

Ezekiel

Week 10

The Faithless Bride

Chapter 16

Introduction

Second only, perhaps, to the genealogies in 1 Chronicles, the lurid allegories of Ezekiel 16 and 23 must qualify as the chapters in the Bible least likely to be read aloud in church—and just as unlikely to be preached from. They are long, they are lewd, and their language in places is, frankly, pornographic. They evoke images of the most vulgar sexual depravity and the most horrendous graphic violence. They are, in short, shocking. Shocking also is what they were intended to be when they emerged from the mouth of this young son of a priest, who must himself have been utterly appalled at what he was being given to say as Yahweh's spokesman. In fact, it is difficult to imagine Ezekiel pouring out this torrent of prophetic prurience without excruciating embarrassment and abhorrence. As one who claimed that his lips had never been defiled by unclean food (4:14) what must it have felt like to have his lips defiled by such unclean language? Especially if his wife was listening. For the fact is that most English translations have to tone down the offensive coarseness of some of the original expressions of sexual lust and obscene behaviour used in these chapters. If they offend our eyes and ears today—we who are accustomed to a barrage of such language and images in the western media—what must they have done to Ezekiel's first hearers in his own language? We can be sure, therefore, that this is not a matter of gratuitous bad taste, or evidence of some sick perversion to add to the catalogue of Ezekiel's other alleged personality disorders. These are deliberate shock tactics on a scale probably unsurpassed in the whole arsenal of prophetic assault and battery weapons.¹

Pauper to Princess (1-14)

It is correct to tie Jerusalem, at least the Jebusite city, to Amorite and North Syrian Hittite political origins. This is established by its mention in the El Amarna texts. However, on a symbolic level, in confronting Jerusalem with its mixed ancestry (tying it to three of the seven major inhabitant groups of Canaan listed in Ex 3:8), God identifies the place and the people as utterly corrupt. When the land was conquered, it was the responsibility of the Israelites to purify it of its idolatrous traditions (Deut 7:1–5), but instead the people became just like the nations they were supposed to displace.²

treatment of a newborn. All of the actions described here would ordinarily be those of the midwife. She would cut and tie off the umbilical cord, rinse the placenta off the newborn, clean the baby's skin with salt water and finally wrap it in a blanket. The child would then be presented to the parents to be named. However, in this case the child is not accepted as

¹ Wright, C. J. H. (2001). [The Message of Ezekiel: A New Heart and a New Spirit](#). (A. Motyer & D. Tidball, Eds.) (p. 127). Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press.

² Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). [The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament](#) (electronic ed., Eze 16:3). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

a member of the household and instead is abandoned in a field, where its fate is left up to God.³

child exposure. Both classical and ancient Near Eastern sources make mention of infanticide. Graphic evidence of this from the Roman-Byzantine period has been found in recent excavations at Ashkelon, where the remains of a hundred infants who had been disposed of in a sewer drain were uncovered. Infanticide was usually employed to get rid of female or malformed children. This was done as a means of either population control or economic necessity, since many villages were barely able to feed and care for healthy children and adults. The fact that the infant's parents "cast it out" into a field has legal implications as well. They are renouncing all legal claims to the child and leaving it up to God and/or another person to "adopt" and thus save the child's life.⁴

I said to you in your blood, "Live". Ancient Near Eastern texts use phrasing related to birth fluid and blood in legal adoption formulas. Yahweh is declaring His intent to adopt the baby, simultaneously claiming all legal right to the child.⁵

age for love. The woman's physical maturity indicates that she is marriageable.⁶ At the end of this time, she once again came to the Lord's attention, and he spread a corner of his robe over her, symbolically covering her nakedness (16:8). This was an act with quasi-legal status, affirming the choice of a bride, as in the case of Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 3:9). The Lord then gave an oath and entered into a covenant relationship with Jerusalem. In the terms of the metaphor, he married her. Again, the historical reality lies buried beneath the surface in the establishing of the Davidic covenant, which entails not simply the election of David and his descendants (2 Sam. 7) but also the election of Zion, David's city, as the city of the Great King (Ps. 48:2).

The Lord's choice of Jerusalem was not merely a legal and political convenience, however, but a true love match on his part. He did for the girl what no one else had ever done, washing off her blood, anointing her, and clothing her (Ezek. 16:8–9) in a threefold reversal of the circumstance of her birth, when she was not washed, anointed, or clothed (16:4). He provided her with a wardrobe fit for a queen, with embroidered dresses and shoes of fine leather (16:10). This is not merely elegant or royal clothing, however. She is clothed in materials that are elsewhere associated with the tabernacle, underlining her symbolic identity as the home of the temple.⁷

Having taken Jerusalem as wife, Yahweh provides her with clothing and food, advancing her status to that of a queen. The clothes are made of the finest fabrics, and her leather footwear would have been an expensive luxury, signifying wealth and power. The list of

³ Matthews & Walton. 16:4

⁴ Matthews & Walton. 16:5

⁵ Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). *Faithlife Study Bible* (Eze 16:6). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

⁶ Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). *The Lutheran Study Bible* (p. 1332). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

⁷ Duguid, I. M. (1999). *Ezekiel* (pp. 210–211). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

jewelry is reminiscent of that in Isa 3:18–23. Yahweh adorns His bride with a necklace, bracelets, nose ring, earrings, and a royal tiara. Her food is made of the highest quality of the flour, honey, and oil that formed the staples of the diet.⁸

the splendor that I had bestowed on you. Her beauty and other luxurious possessions were not a natural endowment or birthright, but gifts of pure grace.⁹

The Prodigal Wife (15-43)

you prostituted on account of your name. The Hebrew verb *zanah*, meaning “to play the whore,” and the related noun *taznuth*, meaning “fornication” or “whoring,” appear throughout this passage to characterize the idolatrous behavior of Israel.¹⁰

Instead of remembering that it was the Lord who had endowed her with all these blessings, she trusted in her beauty and prostituted her reputation. Like the prodigal son, she wasted her substance in riotous living. The beautiful clothes were used to adorn the high places where idolatrous worship occurred and to clothe the idols housed within. The gold and silver were used to manufacture the idols themselves; the flour, oil, and honey, which had been given to her for food, were offered instead to her idols (16:16–19). Even her children, those whom she had borne to the Lord, were not safe; they were sacrificed to the idols she had made for herself (16:20–21).¹¹

She confused gift and Giver, virtually deifying her beauty. She dedicated her gifts not to the Giver but to herself (self-gratification). Greg: “The deluded mind admires itself for the great things that it has done. And, being exalted in its own sight through hidden tumour, it is deprived of the grace of Him Who bestowed the gift” (*NPNF 2 13:36*).¹²

garments used to make high places. Once again the double meaning in the text refers both to the high places (*bañt*) where idolatrous worship took place as well as to the gaudily decorated beds of prostitutes on raised platforms. Similarly, Isaiah 57:7 describes making one’s bed on a lofty hill where sacrifice is made to idols. Proverbs 7:16–17 warns that the harlot’s bed is covered with enticingly colorful and expensive garments (compare Ezek 23:17)—choice colored linens like those that God had given to the bride Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16:10.¹³

My ... My ... I had given you. Emphasizes the absolute reversal of God’s intent with Israel’s gifts. The verse seems to describe worship of male deities, esp Baal, the main male fertility god in Canaanite religion.¹⁴

⁸ Barry, et al. 16:10-13

⁹ Engelbrecht. 1332

¹⁰ Barry, et al. 16:15

¹¹ Duguid. 211

¹² Engelbrecht. 1332

¹³ Matthews & Walton. 16:16

¹⁴ Engelbrecht. 1332

The most offensive pagan worship practice of all—the sacrifice of children. Child sacrifice to the god Molech is often referred to in the Bible and elsewhere in Ezk (20:25–26). The practice is attested archaeologically, esp in certain North African cemeteries used by Phoenician settlers.¹⁵

Again, this history of idolatry corresponds to the general trend of Israel's behavior according to the account of the book of Kings. Even Solomon used part of his great wealth to build temples for the gods of his foreign wives (1 Kings 11:7–8), and the practice of child sacrifice is attested of Ahaz in 2 Kings 16:3 and Manasseh in 21:6, as well as more widely in the time of Jeremiah (Jer. 7:31; 19:5; 32:35). The high places were a perennial attraction to God's people, repeatedly seducing them away from the worship of the true God (2 Kings 17:9–10).¹⁶

offering yourself. The Hebrew is quite explicit. She offers herself by indecently spreading her legs. The verb *pisseq* is an intensive form meaning “to split wide open.” The literal Hebrew phrase here reads “you spread your feet wide.”¹⁷

Indeed, Jerusalem did not even act like a normal prostitute, for they at least are motivated to sin for material gain or out of financial desperation. Jerusalem, however, has been sinning at her own expense, so perverse in her lust that she pays everyone to join in her depravity (16:34).¹⁸

Judah had a history of looking for love in all the wrong places, seeking security not in the Lord but in the arms of a foreign power. In the days of Ahaz, it was Assyria (2 Kings 16:7). In the days of Hezekiah, it was Babylon (Ezek. 20:12–19). In the days of Zedekiah, it was Egypt (Jer. 2:36; Ezek. 17:15). These alliances were frequently costly to Judah, for accepting a major power as overlord carried with it a substantial price tag. The suzerain invariably expected to receive silver and gold as tribute in exchange for protection (2 Kings 16:8). Even then, only rarely did they deliver the hoped-for help.¹⁹

God's judgment is described as a reversal of the whore's own actions. As she gathered lovers, God will gather them against her. As she had bared herself for her lovers, she will be stripped bare at her trial. There is copious evidence outside the Bible that this was a common punishment for unfaithfulness, leading to a divorce. Here it is a reversal of the Lord's spreading the edge of His robe over her (v 8).²⁰

For Jerusalem, the natural and inevitable consequence of an adulterous lifestyle was an adulteress's death (Ezek. 16:38). The punishment is in accord with the crime. The normal

¹⁵ Engelbrecht. 1332

¹⁶ Duguid. 211

¹⁷ Barry, et al. 16:25

¹⁸ Duguid. 212

¹⁹ Duguid. 212

²⁰ Engelbrecht. 1333

practice was for adulteresses first to be exposed naked in public (16:37; cf. Nah. 3:5), followed by their stoning by the assembly (Deut. 22:22; Ezek. 16:40).²¹

I satisfy My wrath ... jealousy ... I will be calm. Language is that of God's satisfaction of the penalty for all her sin (the same language the Church uses to describe Christ's crucifixion in full satisfaction for mankind's sin, effecting God's calm).²²

Like Mother, Like Daughters (44-58)

In Ezek. 16:44 the imagery changes from the husband-wife relationship to mother and daughter. Whereas Jerusalem had previously been considered in relationship to her adoptive "family," now her natural genetics are brought to the fore. She has proved herself to be a chip off the old block by despising her husband and children. She is like her mother, the Hittite, who was married to an Amorite (16:45), the people whose sins had led to their expulsion from the land of Canaan at the time of Joshua (Gen. 15:16). This statement serves not only to link this section with the preceding one but also to suggest that she stands to share their fate of being cut off from the land.²³

elder sister is Samaria ... younger sister ... Sodom. A more literal translation would be "larger" and "smaller" (geographically). The Northern Kingdom, with its 10 tribes, encompassed vastly more territory than Judah. While there are no explicit statements about Sodom's size, surrounded by desert, it was not very large.²⁴

Samaria has not committed half your sins. Typically, Ezekiel expresses himself in hyperbole. The corruption may be described as more intense because Judah has the center of holiness in its midst: the temple. Precisely because Jerusalem was the elect city, anyone aware of that fact would hold her to a higher standard.²⁵

restore their fortunes. In the new creation, even sinners like Sodom can be redeemed. Here, Jerusalem's restoration is mentioned last, almost as an afterthought. As lesser offenders, it is only right that the sisters should be restored first. Israel is in special need of sheer grace because, as heir of the promise, she has transgressed more.²⁶

becoming a consolation. Because God will forgive her flagrant behavior, Jerusalem will be an example of comfort to Samaria and Sodom. Unbelievers today also console themselves by the misdeeds of Christians and may use them as an excuse to reject the Gospel.²⁷

Edom and Philistia. Given the apparent alliance between the Edomites and the Chaldeans at the time of Jerusalem's siege (see Ps 137:7), they would be in a position to gloat over or even loot Judah once the Babylonians had conquered the capital (see the comment on Jer

²¹ Duguid. 213

²² Engelbrecht. 1333

²³ Duguid. 213

²⁴ Engelbrecht. 1334

²⁵ Engelbrecht. 1334

²⁶ Engelbrecht. 1334

²⁷ Engelbrecht. 1334

49:7). Philistia during the seventh century vacillated between antagonism and alliance with the Babylonians. Ashkelon, for instance, was sacked and burned by Nebuchadnezzar in 604 b.c. In any case, Jerusalem's capture in 597 and destruction in 587 would have been the basis upon which other states could chide the people of Jerusalem, considering that city to be the new Sodom and evidence of God's righteous anger against a corrupt and disobedient nation.²⁸

The Lord's Covenant (59-63)

The great reversal from condemnation to mercy begins here. Abrupt transitions like this are found elsewhere in prophetic books.²⁹

Though they have despised God's oath and broken his covenant and must therefore be judged (16:59), yet judgment is not God's last word. For though Jerusalem does not remember the days of her youth (16:22, 43), the Lord will remember the days of her youth and will therefore establish an everlasting covenant with her (16:60). In so doing, he will create in her the two qualities that are signally lacking in her at present, memory and shame (16:61). On the one hand, she will be profoundly aware of having broken the covenant, shattering it so completely that it can no longer stand as the basis of her self-identity vis-à-vis other nations (16:61). She will recognize that there is no goodness within herself to which she can appeal, no obedience that can form the basis for confidence in the presence of the Lord.³⁰

On the other hand, she can also look back to the days of her youth, the days when, in the imagery of Ezekiel 16:4–6, she was similarly naked and bare before the Lord. If he chose her once, not on the basis of anything in herself but simply his own sovereign will, can he not do so again? If he covenanted with her once, may he not do so once again, this time forever? Were it not for the Lord's own words it would be too much to hope for. Second chances like that simply don't happen in real life. Lightning never strikes twice in the same place.

Yet that is precisely what the Lord affirms. He will remember his original covenant with her and establish it as an everlasting covenant (16:60), a covenant that precisely because it includes wanton sinners is big enough to include Sodom and Samaria alongside Jerusalem. The nations will view Jerusalem as an object lesson of the wideness of God's mercy. On the day when the Lord "makes atonement" (*kipper*) for Jerusalem (16:63), she will remember and be ashamed; her tongue will be stilled and her pride humbled once and for all.³¹

²⁸ Matthews & Walton. 16:57

²⁹ Engelbrecht. 1334

³⁰ Duguid. 214-215

³¹ Duguid. 215