114) ⁸
2. The Lord’s compassion (v 6-14):
- a. His rescue, adoption, and nurturing of the foundling (v 6-7)
 - 1) “The expression seems difficult to understand, but interpreted in the light of ancient Near Eastern custom, it signifies a formal declaration of adoption. Convention has it that whoever takes a child while ‘in its blood,’ viz., its amniotic fluid, acquires full legal right to it as his or her child.” (Block, 1:481)
 - a) “Cf. §185 in the Code of Hammurabi: ‘If a man has adopted (*il-qé-ma*) an infant while still in his amniotic fluid (*i-na me-e-šú*) and raised him up, that adopted child may never be reclaimed.’” (Block, 1:481, n. 110)

⁸ For a dissenting view, see MacArthur, 907.

- 2) But “[w]ith the passing of the age of innocence and the arrival of sexual maturity, nakedness assumes moral overtones . . . Whereas the earlier nakedness had made the foundling vulnerable to the elements and marauding animals, now she stands exposed to dangers of a different sort.” (Block, 1:482)
- b. His betrothal, covenant, and glorification of the bride (v 8-14)
- 1) “This second passing by may be understood of God’s visiting them in Egypt, and calling them out.” (Benson)
- a) “When Israel arrived at the time of marriage, God spread his skirt over her (espousal, Ruth 3:9) and made a covenant with her (marriage, Jer. 2:2; 3:1; Hosea 2:2-23).” (Harkrider, 40; cf. Clarke, 461 and Plumpré, I:272)
- b) “The historical fact represented by the symbol here was probably the formal covenant between Jehovah and Israel (Exo 24:6, 7). It was then that he became her God, and that she became his people.” (Plumpré, I:272)
1. “‘Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.” (Ex 19.5-6)
 2. “The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb.” (Dt 5.2)
 3. “‘not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,’ declares the LORD.” (Jer 31.32)
- c) But not because of their own worth or might (Dt 7.7-8)
- c. His abundant grace toward His new bride (v 9-14)
- 1) Regarding verse 9: “[T]his image should probably be associated with virginal bleeding, the effects of the first coitus (see Deu 22:13-21). The young woman whom Yahweh has rescued is an innocent maiden, untainted by the lust that later consumes her. The bathing and anointing with oil are part of her initiation into her new status and represent luxuries that she has never before experienced.” (Block, 1:484)
- 2) Regarding her clothing and adornments (v 10-13a):
- a) Daniel Block sees reference to “the descriptions of the tabernacle, its curtains, and the priestly vestments.” (Block, 1:485)
 - b) More likely in my mind, these allude to the plundering of the Egyptians at the time of Israel’s exodus (Gen 15.14; Ex 3.21-22; 11.2; 12.35-36).
- 3) “You ate fine flour, honey and oil” (v 13b)
- a) The material benefits of the promised land. (cf. 20.6, *et al*)
 - b) “Furthermore, her special food, *sōlet* and *šemen*, ‘fine flour’ and ‘oil,’ figured prominently in the sacred offerings. In short, Jerusalem, the bride of Yahweh, is clothed with the garments that ‘clothe’ the sanctuary and is fed with the ‘food’ of its offerings.” (Block, 1:485)
- 4) “So you were exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty.” (v 13c)

- a) Or “thou didst prosper into a kingdom” (KJV) ⁹
- b) “History crops out through the parable, and points to the stage which it has now reached, i.e. that of the magnificence of the kingdom under Solomon.” (Plumptre, 1:273)
- 5) ““Then your fame went forth among the nations on account of your beauty, for it was perfect because of My splendor which I bestowed on you’ declares the Lord GOD.” (v 14)
- a) Regarding “fame,” cf. 1 Kgs 10.1, 23-29
- b) “But this remarkable rags-to-riches story ends with an extremely important reminder: Jerusalem’s beauty was not innate—it was a gift, graciously bestowed (*śîm*) on her by Yahweh, and reflective of his own splendor (*hādār*) . . . Like this woman, Jerusalem owed her status entirely to the grace of God.” (Block, 1:485-486)
3. Jerusalem’s deplorable response (v 15-34):
- a. “This is the tragic story of a people who had received the blessing and mercies of God, but who had turned from him to the ways of the world about them. When such happens, it seems that the people who had known most, and who had received most, become the worst of all peoples about them.” (Hailey, 202-203)
- b. “But you trusted in your beauty and played the harlot because of your fame, and you poured out your harlotries on every passer-by who might be *willing*.” (v 15; cf. 28.17)
- 1) “[T]he pendulum swings metaphorically from abandoned child of suspect parentage to princess bride with Yahweh as groom, from royal wedding to prostitution. . . .” (Block, 1:463)
- 2) “Jerusalem’s response to his kindness is characterized by a single word, *zānā*, ‘to act as a prostitute,’ and its derivatives, which occur no fewer than eighteen times in the next twenty verses.” (*Ibid.*, 487) ¹⁰
- a) “Given the covenantal basis for the marriage metaphor, one might have expected the verb *nā’ap*, ‘to commit adultery,’ to be used to describe Israel’s infidelity to Yahweh. The present preference for *zānā* may be attributed to several factors: (1) the use of the participle *zōnā* to describe a professional whore suggests that habitual, iterative activity is implied in the verb *zānā*; (2) the motive of personal gain (cf. Eze 16:33-34) places the offense in the realm of prostitution, rather than adultery; (3) the involvement of multiple partners (cf. [Ezek.] 16:17, 25-29) is more appropriate to *zānā*” (Block, 1:465)
1. “According to Jer 3:3, the participle *zōnā* implies a hardened woman.” (Block, 1:465, n. 23)
- b) “Consequently, although the root *nā’ap* is more fitting to describe Israel’s covenantal infidelity, *znh* offers a more forceful rhetorical

⁹ Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are from the KING JAMES VERSION of the Holy Bible, public domain.

¹⁰ For similar uses of this word, see Ex 34.15,16; Lev 17.7; 20.5; Dt 31.16; Jgs 2.17; 8.27,33; Jer 2.20; 3.1-13; Ezek 6.9; 20.30; Hos 2.1-23.

tool... The innocent young woman, graciously elevated to the status of queen, has become a whore.” (Ibid., 465-466)

- c. “The perversity of Jerusalem’s reaction is communicated by means of a clear chiasmic structure, in which the bestowal of each of Yahweh’s good gifts is answered by a contemptible act of infidelity.” (Block, 1:472)
- 1) A: “squirming in your blood” (v 6)
 - a) B: “you were naked and bare” (v 7)
 1. C: the declaration of the Lord (v 8)
 - a. D: the Lord’s personal endowments (v 9-13)
 1. E: the fame of Jerusalem (v 14)
 - a} F: “on account of your beauty” (v 14)
 - b} F’: “on account of your beauty” (v 15)
 2. E’: the fame of Jerusalem (v 15)
 - b. D’: the Lord’s personal endowments (v 16-19)
 2. C’: the declaration of the Lord (v 19)
 - b) B’: “you were naked and bare” (v 22)
 - 2) A’: “squirming in your blood” (v 22)
- d. Charges of religious prostitution (v 16-22):
- 1) The clothing and adornment of idolatrous “high places” (v 16), abusing the Lord’s gifts (v 10; cf. Pr 7.16-18)
 - 2) The construction of “male images” (v 17), or “images of men” (ASV, KJV, ESV)¹¹, abusing the Lord’s gifts (v 11-12)
 - a) cf. Ex 32.1-4; Jgs 8.24-27
 - b) “The words point to the teraphim, the penates, or household gods, of which we read in Gen 31:19; Jdg 18:14; 1 Sa 19:13; Hos 3:4; and which, like the statues of Baal-peor, may have exhibited the phallic type of idolatry.” (Plumptre, I:273; cf. Barker, 1175 and Clarke, 462)
 - c) However, regarding the latter, C.F. Keil says, “it is impossible to find the slightest trace among the Israelites” (118).
 - 3) The covering of the aforementioned idols (v 18a; cf. v 8), abusing the Lord’s gifts (v 10).
 - 4) The offerings to the aforementioned idols (v 18b-19), abusing the Lord’s gifts (v 13).
 - 5) And as if that were not enough...
 - a) “Moreover, you took your sons and daughters whom you had borne to Me and sacrificed them to idols to be devoured.” (v 20)

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b) “You slaughtered My children and offered them up to idols by causing them to pass through *the fire*.” (v 21)

1. “The abomination appears to have been introduced to the northern kingdom in the 7th century (2 Ki 17:17), spread to Judah during the reign of Ahaz (2 Ki 16:3; 2 Ch 28:3), and reached its peak of popularity under Manasseh (2 Ch 33:6). Although Josiah had taken steps to eliminate it (2 Ki 23:10), the cancer seems to have returned with a vengeance after his death (Jer 32:35). In Ezekiel’s mind (and Yahweh’s) the sacrificing of Yahweh’s children is the ultimate cultic crime. By offering her offspring Jerusalem proved her Canaanite ancestry beyond doubt. She who had been abandoned by her mother as an infant now sacrificed her own children. She who owed her existence to Yahweh’s call to life now danced with death. She who had benefited from Yahweh’s unrestrained benevolence now cast off all restraint herself.” (Block, 1:491)

e. How had the Lord’s chosen fallen so far? (v 22)

- 1) Pride (v 15) and forgetfulness (v 22)
- 2) “In her intoxication with her newfound beauty and her insatiable lusts, she suffered from a severe case of amnesia. Instead of remembering her desperate beginnings or celebrating the goodness of Yahweh in rescuing her, she trampled underfoot the grace of God.” (*Ibid.*)

f. Charges of political prostitution (v 23-34) ¹²

1) This shift in focus, from religious to political, is indicated by:

a) A change in the vocabulary used.

1. Heb. *geb*, “shrine” (v 25, 31)
 - a. “a vaulted chamber” (ESV), “an eminent place” (KJV)
 - b. “[T]he word probably denotes either the platform on which the harlot’s bed is placed . . . the LXX understood its function correctly by translating οἶκημα πορνικόν, ‘house of prostitution.’” (Block, 1:494)
2. Heb. *rāmâ*, “high place” (v 25, 26, 31), i.e. a platform
3. Both differ from the *bāmôt* (“high places”) used earlier in the chapter (v 16).

b) A change in those with whom the harlotries are committed.

1. Egyptians (v 26), Assyrians (v 28), Chaldeans (v 29).

¹² “When her religious harlotry failed to satisfy her nymphomaniacal lusts, she turned to other nations . . . Harlotry has obviously now become a metaphor for political and military alliances; instead of putting her trust in Yahweh, Jerusalem flirted with the world powers. The order in which these nations are named reflects the history of Israel’s contacts with them.” (Block, 1:494, 495) But these harlotries no doubt involved her with the gods of those nations (cf. 23.30) (Harkrider, 41, Keil, 120).

2. Versus “male images” (v 17) and “idols” (v 20, 21); cf. other idol-worship language in v 15-22.¹³
- c) “Up to this point Ezekiel had dwelt on the forms of idolatry which were indigenous to Canaan and the nations in immediate contact with it. Now he enters on the later forms of evil which had been adopted from more distant nations. We pass from the time of Solomon to that of Ahaz and Manasseh.” (Plumptre, I:274)
- d) “We enter on the history of the apostasy, and the root evil was that the bride of Jehovah had been unfaithful to her Lord. She looked on her glory as her own, and did not recognize that everything in it was the gift of God (Hos 2:8). The words obviously point to the policy which Solomon had initiated, of alliances with the heathen and the consequent adoption of their worship . . . Every passer by was admitted to her embraces, every nation that offered its alliance had its worship recognized and adopted.” (Plumptre, I:273)
- 2) More than an adulteress who accepts the overtures of her would-be lovers, she is the harlot who brazenly flaunts her promiscuity to entice her clients.
- a) Accessible and advertised “in every square” (v 24) and “at the top of every street” (v 25)
- b) “Spread[ing] your legs to every passer-by to multiply your harlotry.” (v 25)
1. “hast opened thy feet to every one that passed by” (ASV, KJV)
 2. “offering yourself to any passerby” (ESV)
- 3) “You also played the harlot with the Egyptians” (v 26a)
- a) Jerusalem’s sordid history with Egypt (cf. ch 23):
1. “From Josiah’s time the Jews were in strict confederacy with the Egyptians, and, to ingratiate themselves with them, practised [*sic*] their idolatries; and the worship of Tammuz, the idolatry they are upbraided with, chap. 8:14, was derived from that country.” (Benson)
 2. If 16.26-29 is not a chronological recounting of their political harlotries, perhaps this affair with Egypt refers to later overtures (e.g. Is 30.1-5; 31.1-3).
- b) “Your lustful neighbors” (v 26b)
1. Lit. “great of flesh” (ASV, KJV)
 2. D. Block’s translation suggests Jerusalem’s whoring desire for Egypt’s “huge organs.” (Block, 1:495)
- c) “Multiplying your whoring, to provoke me to anger. Behold, therefore...” (v 26c-27 ESV)
1. “Here his first discipline for the unfaithful wife is to place her on a short allowance. Jehovah, to interpret the parable, had placed Israel under the discipline of famine and other visitations that

¹³ e.g. “high places” (v 16), “offered My oil and My incense before them” (v 18), “offer before them for a soothing aroma” (v 19), “sacrificed them to idols to be devoured” (v 20), “offered them up to idols by causing them to pass through *the fire*” (v 21)

- involved a loss of wealth and power... [The Philistines] had been, from the days of Samuel to those of Ahaz (2 Ch 28:18), among the most persistent enemies of Judah (comp. Amo 1:6; Amo 3:9; Joe 3:4; Isa 9:12; Isa 14:29).” (Plumptre, 1:274)
2. Others find explanations, though less likely in my mind, in later happenings. ¹⁴
 3. Even their immoral and pagan enemies “are ashamed of your lewd conduct” (v 27).
- 4) “Moreover, you played the harlot with the Assyrians because you were not satisfied; you played the harlot with them and still were not satisfied.” (v 28)
- a) “Here also the words include political alliances like that of Ahaz with Tiglath-Pileser (2 Ki 16:7), as well as the adoption of idolatrous worship. The latter probably followed under Ahaz as a consequence of the former, and afterwards spread through the influence of the Assyrian colonists—each nation with its own deities—in Samaria (2 Ki 17:24).” (Plumptre, 1:274; cf. Bruce, 823 and Block, 1:495)
- 5) “You also multiplied your harlotry with the land of merchants, Chaldea, yet even with this you were not satisfied.” (v 29)
- a) “Judah’s flirtations with this nation began in the late 8th century when Hezekiah entertained the envoys of Merodach-baladan (2Ki 20:12-19), who was seeking support in his resistance against the Assyrians.” (Block, 1:495)
 - b) “Those that in sincerity join themselves to the true God find enough in him for their satisfaction; and, though they still desire more of God, yet they never desire more than God. But those that forsake this living fountain for broken cisterns will find themselves soon surfeited, but never satisfied; they have soon enough of the gods they have, and are still enquiring after more.” (Henry, 838)
- 6) Jerusalem’s “languishing” heart (v 30-34): ¹⁵
- a) “Sick” (ESV, KJV), “weak” (ASV), “degenerate” (NKJV) ¹⁶
 - b) Worse than “a bold-faced harlot”
 1. Harlots customarily receive material benefit, i.e. wages, for their services; but Jerusalem’s whoring yield no such fruit.
 2. “Herein thou art like a wife that commits adultery, not for gain, as harlots do, but entirely for the sin’s sake.” (Henry, 838)
 3. Other nations had been prospered and empowered through foreign alliances, but Judah had experienced only subjugation and the forced payment of tribute.

¹⁴ e.g. “This and what follows was effected in the reign of King Ahaz, 2 Ch 28:16; 2 Ch 28:18.” (Benson)

“The reference may be to Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah in 701 B.C. (2 Kg 18:13ff.; Isa. 36:1ff.); he claims to have given some cities of Judah to Ashdod, Ekron and Gath.” (Bruce, 823; cf. Block, 1:496)

¹⁵ Regarding the difficulties of translation the first phrase of verse 30, see D. Block’s commentary.

¹⁶ Scripture quotations marked (NKJV) are from the NEW KING JAMES VERSION of the Holy Bible, Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

4. “The conduct of Ahaz in stripping the Temple of its gold and silver to pay tribute to Assyria (2 Ki 16:8), gives an apt illustration of what the prophet means (comp. Hos 12:1; Isa 30:6).” (Plumptre, I:275)
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C. The sentence against Jerusalem (16.35-43)

1. A summation of the charges against her (v 35-36):
 - a. “Because your lewdness was poured out”
 - 1) “The meaning of this difficult expression is illuminated by the Akkadian cognate to *nēhōšet*, *nahšātu*, ‘abnormal female genital discharge,’ from *nahāšu*, ‘to overflow’ . . . However, Ezekiel has changed a pathological expression into an erotic image, referring to female genital distillation produced at sexual arousal . . . Ezekiel has returned to his explicit, almost pornographic style.” (Block, 1:500)
 - b. “And your nakedness uncovered through your harlotries with your lovers”
 - 1) The nakedness of her destitute condition (v 4-7) brought no guilt.
 - 2) But following her covenant and exaltation, the nakedness associated with her subsequent political promiscuity made her culpable.
 - c. “And with all your detestable idols”
 - 1) As above, except regarding her religious promiscuity
 - d. “And because of the blood of your sons which you gave to idols”
 - 1) See above [p. 9 subpoint 5]
 - 2) The Lord sets this as the most severe charge against them, i.e. that which fully captured the depths of their depravity and infidelity. (cf. v 20-21)
2. The Lord’s judgment against her (v 37-43):
 - a. Executed by her former lovers (v 37a, 39a)
 - b. Appropriate for her sins (v 37b-41a)
 - 1) Exposing nakedness (v 37b; cf. Hos 2.3, 10)
 - a) “Even as the spreading of a garment over a woman by a man represented a nonverbal gesture of marital commitment in the ancient Near East (cf. v. 8), so the public stripping of one’s wife symbolized a divorce, a custom alluded to in Hos 2:4-5 (Eng. Hos 2:2-3), which, in stylized fashion, recalls a divorce ritual . . . Yahweh’s actions are intended not only to shame Jerusalem but also to declare her destitute

¹⁷ “It is impossible to identify the exact historical events to which Ezekiel alludes, but Israel’s payments of funds to foreign powers are well documented. [To Assyria by Kings Jehu of Israel (*ANET*, p. 281), Jehoahaz of Judah (*ANET*, p. 282), Menahem of Israel (*ANET*, p. 283), Hoshea of Israel (*ANET*, p. 284), Ahaz (2 Ki 16:7-9), and Hezekiah (2 Ki 18:14-16; *ANET*, p. 288). When Manasseh stopped payment, the Assyrians retaliated (2 Ch 33:11-12; cf. the explanation of this punishment by the Chronicler in 2Ch 33:3-9). Later Jehoiakim had paid tribute successively to Necho (Eze 23:34-35), Nebuchadrezzar (Eze 24:1), and Egypt (Jer 2:18, Jer 2:36). Zedekiah paid an annual tribute to Babylon (Eze 17:6, Eze 17:13-14), and perhaps to Egypt (Eze 17:7-9). (n. 206)] Whereas historical documents generally report these as tribute payments imposed on the nation, in Ezekiel’s mind all such transfers of resources represented flirtations with foreign rulers and a betrayal of Yahweh. Had Jerusalem been satisfied with her own husband/divine patron, these payments would not have been necessary.” (Block, 1:498)

condition when divorced from him. Her fate or fortunes have come full circle.” (Block, 1:501-502)

- b) “And I will judge you as women who break wedlock or shed blood are judged” (v 38a NKJV; cf. KJV, ASV)
- 2) “The blood of wrath and jealousy” (v 38a; cf. v 6, 9, 20-22, 36)
- 3) “Leave you naked and bare” (v 39; cf. v 10-18)
- 4) “They will stone you and cut you to pieces¹⁸ with their swords.” (v 40)
 - a) The punishment for Molech-worship (Lev 18.21; 20.1-5)
 - b) The punishment for adultery (Ex 20.14; Lev 18.20; 20.10; Dt 22.22; Jn 8.5)
 - c) The punishment for fornication (Dt 22.20-21) ¹⁹
- 5) “They will burn your houses with fire” (v 41)
 - a) The punishment for harlotry (Lev 21.9)
- 6) “In the sight of many women” (v 41; cf. v 15, 23-25, 30-31, 36)
 - a) i.e. In the sight of many nations, “in harmony with the figure at hand” (R. Alexander, 815, also Keil, 125).
 - b) “With poetic justice, the one who had pursued her abominations out in the open would fall while the world looked on.” (Block, 1:503)
- c. Serving God’s purposes for His people (v 41b-42)
 - 1) He will cause these abominations to cease among His people. (v 41b)
 - a) “Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy . . . Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves molten gods; I am the LORD your God.’” (Lev 19.2, 4)
 - 2) The aforementioned judgment will satisfy divine wrath and justice. (v 42)
- d. “Because you have not remembered...” (v 43)
 - 1) “He who maintains not a proper recollection of past mercies is not likely to abide steadfast in the faith. Ingratitude to God is the commencement, if not the parent, of many crimes.” (Clarke, 464)
 - a) “The issue is not that she had forgotten either her miserable origins or Yahweh’s unrestrained favors; she simply failed to take them into account, a disease that Eze 36:26 diagnoses as a sclerosis of the heart. Yahweh’s benevolence was answered with callousness; his covenant commitment, with infidelity.” (Block, 1:503)
 - b) “Those who will not hear the commanding word of the Lord and obey it shall be made to hear the condemning word of the Lord and shall tremble at it.” (Henry, 839)
 - 2) Again, the Lord’s aim is the holiness of His people. (cf. Lev 19.2, 4)

¹⁸ “thrust you through” (NKJV; cf. KJV, ASV)

¹⁹ “Did Ezekiel think of the stones cast against the city from the catapult engines of the Chaldeans as a literal counterpart of that punishment?” (Plumptre, I:275; cf. Benson)

D. The shame of Jerusalem (16.44-52)

1. Jerusalem's family tree (v 44-45)

a. "Your mother was a Hittite and your father an Amorite." (v 45b; cf. v 3) [See p. 4 subpoint B-1-a]²⁰

1) Here the emphasis is, "Like mother, like daughter." (v 44)

2) "Who loathed her husband and children" (v 45)²¹

a) "Both these qualities belong to harlots, and were verified in the Jews, who hated God, their husband, and offered their children to idols, having cast off all natural affection to them." (Benson)

b) i.e. It was from her mother that Jerusalem had learned the ways of a harlot.

b. Jerusalem's parents, esp. mother and her influence, were shared with two sisters:

1) "Now your older sister is Samaria" (v 46a)

a) Most commentators take "older" as "greater/bigger," since Samaria was not literally older than Jerusalem. (Block, R. Alexander 817-8, et al)

b) "Who lives north [*lit.* on your left²²; cf. ASV, KJV] of you with her daughters"

2) "And your younger sister... is Sodom with her daughters." (v 46b)

a) Most commentators take "younger" as "lesser/smaller," since Sodom was not literally younger than Jerusalem. (Block, 1:507; R. Alexander, 817-881; et al)

b) "Who lives south [*lit.* on your right²²; cf. ASV, KJV] of you"

c) Identifying "Sodom," as used in this text

1. Due to the ethnographic differences between Jerusalem and Sodom (Block, 1:508), various explanations have been sought for their sisterhood.²³

2. However, it seems the simplest explanation is best:

a. Sodom was to the Jews the proverbial poster child of worldliness, immorality, sinfulness, and godlessness; the worst of the worst.

²⁰ "She was so much like the inhabitants of the land before her, cf. 16:3." (Harkrider, 41)

²¹ "The husband, whom the mother and sisters have put away, cannot therefore be any other than Jehovah; from which it is evident that Ezekiel regarded idolatry generally as apostasy from Jehovah, and Jehovah as the God not only of the Israelites, but of the heathen also . . . Note: Theodoret has explained it correctly in this way: 'He shows by this, that He is not the God of Jews only, but of Gentiles also; for God once gave oracles to them, before they chose the abomination of idolatry. Therefore he says that they also put away both the husband and the children by denying God, and slaying the children to demons.'" (Keil, 127)

²² "Reflect the customary eastern orientation of the OT" (Block, 1:507, n. 257).

²³ e.g. "It is supposed that the prophet by Sodom in this place means the Israelites that dwelt beyond Jordan, in the land of the Moabites and Ammonites; or rather of the Moabites and Ammonites themselves [the descendants of Lot, who fled Sodom, *jp*]. Literally, Sodom could not be called the younger sister of Jerusalem, as it existed before Jerusalem had a name." (Clarke, 464)

- b. “The prophet’s linkage of Jerusalem with Sodom is intended to shock his audience into reality.” (Block, 1:508)
2. Jerusalem is “the sister of [her] sisters.” (v 45)
- a. “The construction signifies that Jerusalem is the preeminent sister among the sister-cities when it comes to participation in corrupt abominations.” (R. Alexander, 817)
- 1) “Instead of charging the city outrightly for her crimes, Ezekiel shames her by demonstrating that her depravity exceeds that of two other peoples who, in Judean circles at least, were proverbial for their wickedness.” (Block, 1:506)
- b. She is worse than her sister Sodom. (v 47-50)
- 1) The divine judgment against Sodom (Gen 19) was well known and regarded as just. Now Jerusalem will join her.
- 2) “Such is the depravity of human nature, that plenty, and a freedom from toil and danger, often prove people’s ruin; and therefore, if we were truly wise, we should be as much afraid of prosperity as we are of any of those supposed evils which are the frequent objects of our fears.” (Benson)
- c. She is worse than her sister Samaria. (v 47, 51a)
- 1) Jerusalem knew the fate of her “older sister” and was told to expect nothing better.
- d. “Thus you have made your sisters appear righteous by all your abominations which you have committed.” (v 51b)
- 1) “Justified” (ASV, KJV, NKJV); not absolute righteousness, but relative righteousness; i.e. less guilty by comparison. (Benson; Henry, 843)
- 2) “The prophet’s intention is obviously not to exonerate these two, but to present as negative a picture of Jerusalem as possible . . . Thus Jerusalem has unintentionally intervened on her sisters’ behalf by diverting attention to herself with all her abominable behavior. For this reason, in addition to experiencing the direct wrath of Yahweh, she will have to bear the shame and disgrace of having made those, whom Judeans had traditionally viewed as the epitome of evil, appear innocent . . . The one who had been rescued from the gutter by Yahweh has become intoxicated with the benefactions he bestowed on her. The dog has returned to its vomit, the sow to its mire (2 Pe 2:21-22). For this contempt of divine grace Jerusalem will pay dearly.” (Block, 1:510)
3. It is on this comparison/contrast of Samaria and Jerusalem that Ezekiel 23 expounds.

II. Ezekiel 23.1-49

A. Context: eleven months later (8.1; 20.1)

1. Perhaps emboldened by the Lord’s longsuffering (cf. 2 Pet 3.3ff) or “Zedekiah’s current diplomacy with Egypt” (R. Alexander, 832). ²⁴
2. Nevertheless, the judgment of the Lord was coming:

²⁴ “The elders in exile sought an audience with Ezekiel. ‘To inquire of the LORD’ was a popular idiom indicating that a prophetic audience was being requested for the purpose of securing an interpretation of a certain event (1 Kings 14:5-18; 22:7-28; 2 Kings 8:8-15; 22:13-20; Jer 21:2-14; 37:7-10). It was probable that the elders were seeking a prediction concerning the outcome of Zedekiah’s overtures of Egypt.” (R. Alexander, 833)

- a. “Will you judge them, will you judge them, son of man? Make them know the abominations of their fathers” (20.4)
 - b. “Son of man, set your face toward Jerusalem, and speak against the sanctuaries and prophesy against the land of Israel” (21.2)
 - c. “Thus I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; their way I have brought upon their heads’ declares the Lord GOD.” (22.31)
 - d. “Your lewdness will be requited upon you, and you will bear the penalty of *worshipping* your idols; thus you will know that I am the Lord GOD.” (23.49)
3. Because men are slow to see the worst in themselves and the consequences thereof, repetition becomes a necessary component of divine revelation. (Henry, 887)
 - a. “The adultery in this chapter symbolized not primarily idolatry but foreign alliances (which indeed involved the acknowledgment of the gods of the allied nations).” (Bruce, 829)
 - b. “The worldly game of international politics rather than relying on the Lord for her security — as clear a case of religious prostitution as idolatry.” (Barker, 1186)
 - c. “The words are much too strong for us to understand them as relating simply to political intercourse.” (Keil, 185) ²⁵
- B. The introduction of the accused (23.1-4)
1. Their shared parentage (v 2)
 2. Their order as siblings (v 4)
 - a. “Oholah the elder and Oholibah her sister”
 - b. “Oholah is identified as the *elder* (*haggēdôlâ*, lit. ‘greater’) sister of the two. This order reflects both geographic size and historical chronology. The northern kingdom originally incorporated ten tribes, while Judah consisted of only two. The northern kingdom was also the first to apostasize (1 K. 12), and the first to disappear from the scene at the hands of the Assyrians (2 K. 17).” (Block, 1:733)
 3. Their names (v 4)
 - a. “Samaria is Oholah and Jerusalem is Oholibah”
 - b. “These names have their significance as they are associated with the rebellion of Jeroboam I. This king had set up his own places of worship at Dan and Bethel and had erected a replacement tabernacle (1 Kings 12:29-33). Oholah signifies ‘her own tabernacle,’ while Oholibah means ‘My tabernacle is in her.’ God’s tabernacle was in Judah, whereas the Northern Israelite kingdom had set up her OWN.” (King, 44-45; cf. Benson; Henry, 887; Keil, 184; Plumptre, II:18) ²⁶
 4. Their relationship to the Lord (v 4)
 - a. “And they became Mine, and they bore sons and daughters.”

²⁵ Despite the obvious similarities between chapters 16 and 23, dissimilarities of varying significance are noted by some commentators (e.g. Block, 1:729; R. Alexander, 851; Keil, 184; Plumptre, II:17).

²⁶ D. Block is much less certain: “Although ancient Israelite names always carried meaning, these appellations are riddles.” (Block, 1:735)

b. “Because the declaration alludes to the Sinai covenant, Yahweh’s bigamy is all the more striking. Ezekiel, the priestly prophet, was certainly aware of the Mosaic proscription on marriage to living sisters (Lev 18:18), but he expresses no shock or outrage at Yahweh’s violation of his own rule . . . The present image is artificially created in accordance with the requirements of the allegory. For this prophet, the name ‘Israel’ represented the entire undivided people of God. However, in order to reflect the actual history of the nation, which had for centuries been divided into two kingdoms, the covenant between Yahweh and all Israel was best portrayed as a marriage to two sibling wives.” (Block, 1:736) ²⁷

5. Their character (v 3; cf. v 8, 21)

a. “Even from the days of Egypt these sisters had shown inclinations toward idolatries, cf. Ezek. 20:7-8.” (Harkrider, 56) ²⁸

b. “The description of the sisters’ conduct leaves nothing to the imagination: they offered their breasts and nipples to the men of Egypt . . . Although the physical image is not interpreted, from the broader context, especially Eze 23:1-35, political fraternizing seems to be in view . . . Perhaps some of their number were striking alliances with their overlords. But Yahweh may be putting a political spin on the Israelites’ declaration that they would rather serve the Egyptians than die in the wilderness (Exo 14:12), or their frequent backward glances during their wilderness wanderings (Exo 16:3; Exo 17:3; Num 11:5, Num 11:18, Num 11:20; Num 14:2-3) . . . These women’s addiction to immoral sexual activity antedates their marriage to Yahweh at Sinai.” (Block, 1:734)

C. The historical backdrop (23.5-35)

1. The case against Oholah (v 5-10)

a. The charges against Oholah (v 5-8)

1) Her harlotries with Assyria, “her neighbors” (v 5-7) ²⁹

a) “The word *neighbors*, which in its literal sense is hardly applicable, is probably to be taken of spiritual affinity, or may be taken as ‘come near’ . . . The Assyrians were those who, in that sense, came near to the harlot city.” (Plumptre, II:18)

b) “She had seduced the governors, officials, and military leaders of Assyria to enter into relations with her, which they willingly did (vv. 6-7a; cf. 2 Kings 15:19-20; 17.3-4; Hos 5:13; 7:11; 8:9; 12:1-2, Amos 5:26). The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III shows Jehu, Israel’s king, bowing in submission to Shalmaneser III and giving tribute to him as was the custom. Not only did Israel submit to political alliances with Assyria, but she likewise defiled herself by going after the idols and gods of Assyria (v.7b).” (R. Alexander, 852; cf. Block, 1:740; Bruce, 829; Plumptre, II: 18)

c) “Her total lack of restraint is emphasized by the threefold repetition of *kol*, ‘all,’ in Eze 23:7.” (Block, 1:739)

²⁷ “Though the ten tribes had deserted the house of David, yet God owned them for *his* still; though Jeroboam, in setting up the golden calves, *sinned, and made Israel to sin*, yet, as long as they worshipped the God of Israel only, though by images, he did not quite cast them off.” (Henry, 887)

²⁸ cf. Ex 32.1ff; Lev 17.7; Dt 9.7; Josh 24.14; 2 Kgs 21.15

²⁹ For explanation of “warriors” (ESV), see D. Block’s commentary (Block 1:739).

- 2) Her harlotries with Egypt (v 8)
 - a) "...Oholah's behavior represents a continuation of the sexual addiction developed in her youth in Egypt...." (Block, 1:738)
 - b) Or, a historical reference to the Egyptian alliance which precipitated Assyria's vicious siege on Samaria (2Kgs 17.1-6).³⁰
- b. The sentence against Oholah (v 9-10)
 - 1) The Lord's abandonment, leaving her without protection and at the mercy of her former lovers. (v 9)
 - 2) The earthly consequences (v 10; cf. 2 Kgs 17.1-6):
 - a) "They uncovered her nakedness." (cf. 16.37) [See p. 13 subpoint 1)]
 - b) "They took [away, NKJV] her sons and her daughters" into captivity.
 - c) "But they slew her with the sword," bringing an end to the capital city.
 - d) "Thus she became a byword among women," i.e. nations.
2. The case against Oholibah (v 11-35)
 - a. The charges against Oholibah (v 11-21)
 - 1) Her harlotries with Assyria (v 11-13)
 - a) Despite what she had observed in the behavior and outcome of her older sister (v 5-10), she foolishly pursued the same course.
 - b) "The historical referents to these harlotries are not clear. The most likely candidate is Ahaz's alliance with Tiglath-pileser III against his northern neighbors, Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Aram-Damascus (2 Ki 16:5-20)." (Block, 1:744; cf. Plumptre, II:18)
 - 2) Her harlotries with Babylon (v 14-18)³¹

³⁰ "Having done this, the kings of Israel sought to play off one kingdom against the other (see Hos 7:11; 2 Ki 17:4). It was, in fact, the discovery of Hoshea's treachery in this matter that led Shalmaneser to besiege Samaria. The result of that siege is described in general terms in Eze 23:10." (Plumptre, II:18)

³¹ "The vagueness of Yahweh's description of Oholibah's affairs with Babylon precludes the firm identification of the historical events underlying this accusation. The first candidate would be Hezekiah's ill-conceived contacts with the Chaldean Merodach-baladan (Marduk-apla-iddina), the archenemy of Sargon II (722-705) and Sennacherib (705-681) (2 K. 20:12-21; Isa 39:1-8). However, the increasing detail of vv. 14-18 may reflect a concern with more recent history. Are we to see here an allusion to Josiah's ill-fated encounter with Pharaoh Necho at Megiddo in 609 (2 K. 23:29-30)? The lack of information on the motive for and nature of that meeting has led some to surmise the Judean king had aligned himself with the Babylonians, who were rapidly replacing the Assyrians as the dominant power in the ancient Near East. Whatever the actual event, Yahweh recalls a period of passionate flirtation with Babylon." (Block, 1:746)

- a) Enticed by “images of the Chaldeans portrayed with vermilion” (v 14-15) ³²
- b) “When she saw them she lusted after them and sent messengers to them in Chaldea.” (v 16)
 1. She was defiled by them. (v 17b; cf. v 7)
 2. “She became disgusted with them.” (v 17b) ³³
 3. “Then I became disgusted with her, as I had become disgusted with her sister.” (v 18)
 - a. “Literally ‘my soul was torn away from her’” (R. Alexander, 856)
- 3) Her harlotries with Egypt (v 19-21) ³⁴
 - a) “Now she has come full circle. As she recalls her youth in Egypt, the mature woman’s addiction takes her back to where it all began, only with intensified energy.” (Block, 1:746)
 - b) “The coarse speech represents an intentional rhetorical strategy, designed not only to shock the audience but also to reflect Yahweh’s disgust with Oholibah’s behavior.” (*Ibid.*, 747)
- b. The sentence against Oholibah (v 22-35)
 - 1) “Therefore, O Oholibah, thus says the Lord GOD” (v 22-27)
 - a) Those who had formerly come as lovers to her, now come as warriors against her. ³⁵
 - b) “These former lovers will now deal in wrath. They will treat her with the punishment customary for an adulteress in Egypt and Chaldea.” (Harkrider, 56; cf. Clarke, 487, Keil, 189)
 1. “Ezekiel cites a series of barbarous atrocities they will commit against her, . . . all of which were common elements of neo-Assyrian treatment of defeated populations: (1) mutilation of her

³² “The description of these engravings answers perfectly to the sculptures upon the inner walls of the Assyrian palaces in the monuments of Nimrud, Khorsabad, and Kouyunjik . . . The pictures of the Chaldeans are not mythological figures (Hävernick), but sculptures depicting war-scenes, triumphal processions of Chaldean rulers and warriors, with which the Assyrian palaces were adorned. We have not to look for these sculptures in Jerusalem or Palestine . . . The intercourse between Palestine and Nineveh, which was carried on even in Jonah’s time, was quite sufficient to render it possible for the pictures to be seen. When Israelites travelled to Nineveh, and saw the palaces there, they could easily make the people acquainted with the glory of Nineveh by the accounts they would give on their return . . . Such an embassy, for example, was sent to Babylon by Zedekiah (Jer 29:3); and there is no doubt that in v. 16b Ezekiel has this in his mind. Others may have preceded this, concerning which the books of Kings and Chronicles are just as silent as they are concerning that of Zedekiah. The thought in these verses is therefore the following: - The acquaintance made by Israel (Judah) with the imperial splendour of the Chaldeans, as exhibited in the sculptures of their palaces, incited Judah to cultivate political and mercantile intercourse with this imperial power, which led to its becoming entangled in the heathen ways and idolatry of the Chaldeans.” (Keil, 187)

³³ “She broke her league and covenant with them. . . that covenant which Jehoiakim made with Nebuchadnezzar to be his tributary [2 Kgs 24.1, *jp*], and which was afterward renewed by Zedekiah [2 Kgs 24.17, *jp*].” (Benson)

³⁴ “This may relate to the time when Zedekiah entered into a new confederacy with Egypt [Ezek 17.11-15, *jp*], which made the people fond of admitting the Egyptian idolatries.” (Benson)

³⁵ Regarding the identities of “Pekod and Shoa and Koa,” none can be certain. For a discussion of various possibilities, see R. Alexander, 856; Benson; Block, 1:749, and Clarke, 486-487.

face; . . . (2) slaughter with the sword; (3) seizure of her children; (4) destruction by fire; (5) public naked exposure; . . . and (6) the removal of her jewelry.” (Block, 1:751)

2. Radical measures necessary to perform the radical surgery needed upon their hearts (v 27).

2) “For thus says the Lord GOD” (v 28-35)

a) Verses 28-30 are largely reiterative (cf. v 22-27)

1. Though note the inclusion of “idols” (v 30), for the first time since Oholah’s indictment (v 7).

2. i.e. Oholibah’s harlotries were not just political, but also religious.

b) “You have walked in the way of your sister; therefore I will give her cup into your hand.” (v 31-34) ³⁶

1. “The description of the cup emphasizes its size (it is deep and wide) and its contents (it is full to the brim), both figurative of the intensity of the coming judgment. It contains enough wine to intoxicate anyone, and when Oholibah has had her fill and the alcohol has taken its effect, the surrounding nations will mock her like bystanders railing on a drunken person.” (Block, 1:755)

2. “Oholibah’s drunkenness will bring her to grief, for hers is a ‘cup of devastation and horror.’” (*Ibid.*)

3. “She will drain the cup to the last drop. Matching her earlier passion for her lovers, Oholibah’s thirst for more will be so intense that she will break the cup into sherds. The final statement alludes back to Eze 23:3, Eze 23:21. She who had shamelessly craved the fondling of her breast by her lovers will tear them off in her inexpressible grief.” (*Ibid.*, 755-756)

3) “Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD” (v 35)

a) A summation of the charges against her and the consequences thereof.

b) “With her dismissal of Yahweh she could rationalize her behavior, but she could not forestall their long-range effects.” (Block, 1:756)

D. The case against Oholah and Oholibah (23.36-49) ³⁷

1. The charges against them, “their abominations” (v 36-45)

a. “They have committed adultery with their idols” (v 37; cf. v 45)

³⁶ cf. Ps 23.5; Is 51.17; Jer 25.15; Mt 20.22; 26:39

³⁷ “Even though Oholah (Samaria) has been off the historical scene for more than a century, the suit against the two women is to be presented as a single case. In the mind of Yahweh and the prophets, in spite of centuries of political division, the nation is one, and her sin is one. Nevertheless, it quickly becomes evident that Judah is the primary target (vv. 38-39). Let Jerusalem be warned that the fall of Samaria was but the first phase of an event that would soon engulf ‘all Israel.’” (Block, 1:759; cf. Keil, 184)

“After the ten tribes were carried into captivity, and that kingdom was made quite desolate, the remains of it by degrees incorporated with the kingdom of Judah, and gained a settlement (many of them) in Jerusalem; so that the *two sisters* had in effect become *one* again; and therefore, in these verses, the prophet takes those to task jointly who were thus conjoined.” (Henry, 893)

- 1) Not “harlotry,” the key word of the foregoing verses
- 2) But “adultery,” emphasizing the covenant which they had violated (cf. 16.32, 38)
- b. “And blood is on their hands... even caused their sons, whom they bore to Me, to pass through *the fire* to them as food.” (v 37; cf. v 45; 16.20-21, 36, 38, 45)
 - 1) “...to be devoured” (ASV), “...to devour them” (KJV, NKJV)
- c. “They have defiled My sanctuary on the same day and have profaned My sabbaths.” (v 38-39)
 - 1) These sins against sanctuary and sabbaths had appeared before, but for different reasons (20.13, 16, 21; 22.8, 26).
 - 2) Now, “On the same day they pretended to worship the Lord, they also scheduled worship to Molech. By so doing, they had profaned the sabbath and placed Jehovah and Molech on the same level.” (Harkrider, 57)
- d. “Furthermore, they have even sent for men who come from afar” (v 40-44)
 - 1) As a common harlot or cultic prostitute enticed her lovers (Pr 7.10-21)³⁸, so Israel and Judah had pursued their political whoredoms. (cf. v 16-17)³⁹
 - a) Their guilt was only compounded by their use of the Lord’s incense and oil. (cf. Ex 30.22-38)
 - b) Various explanations have been offered for verse 42:
 1. “This verse suggests that this adulterous activity was open to the public. The phrase *the noise of a carefree crowd was there* . . . The noise seems to have come not only from the general din of the assembly, but perhaps from musicians as well . . . By this interpretation, the lovers are drunken nomadic men brought in from the Arabian desert to satisfy the women’s cravings . . . Both comments are pejorative and stand in sharpest contrast to the nobility that the adulteress had officially invited from afar (Eze 23:16-17, Eze 23:40). Their presence at this feast is not explained, but it serves to cheapen the entire experience, as they fawn over the adulteress, adorning her with bracelets and beautiful tiaras.” (Block, 1:761)
 2. “All sorts of sordid ‘men’ responded to the wooing, even drunkards from the desert—most likely a reference to the Arabians, Moabites, Edomites, or Sabeans” (R. Alexander, 857; cf. Block, 1:761).

³⁸ The use of this imagery has prompted some to interpret this as “an account of an idolatrous festival, where a riotous multitude was assembled, and fellows of the baser sort, with *bracelets* on their arms and *chaplets* on their heads, performed the religious rites” (Clarke, 488), but this does not seem to be the best understanding of the text.

³⁹ “In Eze 23:40-44 the allusion is not to actual idolatry, but to the ungodly alliance into which Judah had entered with Chaldea. Judah sent ambassadors to Chaldea, and for the purpose of receiving the Chaldeans, adorned herself as a woman would do for the reception of her paramours. She seated herself upon a splendid divan, and in front of this there was a table spread, upon which stood the incense and the oil that she ought to have offered to Jehovah.” (Keil, 191; cf. Henry, 894)

“Possibly a reference to the Jerusalem summit meeting in Zedekiah’s time (Jer 27).” (Barker, 1188)

3. “The threats of the alien powers whom Judah courted were for a time hushed by the tributes thus paid to them . . . What Ezekiel dwells on is the ever-growing degradation of the harlot city. Not only the officers of the Chaldeans, but the mixed multitude, the very drunkards from the wilderness of Babylon, were admitted to her embraces . . . The bracelets and crowns symbolize the wealth and prestige which the Chaldean alliance was supposed to bring with it.” (Plumptre, II:20; cf. Keil, 192)
- 2) Regardless of the specifics, the end result is the same — she is “worn out by [old in ASV, KJV, NKJV] adulteries.” (v 43-44) ⁴⁰
- a) “The whole verse is obscure, and has been very differently rendered. . . In any case the general meaning is clear. The sin is of too long standing to be cured.” (Plumptre, II:20)
- b) “The identification of this woman as *whore* (ʿiššâ zônâ) and then of both as *lewd women* (ʿiššôt hazzimmâ), in place of some form of *nāʿap*, ‘to commit adultery,’ suggests a total disregard for their marital status by the men who come to them. To their clients Oholah and Oholibah are nothing more than sex objects, prostitutes dispensing amorous favors.” (Block, 1:762)
- e. “But they, righteous men, will judge them” (v 45)
- 1) Righteous men, “so called either because their cause is just, or more likely because they appear relatively righteous in comparison to the utter depravity of Jerusalem” (Block, 1:762). (cf. 16.51-52)
- a) Most likely, the Assyrians (re: Israel) and/or Chaldeans (re: Judah). (cf. v 24) (R. Alexander, 857-858; Clarke, 488; Henry, 895; Keil, 193)
- b) “The prophets, whose office it was, in God’s name, to judge them and pass sentence upon them”? (Henry, 895)
- c) “All righteous men . . . that have a sense of equity”? (Henry, 895)
- d) “The remnant of godly people in the nation who would affirm the justice of judgment”? (MacArthur, 915)
- 2) Just punishment, appropriate to their sins. (cf. 16.35-43) [See p.12ff, subpoint C]
2. The sentence against them (v 46-49; cf. 16.40-41) [See p.13, subpoint C-2-b]
- a. “I will bring up a company against them, and will give them to be tossed to and fro and robbed.” (v 46 ASV)
- b. “Thus I will make lewdness cease from the land” (v 48a) — purge His people. (cf. Lev 19.2, 4)
- c. “That all women may be admonished. . .” (v 48b) — warn others.
- 1) “Ezekiel’s message is not merely academic. Burdened for the spiritual and moral transformation of his fellow exiles, he appeals to the women in Babylon to abandon their own adulterous ways.” (Block, 1:764)
- a) “Cf. his concern for individual righteousness in [Ezek] 3:16-21; 18; Eze 33:1-20. . .” (Block, 1:764, n. 208)

⁴⁰ Regarding “worn out,” compare the same Hebrew expression as used in Gen 18.12 and Josh 9.4, 5.

2) Or, “this judgment would instruct all other nations (‘women’) in the fruitlessness of following this same manner of unrighteousness” (R. Alexander, 858)

- d. “Your lewdness will be requited upon you” (v 49a) — punish the sin.
- e. “Thus you will know that I am the Lord GOD” (v 49a) — acknowledge Him.

E. But despite the judgment that was surely coming in all its severity, hope remained.

II. Ezekiel 16.53-63

A. Promise of their restoration (16.53-59)

1. These verses compose a transition from the theme of *judgment* to the theme of *hope*, and speak of both. ⁴¹
2. Hope: “I will restore your own fortunes in their midst” (v 53b ESV; cf. v 55b)
 - a. The variety among equally reputable Bible versions attests to the difficulty of translation here:
 - 1) “Nevertheless, I will restore their captivity...and along with them your own captivity” (NASB) ⁴²
 - 2) “And I will turn again their captivity...and the captivity of thy captives in the midst of them” (ASV)
 - 3) “When I bring back their captives...then *I will also bring back* the captives of your captivity among them” (NKJV)
 - 4) “When I shall bring again their captivity...then *will I bring again* the captivity of thy captives in the midst of them” (KJV)
 - b. Regarding this idiom, D. Block’s comments are most helpful:
 - 1) “[T]he clearest indication of the common meaning of the idiom is provided by Job 42:10. Here *šûb šēbît* involves the restoration of Job’s original good fortune, including the return of his standing in the community, his wealth, and his family. Jeremiah, who uses the phrase most frequently, offers the fullest information on its prophetic force. The idiom appears for the first time in Jer 29:14, but its eight occurrences in chs. 30-33 suggest that these chapters represent an exposition of the idiom. Here, as in Eze 39:25, *šûb šēbût/šēbît* identifies a model of restoration according to which Yahweh reverses his judgment and restores a condition of well-being, which often includes a correction of the causes that led to the judgment . . . This interpretation also suits the present context, which speaks of the restoration of Sodom, Samaria, Jerusalem, and their respective daughters to their former state (*lěqadmātān*, Eze 16:55).” (Block, 1:513)
3. Judgment:
 - a. “I will restore their fortunes, both the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters, and the fortunes of Samaria and her daughters” (v 53a ESV; cf. v 55a)

⁴¹ “Ezekiel’s effort to shame Jerusalem by comparing her with her wicked sisters takes a surprising turn in Eze 16:53-58. Although this section introduces the motif of restoration, if this oracle ever reached the city the response would have been mixed. The people would certainly have welcomed his announcement of the city’s restoration, but to have to share this renaissance of fortune with Samaria and Sodom is another matter.” (Block, 1:512)

⁴² Scriptures marked as “NASB” are taken from the New American Standard Bible®, © 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

- 1) i.e. Jerusalem would not experience restoration apart from her loathsome sisters, Sodom and Samaria.
 - 2) However we understand “Sodom” in the preceding context (v 46-52), consistency demands that we likewise understand “Sodom” in this context. [See p. 15, subpoint c]
 - a) Sodom was not literally the sister of Jerusalem.
 - b) Nor would she be literally restored. (Gen 19.24-25, 28; Jude 7) ⁴³
 - 3) To the humbling of Jerusalem
 - a) “If God restores Judah, there is hope for Samaria and Sodom because they were not as wicked.” (Harkrider, 41)
 - b) “She who had always viewed herself more righteous than either of her sisters now becomes an object lesson of God’s restorative power: arguing from the greater to the lesser, Ezekiel maintains that if he can restore her, he can restore anybody. As Ezekiel sees it, Jerusalem has no room for pride or superiority complexes. Yahweh’s perception of the city’s spiritual condition is quite different from their perception of themselves.” (Block, 1:514)
- b. Sharing Sodom’s reproach (v 56-58)
- 1) “There was a time in self-righteousness she wouldn’t even speak the name of Sodom.” (Harkrider, 42) ⁴⁴
 - 2) “She should feel ashamed as she now bears the reproach of Syria (Edom) and the Philistines, neighboring lands.” (*Ibid.*) ⁴⁵
- c. As Jerusalem had “despised the oath by breaking the covenant,” so would the Lord respond according to the terms of that covenant. (v 59; cf. Dt 27-29)
- 1) “Jerusalem’s contempt toward the oath and the breaking the covenant will be answered by the suspension of his own covenant obligations . . . With her abominable behavior she has displayed a profound contempt . . . for the covenant curses, and Yahweh is duty bound to impose them on her . . . Because of Jerusalem’s wanton infidelity Yahweh is legally absolved of all responsibility toward her and totally justified in judging her according to the covenant curses.” (Block, 1:515)
 - 2) “Those that will not adhere to God as their God have no reason to expect that he should continue to own them as his people.” (Henry, 844)
 - 3) In this deplorable state, how then is the hope of restoration (v 53, 55) possible at all?
- B. Promise of “an everlasting covenant” (16.60-63)

⁴³ Nor would Samaria be literally restored. (Ezek 37.22)

⁴⁴ “If the Jews had but talked more frequently and seriously to one another, and to their children, concerning *the wrath of God revealed from heaven against Sodom’s ungodliness and unrighteousness*, it might have kept them in awe, and prevented their treading in their steps . . . Those are but preparing judgments for themselves that will not take notice of God’s judgments upon others.” (Henry, 843)

⁴⁵ “LXX Συρίαζ supports MT *’āram*, but numerous Hebrew mss. and Syr. read *’dm*. The latter reading is more logical because of the references to the Philistines in Eze 16:15 and Eze 16:57b, the contempt for the Edomites expressed in Eze 36:5, and the absence of the Arameans as enemies of Judah at this late date.” (Block, 1:511, n. 280)

1. Despite their faithlessness (v 59), God is faithful! (2 Tim 2.13)
 - a. “Nevertheless, I will remember My covenant with you in the days of your youth” (v 60a; cf. v 8, 22, 43)
 - 1) The same covenant which demanded judgment for their sins also assured the lovingkindness of God. (Lev 26.40-45) ⁴⁶
 - 2) “Jerusalem’s infidelity had caused him to suspend its benefits and to enforce its curses, but this response was neither permanent nor irrevocable. Ezekiel’s present message of hope is based, therefore, not on wishful thinking, some flight of fancy regarding what the future might be like, but on the immutable word of Yahweh. Jerusalem may treat his covenant with contempt, but he will not. If his punishment of his people follows the line of his ancient warnings, their restoration is assured by his ancient promises. After all, he is Yahweh; he has spoken, and he will make good his word.” (Block, 1:518)
 - b. “And I will establish an everlasting covenant with you.” (v 60b; cf. v 62a; 37.26; Jer 31.31-35) ⁴⁷
 - 1) Fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Heb 8.6-13)
 - 2) Its benefits received through faith (Gal 3.26-29; Rom 9.6-8)
2. Outcomes of the Lord’s covenant-faithfulness:
 - a. “Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed” (v 61a; cf. v 63; Jer 31.33)
 - 1) God’s faithfulness is a powerful and painful reminder of their faithlessness.
 - 2) “Never open your mouth anymore because of your humiliation” (v 63a)
 - a) Embarrassed silence over their deplorable conduct
 - b) All complaints about the justice or faithfulness of God will cease. (Block, 1:519)
 - 3) “The pardon which God gives is not... blotting out the memory of the evil past. Ezekiel represents that memory as quickened to a new intensity in the very hour of restoration. The shame which it brings with it is necessary as the safeguard of the new blessedness.” (Plumtre, 1:277)
 - b. “When you receive your sisters... as daughters” (v 61b; cf. v 44-59) ⁴⁸
 - 1) “But not because of your [Abrahamic or Sinaitic] covenant” (cf. Eph 2.11-12; Jer 31.32)
 - 2) “Jerusalem will regain her status as mother-city of the people of God (cf. Gal. 4:26).” (Bruce, 823)

⁴⁶ And predating the Sinaitic covenant, there was the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12.1-3; 15.1-21; 17.1-14).

⁴⁷ “The modifier ‘eternal’ implies that it cannot be forgotten (cf. Jer 50:5) or broken (Jdg 2:1; cf. Deu 7:9) by God. However, it may be broken by the subject party, as in Isa 24:5 (the covenant established with Noah). But this does not mean that the covenant is cancelled. It merely signifies the suspension of its benefits.” (Block, 1:516, n. 304)

⁴⁸ “How far the prophet expected a literal fulfilment [*sic*] in the restoration of Sodom and Samaria, we cannot define with certainty; but the ideal picture of the purification of the waters of the Dead Sea in Eze 47:8 suggests that it entered into his vision of the future. For us, at least, it is enough to pass from the temporal to the eternal, from the historical to the spiritual, and to see in his words the noblest utterance of mercy prevailing over judgment.” (Plumtre, 1:278)

- 3) New covenant inclusion of Samaritans and Gentiles, “beginning from Jerusalem” (Lk 24.47; cf. Is 2.2-3; Ac 1.8)
- c. “And you shall know that I am the LORD” (v 62a; cf. 23.49; Jer 31.34a)
 - 1) “This restoration would cause Jerusalem to know that the Lord was her ever-present, always faithful God.” (R. Alexander, 819)
- d. “When I have forgiven you for all that you have done” (v 63b; cf. Jer 31.34b)
 - 1) “When I am pacified toward thee” (KJV), “When I provide you an atonement” (NKJV)
 - 2) Only the Lord could purge His people of all their abominations and fully wipe clean their souls.

Conclusion:

- I. “According to common consensus, Israel’s security was firmly rooted in God’s irrevocable covenant promises. After all, they were his ‘special treasure,’ his ‘kingdom of priests,’ his ‘holy people’ (Exo 19:5-6) . . . But [Ezekiel] forces his audience to wrestle with the reality of their past by driving their images to the extreme, and intentionally skewing and distorting their sacred traditions. His attribution of his reconstruction of Israel’s history to Yahweh himself renders his presentation all the more shocking.” (Block, 1:462)
- II. Lessons to be learned:
 - A. Salvation comes by grace through obedient faith.
 1. Apart from the grace of God we are miserable and without hope. (Ezek 16.1-5; cf. Rom 5.6-8; Eph 2.1-3)
 2. “But God...” (Ezek 16.6-14; cf. Eph 2.4-10; Rom 5.6-11)
 3. “What shall we say then? . . .” (Rom 6.1ff; cf. Lk 6.46; James 2.14-26)
 - B. God’s justice is perfect.
 1. Impenitent sinners cannot go unpunished (Heb 10.28-31)
 2. Fear and shame are powerful motivations for change. (Ezek 16.35-59; cf. 1 Cor 6.5; 15.34; 2 Th 3.14)
 3. And so is hope...
 - C. “If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.” (2 Tim 2.13)
 1. The whole course of human treachery, from Eden to Calvary, did not thwart the scheme of redemption divinely authored in eternity-past. (Ezek 16.60-63)
 2. Neither do our failures change His desire for us. (Heb 12.7-10; Rev 3.19)
 3. “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” (2 Pet 3.9)
 - D. “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth.” (Eccl 12.1)
 1. A wayward course established early is a monumental challenge to overcome. (Ezek 23.3, 8, 19, 21)
 2. But, “Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it.” (Pr 22.6)
 - E. “Fornicators and adulterers God will judge.” (Heb 13.4)

1. God's abhorrence is evident in Ezekiel 16 and 23 by His use of those figures to represent other loathsome sins (e.g. idolatry, human sacrifice, rebellion).
 2. "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul." (1 Pet 2.11)
 3. Very few who are once conquered by such passions are ever again free from their brutal regime. (Ezek 23.43-44, 48)
- F. "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall." (1 Cor 10.12)
1. Pride (Ezek 16.15; Mt 5.3)
 2. Forgetfulness (Ezek 16.22; 2 Cor 6.1)
 3. Weakness (Ezek 16.30; Eph 4.14-16)
- III. The final word (Dt 32.39-43)
- A. "You shall know that I am the LORD"
1. By His judgments (Ezek 23.49)
 2. By His mercies (Ezek 16.62)
- B. Unlike Israel of old, let us learn from His *judgments on others* and His *mercies toward us*. (1 Cor 10.11-12)

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