

The Tent of Twin Sisters

A

B

- 1 **23** The word of the LORD came to me: ²“Son of man, there were two women, the daughters of one mother. ³They played the whore in Egypt; they played the whore in their youth; there their breasts were pressed and their virgin bosoms handled. ⁴Oholah was the name of the elder and Oholibah the name of her sister. They became mine, and they bore sons and daughters. As for their names, Oholah is Samaria, and Oholibah is Jerusalem.
- 2 ⁵“Oholah played the **whore** while she was mine, and she lusted after her lovers the **Assyrians**, warriors ⁶clothed in purple, governors and commanders, all of them desirable young men, horsemen riding on horses. ⁷She bestowed her whoring upon them, the choicest men of Assyria all of them, and she defiled herself with all the **idols** of everyone after whom she lusted. ⁸She did not give up her whoring that she had begun in **Egypt**; for in her youth men had lain with her and handled her virgin bosom and poured out their whoring lust upon her.
- 3 ¹¹“Her sister Oholibah **saw this**, and she became more corrupt than her sister in her lust and in her **whoring**, which was worse than that of her sister. ¹²**She lusted** after the **Assyrians**, governors and commanders, warriors clothed in full armor, horsemen riding on horses, all of them desirable young men.
- 4 ¹⁴But she carried her **whoring** further. She **saw men portrayed on the wall**, the images of the **Chaldeans** portrayed in vermilion, ¹⁵wearing belts on their waists, with flowing turbans on their heads, all of them having the appearance of officers, a likeness of **Babylonians** whose native land was Chaldea. ¹⁶When she saw them, she lusted after them and **sent messengers to them** in Chaldea. ¹⁷And the Babylonians came to her into the bed of love, and they defiled her with their whoring lust. And after she was defiled by them, **she turned from them in disgust**. ¹⁸When she carried on her whoring so openly and **flaunted her nakedness**,
- 5 ¹⁹Yet she increased her **whoring, remembering the days of her youth**, when she played the whore in the land of Egypt ²⁰and lusted after her lovers there, whose members were
- ⁹Therefore **I delivered her** into the hands of her lovers, into the hands of the Assyrians, after whom she lusted. ¹⁰These uncovered her nakedness; they seized her sons and her daughters; and as for her, they killed her with the sword; and she became a byword among women, when judgment had been executed on her.
- ¹³And **I saw that she was defiled**; they both took the same way.
- I turned in disgust** from her, as I had turned in disgust from her sister.
- ²²Therefore, O Oholibah, thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, **I will stir up against** you your lovers from whom you turned in disgust, and I will bring them against you

like those of donkeys, and whose issue was like that of horses. ²¹ Thus you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when the Egyptians handled your bosom and pressed your young breasts.”

from every side: ²³ the Babylonians and all the Chaldeans, Pekod and Shoa and Koa, and all the Assyrians with them, desirable young men, governors and commanders all of them, officers and men of renown, all of them riding on horses. ²⁴ And they shall come against you from the north with chariots and wagons and a host of peoples. They shall set themselves against you on every side with buckler, shield, and helmet; and I will commit the judgment to them, and they shall judge you according to their judgments. ²⁵ And I will direct my jealousy against you, that they may deal with you in fury. They shall cut off your nose and your ears, and your survivors shall fall by the sword. They shall seize your sons and your daughters, and your survivors shall be devoured by fire. ²⁶ They shall also strip you of your clothes and take away your beautiful jewels. ²⁷ Thus I will put an end to your lewdness and your whoring begun in the land of Egypt, so that you shall not lift up your eyes to them or remember Egypt anymore.

²⁸ “For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will deliver you into the hands of those whom you hate, into the hands of those from whom you turned in disgust, ²⁹ and they shall deal with you in hatred and take away all the fruit of your labor and leave you naked and bare, and the nakedness of your whoring shall be uncovered.

6 Your lewdness and your whoring ³⁰ have brought this upon you, because you played the whore with the nations and defiled yourself with their idols. ³¹ You have gone the way of your sister;

therefore I will give her cup into your hand. ³² Thus says the Lord GOD:

“You shall drink your sister’s cup that is deep and large; you shall be laughed at and held in derision, for it contains much;

³³ you will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow. A cup of horror and desolation, the cup of your sister Samaria;

³⁴ you shall drink it and drain it out, and gnaw its shards, and tear your breasts;

for I have spoken, declares the Lord GOD. ³⁵ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Because you have forgotten me and cast me behind your back, you yourself must bear the consequences of your lewdness and whoring.”

7 ³⁶ The LORD said to me: “Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Declare to them their abominations. ³⁷ For they have committed adultery, and blood is on their hands.

⁴³ “Then I said of her who was worn out by adultery, ‘Now they will continue to use her for a whore, even her!’ ⁴⁴ For they have gone in to her, as men go in to a prostitute. Thus they went in to Oholah and to Oholibah, lewd women! ⁴⁵ But righteous men shall pass

With their **idols** they have committed **adultery**, and they have even offered up to them for food the children whom they had borne to me. ³⁸ Moreover, this they have done to me: they have defiled **my sanctuary** on the same day and profaned **my Sabbaths**. ³⁹ For when they had slaughtered their children in sacrifice to their **idols**, on the same day they came into my sanctuary to profane it. And behold, this is what they did in my house. ⁴⁰ They even sent for men to come from afar, to whom a messenger was sent; and behold, they came. For them you bathed yourself, painted your eyes, and adorned yourself with ornaments. ⁴¹ You sat on a stately couch, with a table spread before it on which you had placed my incense and my oil. ⁴² The sound of a carefree multitude was with her; and with men of the common sort, drunkards were brought from the wilderness; and they put bracelets on the hands of the women, and beautiful crowns on their heads.

judgment on them with the sentence of adulteresses, and with the sentence of women who shed blood, because they are adulteresses, and blood is on their hands.”

⁴⁶ For thus says the Lord GOD: “Bring up a vast host against them, and make them an object of terror and a plunder. ⁴⁷ And the host shall stone them and cut them down with their swords. They shall kill their sons and their daughters, and burn up their houses. ⁴⁸ Thus will I **put an end to** lewdness in the land, that all women may take warning and not commit lewdness as you have done. ⁴⁹ And they shall return your lewdness upon you, and you shall bear the penalty for your sinful idolatry, and you shall know that I am the Lord GOD.”

Ezekiel 23:1-49

Two Sisters

Six miles directly south of downtown Estes Park there sits two distinct summits standing side by side, like sisters shoulder to shoulder. As you climb the trail you get one of the most stunning views of Long’s Peak’s mighty 2,000 ft. east face called The Diamond. Itself viewed as a “twin peak”

because of its proximity to Mt. Meeker and their two pyramidal towering summits as viewed from the Front Range, you've seen the much lower [Twin Sisters Peaks](#) anytime you look that direction—though you may not know what you are looking at. Twins they surely are. The pair of wind-swept, bare granite outcrops both rise above timberline, though just barely, for the East Peak sits at 11,428 feet, while the West is just 15 feet lower, half-a-mile away. These “Sisters” stand as a daily, awe-inspiring reminder of God's unchanging nature, his sovereign power, glory, majesty, and covenant faithfulness. Their silent testimony constantly points to the one who must be worshiped.

But Scripture gives us another pair of “sisters”—not stone and snow, but two kingdoms—[Samaria and Jerusalem](#), portrayed as sisters who were claimed by God as his own bride. They should have understood these things about God, but these sisters tell the opposite story. In Ezekiel 23, God paints a shocking picture: these sisters, born of the same covenant mother and father, [played the harlot](#) in their youth in Egypt. The elder, named Oholah, lusted after Assyrian warriors and so was handed over to destruction. The younger, Oholibah, watches her sister's judgment ... yet be-

comes even more corrupt, chasing Babylonian lovers, remembering the lewdness of Egypt, and defiling herself until God turns away in disgust.

Like our Twin Sisters peaks standing tall yet separate, these biblical sisters share the same origin and the same view of God's covenant faithfulness. Yet they **both intentionally turn away**, pursuing disgraceful things instead of the Lord who redeemed them. In the Bible, idolatry often happened on literal high places—hilltops and mountains where altars were built, incense was burned, and spiritual adultery took place under every green tree. Ezekiel condemns those high places previously in the book, but here in chapter 23, he zooms in on the heart: a covenant betrayal so intimate it's like adultery in the marriage bed.

Today, as we open Ezekiel 23, we will let these Twin Sisters on our chapter's horizon serve as **a mirror**. God's people can stand side by side, sharing the same heritage, the same breathtaking view of His glory—and still drift into compromise, one openly first, the other following worse while pretending loyalty. The pattern is ancient but cyclical, and thus the warning is fresh: when we forget the Lord and chase the world's powers, ideologies, or moral causes, we repeat the sisters' story. And it doesn't matter what your

birthright is. **Corporately speaking** (I'm not talking here on the level of salvation, but of churches), if you are unfaithful, this is how God sees you.

Let's let the text speak first with God's own explicit parable of jealousy, disgust, and judgment, before we look deeper into the mirror it holds up to us.

Ezekiel 23 in Context

Ezekiel 23 is one of the most graphic, unrelenting chapters in all of Scripture. God does not pull any punches. It is the genre of literature called **an allegory**. An allegory (Gk. *allēgoría*, from *állo* and *agoreúo* “**to say something other than normally intended by the words spoken**”)¹ is an extended story, often a **metaphor**, where characters, events, objects, and so on personify something else, something beyond the literal meaning of the words. By definition, it is not meant to be taken literally, though it very much is to be taken *seriously*. We've seen plenty of them during our long lament of judgment oracles: The **worthless vine** (**Ezek 15**), the **abandoned infant** who becomes a **prostitute** (**16**), **two eagles and a vine** (**17**), **the lioness and her cubs** (**19**), and so on.

¹ **Allen C. Myers**, “ALLEGORY,” in *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 39.

Ezekiel 23 is the longest and most detailed, a development of “harlot sisters”—two kingdoms side-by-side, with the younger sister being worse than the older—a major twist of the knife into the gut of a group of people who prided themselves on **how impossible it was for them to be like their sister** (their *inviolability*). The allegory represents Israel’s history which takes us back to Egypt.² It is the chiasmic pair to ch. 16’s harlot imagery, but it escalates it. It is more brutal, focuses on historical progression of sin, and ends in a call for judgment to “**put an end to the lewdness in the land.**”

The two **sisters are given names**. The older is Samaria and she is named *Oholah*. The younger sister is Judah and she is named *Oholibah*. Each begin with the three consonants in Hebrew that are used to **spell “tent”** (aleph-he-lamedh; *ahole*). The tent is where religious worship occurred.³ *Oholah* means “**Her Tent.**” Might that refer to the tabernacle when it was set up in the Northern Kingdom, or more generally to religious apostasy that forsook Jerusalem—the place where God set his Name? *Oholibah* means, “**My Tent**

² Alex Luc, “[A Theology of Ezekiel: God’s Name and Israel’s History](#),” *JETS* 26.2 (June 1983): 137-43. Lyons argues that this is not referring to their time in Egypt as slaves, but to their early political alliances with Egypt later on. Michael A. Lyons, “[‘They Whored in Egypt’ \(Ezek 23:3\)—When?](#)” *VT* 72 (2022): 676-87.

³ This and the following are in Michael S. Heiser, “[Naked Bible Podcast Transcript Episode 137: Ezekiel 23](#),” *Naked Bible Podcast* (Dec 17, 2016), 5.

Is In Her.” That refers to Jerusalem, the place where worship was ordained to occur on Mt. Zion. Curiously, Esau’s wife was *Oholibamah*, where *bamah* is the word for a “high place,” as we saw back in ch. 16.

The structure is **not chiastic**. Most just **outline** it with something like 1. Introduction (1-4); 2. Historical Background (5-35) with Oholah going first (5-10) and Oholibah second (11-35); 3. The Case Against (36-49a); 4. Conclusion (49b).⁴ But it is very clearly **a two column weave**, continuing the pattern of 3-2 that we’ve seen since ch. 12, where all the odd chapters are two columns. In this case, the left column is the sisters’ sins, while their doom is in the right column.

Row 1 (Ezek 22:1-4): The Bloody City – Guilty and Defiled

The chapter opens with an **introductory four verses** that cut across both columns. “**The Word of the LORD came to me**” (**Ezek 23:1**). There was no shortage for during these

⁴ For instance **Daniel Isaac Block**, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 731.

years with Christ coming to the prophet Ezekiel with messages. Makes me very much wonder what it must have been like.

“Son of man, there were two women, the daughters of one mother” (2). Of course, I’ve already told you who they are, but reading it for the first time you would have no idea. And he doesn’t tell anyone up front. He lets the allegory play. “They played the whore *in Egypt*...” (3a). To when does this refer? Some, reading the language very literally take it to mean the political alliances both Israel and Judah would make with Egypt in earlier monarchical periods.⁵ But most, being more comfortable with this being a *theological* allegory, believe this is referring to *Israel’s slavery in Egypt* prior the Mosaic covenant being established. To me, the majority view is best.

What is said next begins some of the most shocking and explicit language in the entire Bible. “... they played the whore in their youth; there their breasts were pressed and their virgin bosoms handled” (3). This is “**Rated R**” stuff that refers to passionate love making. But notice that the two women are both depicted as *young* and *virgins*. This is not what they are supposed to be engaging in. It is behavior

⁵ For example, Lyons.

God ordained as good, but within the context of marriage. This is not that, for they are not yet married.

Suddenly, we get their names: **Oholah** is the elder and **Oholibah** is the former (4a). We don't yet know who they are, only that both are **named after tents** and that, apparently, the LORD's tent is in the latter and thus, presumably, not the former. Oholah has her own tent. Tents to do what? *Make love*, as the language depicts.

But then suddenly, The Word of the LORD says, “**They became mine.**” This almost certainly refers to the formal covenant God made with them at Mt. Sinai in the Ten Commandments (**Ex 34:28**), for as we see at the end of **vs. 4**, the names refer to **Samaria** and **Jerusalem**. Of course, there were no older and younger sisters back at Sinai or in slavery in Egypt; there was only Israel. That's why some think this must refer to the days after Jeroboam's rebellion against the South. But if press that, then you have to deal with how God is not yet in covenant with them here (i.e. “they *became* mine”), because surely they already *were* his, for the covenant with Moses was their marriage ceremony.⁶

⁶ This is precisely Lyon's argument and that grammar can support that. But it creates more problems than it solves. For one, these girls are in their youth. Sure, you could argue that beginning with Jeroboam and Rehoboam, Israel and Judah are now young girls. The allegory depicts them as virgins being handled in Egypt—pre-covenant defilement—yet the text laces this before Sinai. Post-Sinai, they are no longer ‘virgins’ in covenant terms. So the Sinai covenant is the “marriage” moment—before which they were already defiled in Egypt.

Samaria and Jerusalem, while now separate in Ezekiel's day, were one before that, which only adds to the biting irony of this entire chapter.

Samaria is a rather scandalous way of referring to the Northern Kingdom which is usually just called Israel. Samaria itself was considered the land of half-breeds, and was the place where they erected their false worship on Mt. Gerizim (**John 4:20**). It was also the place where God first made his Name to dwell in the Tabernacle *in Shiloh* (**Josh 18:1**), but it was only temporary, and the Israelites defiled it with idols (**Jdg 18:31**). God *permanently* made his name and tent dwell *in Jerusalem*, and Shiloh was actually judged, as Jeremiah will have the people recall (**Jer 7:12-14**). Therefore, all of this is allegorical for the uncommanded metaphorical “tent” in the days of Jeroboam king of Israel where he erected **new places of worship**, **new priests** that weren't Levites, **new holy days**, and **golden calves** (**1Kgs 12:25-33**).⁷ These became a great stumbling block for the Northern Kingdom.

At any rate, it seems confirmed that we are dealing with Israel as slaves in Egypt, both because that's exactly what it was in mind previously (**20:5-10, 36**), and because “**they**

⁷ A good summary can be found in **Kevin Reed**, *Biblical Worship* (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage Pub., 1995), ch. 2.

bore sons and daughters” (Ezek 23:4) here. Who are they? All the generations of Israel and Judah until this oracle was given.

Row 2 (22:5-10): Oholah

It is verse 5 that our **two column contrast** now begins to appear. First, we deal with **Oholah**. She, “**Played the whore while she was mine, and she lusted after her lovers the Assyrians, warriors clothed in purple, governors and commanders, all of them desirable young men, horsemen riding on horses. She bestowed her whoring upon them, the choicest men of Assyria all of them, and she defiled herself with all the idols of everyone after whom she lusted**” (Ezek 23:5-7). “**Whoring**” or adultery is the main theme of Ezekiel 16. It will occur in every single row in column 1.

The time frame moves forward long past Egypt now, to the days of **the Assyrians**. This began way back in the days of **king Jehu** (ca. 841 BC), who paid tribute to Shalmaneser III (as we learn from something called the Black Obelisk which now sits in a London museum; see photo below). This continued under Jehoahaz, Jehoash, Jeroboam II, and Menahem for nearly 100 years (ca. 745-38), who paid heavy tribute to

Tiglath-Pileser II (2Kgs 15:19-20). But when king Hoshea rebelled (725-22), Assyria laid siege to Samaria and her people were brutalized and deported in 722 (2Kgs 17:3-6).

It is fascinating to me that what the kings of Israel would have called **wise political alliances**, God calls **spiritual adultery**—lusting after her lovers. Assyria was the power of the world, and Israel believed that making this alliance would increase its own power. But Christ said *he* would bless her, *he* would protect her. So, she lost trust in her God and turned on him with the idols of the nations.

Vs. 8 adds, “**She did not give up her whoring that she had begun in Egypt; for in her youth men had lain with her and handled her virgin bosom and poured out their whoring lust upon her.**” Essentially, all of Israel’s history is being compressed into a single pathetic sentence, and it shows that the Israelites were in fact worshiping false and treacherous gods while slaves in Egypt. They exchanged the tent of Yahweh for **the tents of the gods**. Those are the tents in her midst. They’ve learned nothing in the intervening half-dozen or more centuries.



Panel 2: Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser II (825 BC)
“The tribute of Jehu, son of Omri...” (Jehu is bowing)
© The Trustees of the British Museum , CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Thus we come to [col 2](#), the judgment column, the column of God’s actions. “Therefore *I delivered her* into the hands of her lovers, into the hands of the Assyrians, after whom she lusted. These uncovered her nakedness; they seized her sons and her daughters; and as for her, they killed her with the sword; and she became a byword among women, when judgment had been executed on her” ([Ezek 23:9-10](#)). Uncovering the nakedness is what we saw in ch. 22, and it takes us back to a series of sexual laws in [Lev 18:6-19](#). In two brutal verses, we learn about the horrors of what

happened when the Assyrian invaded and captured the Northern kingdom: rape, slavery, murder. And Israel was no more. And it all lead, *as Judah knows full well*, to the Northern kingdom becoming a mockery and byword both in Judah and in all the nations around. Who remembers the pathetic fallen kingdoms of old? No one.

Row 3 (11-13): Oholibah the Worse

This takes us to [rows 3-5](#), and the much longer oracle against [her sister: Oholibah](#). These rows are going to give [a progression of her sin](#), and because I want you to see it clearly here it is:

- Seeing (14)
- Lusting (12, 14)
- Flaunting (as a summary; 18)
- Sending (16)
- Turning in disgust (17)
- Becoming nostalgic (19)
- Does it again but worse (20)

We begin, “[Her sister Oholibah saw this, and she became more corrupt than her sister in her lust and in her whoring, which was worse than that of her sister](#)” (11). It’s

the same sin as before, but now let's think about this in more detail. As with Eve, it begins with the eyes.

First, *she saw it all*. Judah watched everything from the relatively safe confines of Jerusalem's walled off city. The prophets like Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos were, after all, going after Israel, not so much her. So she watched as her older sister was hauled away for her sins and put to death. "Good riddance! They've been nothing but a thorn in God's side since Jeroboam rebelled. But *we* are the inheritors of the covenants. *We* have the kings. *We* have the temple. This gives us immunity and," she thought to herself, "impunity." Because she knew what her sister had done and didn't heed, she became *worse than her sister*.

How? After seeing, we learn, "*She lusted after the Assyrians, governors and commanders, warriors clothed in full armor, horsemen riding on horses, all of them desirable young men*" (12). This is basically what we just saw with the older sister. *The result?* It is interesting to compare this to what we previously saw in col. 2. We just saw that "*I delivered her...*" Now we get the tension. "*And I saw that she was defiled; they both took the same way*" (13). First Jerusalem sees. Now God sees in return: "*And I saw...*" Do you recall any other times the LORD saw something? How

about in the days before **the Flood**? “*The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*” (**Gen 6:5**). This does not bode well.

Row 4 (14-18): The Lord’s Disgust

The next row begins, critically, “**But she carried her whoring further.**” Do you understand what you’ve just read? It isn’t just that Oholibah saw what her sister did or what happened to her. It is that she *knows* that the LORD saw that she, the younger sister, was defiled. *She knows that God knows*, and she doesn’t care. That’s astonishing.

Vv. 14-15 repeats vs. 12, but gives much more detail. “She saw men portrayed on the wall, the images of the Chaldeans portrayed in vermilion, wearing belts on their waists, with flowing turbans on their heads, all of them having the appearance of officers, a likeness of Babylonians whose native land was Chaldea.” The “seeing” here and in vs. **12** is **lust** (‘*āgab* the verb and ‘*agbā* the noun): **the obsessive, passionate, far-off, depersonalized craving** for the Assyrians that refers not merely to attraction, but to an **all-consuming desire** that leads to defilement and betrayal.

Notice what she sees. She sees *images* of the Chaldeans, decked out in their belts and turbans—so powerful, so important. It is no coincidence that we learn about king Jehu bowing before the Assyrian, not from the Bible, but from the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser II—a 9th century bas-relief depicting the deeds of King Shalmaneser III. Such depictions showed the might of the king and were essentially the *ancient political equivalent of the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue*—glamorous, idealized images designed to evoke awe, admiration, and desire. Why? Because when she saw the *images*, she lusted. **Vs. 16a**, “*When she saw them, she lusted after them...*” The images created fantasies in her head of people she never knew that were not based in reality. The image of the lover creates insatiable desire in the heart of Jerusalem. And it is a lie.

This in turn causes her to “*send messengers to them in Chaldea*” (**16b**). She is now going to go after her lover in a form of *spiritual yet literal adultery*. She *pursues* her fantasy. And the Babylonian returns the favor, but not the way she expects, for the fantasy ends in self-loathing. “*And the Babylonians came to her into the bed of love, and they defiled her with their whoring lust. And after she was defiled by them, she turned from them in disgust*” (**17**). Essentially, as

vs. 18 will say, “She carried on her whoring openly and flaunted her nakedness” and so the Babylonian say, “OK, come to me, my darling.” But as soon as the love-making is over, she is disgusted in herself for doing it.

There is a story during the days of David that is remarkably similar. It regards his son Amnon who sees his forbidden sister Tamar’s beauty and becomes lovesick (2Sam 13:1-2). His passion grows as his *lust* for the forbidden woman increases (2, 4). He *schemes* with Jonadab to lure her to him (5-6). He *woos* and then forces her into the bed and defiles her (11-14). Then *he hates himself* with intense disgust immediately after (15).

This is **the same cycle** so many millions of boys, girls, men, and women are increasingly crushed in because of the modern trap of pornography, which is more parallel, because as we will see, the cycle usually does not end in a one-time event (I choose this sin mainly because of the “images” parallel to Ezek 23, but frankly, it’s the same cycle any besetting sin follows). First there are the alluring images, then the lusting, then the pursuit, then the mental and emotional defilement, then the temporary disgust that you did it again. That’s all the same. But then, there is **the nostalgic return** to the past and the repeat, which sometimes becomes

worse and worse, ending in a few cases in unspeakable crimes not just in the head but in reality—often against children, let alone what happens to children in that industry itself. Again, this is not unique to pornography; it is the same cycle *any besetting sin* follows: seeing, lusting, pursuing, defiling, disgust, and then the deadly return.⁸ This is the anatomy of sin.

⁸ **Going Deeper.** And interesting psychology lesson here. [Some examples might help.](#) **Worry:** 1. You see the threat. 2. You lust for control of that threat. 3. You actively pursue relief asking endless “what if” questions, staying up late thinking and obsessing. 4. The mental “consummation” happens when you are emotionally and mentally united with fear: spiraling thoughts, racing heart, panic attacks—idolatry. 5. You turn in disgust from the exhaustion and guilt and self-loathing. 6. The shame fades, the mind romanticizes the old pattern (“Worrying helped me prepare last time...”). 7. The cycle repeats but worse: greater anxiety, more triggers, etc., etc.

How about [bitterness](#). 1. You see how someone hurts you—the injustice of it. 2. You lust for justice and vindication or superiority. 3. You actively pursue the resentment, rehearsing the offense in your mind, telling others (gossip), avoiding or snubbing the person, plotting revenge. 4. You consummate the bitterness by dwelling in it, letting it consume you. It defiles your heart with poison, joy is replaced by cynicism, peace with anger, love by hardness. 5. You are hit by the guilt and exhaustion of it and feel disgust at your own hardness and how much energy you waste on it. 6. Disgust fades and you romanticize the old would (“They really did hurt me; I’m justified”). 7. It escalates and the pattern starts over.

This is the way of it with any sin: **Emotional/mental sins:** anxiety/worry, bitterness/resentment, envy/comparison, fear/obsessive control, perfectionism, pride/self-exaltation, secret self-pity. **Behavioral sins:** compulsive lying/exaggeration, compulsive overeating/binge eating, compulsive shopping/hoarding, drunkenness/alcohol abuse, gambling, overworking/workaholism, pornography/screen addiction, rage/uncontrolled anger, self-harm. **Relational sins:** gossip/slander, manipulation/people-pleasing/approval-seeking, passive-aggressive resentment, pornography-induced objectification of others. You name it—any of these can run the same tragic course.

Scripture and experience suggest [God permits besetting sins in all human beings](#) (none are excluded) [for at least five reasons](#). 1. To keep us humble and dependent on grace. If God removed every sin, we would quickly become proud and self-reliant in our flesh (remember Paul’s thorn in his flesh, whether it was a besetting sin or not; 2Cor 12:7–10). 2. To teach us to fight by faith, not by willpower alone (Rom 8:13; Gal 5:16–17; Col 3:5). If he freed us of all struggles, we would miss the discipline of putting sin to death daily and the joy of experiencing God’s delivering power (Phil 2:12–13; Heb 12:1–2). 3. To conform us to the image of Christ through suffering (Rom 5:3–4; 8:29; Heb 5:8). 4. To display the riches of his patience and mercy (Ex 34:6; Ps 103:8; 2Pet 3:9; Rom 9:22–23). 5. To prepare us for eternal glory, the thing for which we long (Rom 8:23; Rev 21:4).

But before we see how this parallel's Jerusalem with her political lust (for lust is really just coveting, and that concerns many more things than just sex), let's note **God's reaction** in the B Column. For just as **Jerusalem saw** and then **God saw**, so now as **Jerusalem turned from them in disgust**, so now, "*I turned in disgust from her, as I had turned in disgust from her sister*" (18b).

What you have just read there is **the power of the law**. It is not the gospel. Many leave the solution to their lust in the power of the law and in their own strength to overcome sin by just trying harder. But the law increases sin. Only the gospel forgives it. The law here is God's *just* reaction to sin. Not his gracious reaction to it. It is not the good news of Jesus Christ, **of which there really is not much of in this chapter**; that is not its purpose. Don't make this about your or your friend. This is about a nation of people, a corporate entity. This isn't about their eternal salvation, which comes by grace alone. It is about their temporal destruction—a picture of what sin justly deserves. A picture of what Christ carried upon himself when he took the wrath of God for your sin. **The Gospel is the only power that forgives** the cycles in Christ who makes us into new creatures who are not

known by our sins, but by the perfect name of Jesus—for-given, justified, and made new. That is God’s love that must always be returned to.

Row 5 (19-29): Nostalgia Gone Wrong

But we must continue with our passage. Notice that even though she was disgusted at herself, “**Yet she increased her whoring...**” (19). In other words, **she returned to her sin**. How did she do this? Through **nostalgically** reminiscing her fantasy. After her disgust wore off, she “*remembered the days of her youth, when she played the whore in the land of Egypt and lusted after her lovers there...*” (19b-20a), obviously harkening back to how even in the wilderness, Israel would rather go back to Egypt and its gods and its pharaoh and its harsh slavery in its sick nostalgic fantasy.

But God wants people to see that **the fantasy is a disgusting lie**. And so we get one of the most **vulgar** verses of the entire Bible to describe this fantasy. The goal is to disrupt that fantasy and make them realize what it is actually is like to God. It says, “**Whose members were like those of donkeys, and whose issue was like that of horses**” (20b). “**Members**” is a word for “flesh” (*basar*) or, better, (sacrificial) “**meat**” and

is a clear euphemism for the male organ (the penis), as the word “**issue**” which is in parallel is the word *zirmâ*, a gutter-word meaning “**to flow forth violently**” or “**to gush**” (ejaculate, related to *zāram* = “**to pour out in torrents, flood.**” Some lexicons have it meaning “penis”). **Ezekiel deliberately uses the most graphic, scatological, and obscene language available** in biblical Hebrew to describe spiritual adultery (idolatry and foreign alliances). He wants you to understand that what humans find magnetically alluring (the painted images of desirable officers), God repaints as disgusting and bestial (donkey-sized members, horse-like gushing emissions) to create revulsion where lust once ruled. Through the metaphor, the sin here is actually being viewed as a kind of bestiality—a grotesque, dehumanizing sin in the way they have forsaken him with the nations and their gods. That is what vs. **21** thus summarizes when it says, “**Thus you longed for *the lewdness of your youth*, when the Egyptians handled your bosom and pressed your young breasts.**”

This takes us to **the turning point of the chapter**, and nearly the halfway point. From here on out, even though the columns still continue to repeat the same ideas, it is **judgment** that comes to the foreground. First up is **vv. 22-29** in

the judgment column. “Therefore, O Oholibah, thus says the Lord God: ‘Behold, I will stir up against you your lovers from whom you turned in disgust, and I will bring them against you from every side’” (22). *You were stirred up* in your lust, so *I will stir up* your lovers. Eye for an eye. I will cause them to turn on you, like Amnon turned on his sister, only worse. For these lovers will come from every side.

“The Babylonians and all the Chaldeans, Pekod and Shoa and Koa, and all the Assyrians with them, desirable young men, governors and commanders all of them, officers and men of renown, all of them riding on horses” (23). The language is the same as that of the images they lusted after: desirable young men, governors, commanders, riding on horses, everything they lust after. But this refers historically to “a series of invaders ... Peqod [was] an important Aramean tribe ... [who] inhabited the lower Tigris River ... The people mentioned as Shoa and Koa in Ezekiel have been identified with Aramean tribes called Sutû and Qutu in Akkadian literature.”⁹ The purpose is to show that Israel is surrounded by a full coalition of Eastern Aramean tribes under the command of Nebuchadnezzar.

⁹ John H Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 455.

Thus it continues, “And they shall come against you from the north with chariots and wagons and a host of peoples. They shall set themselves against you on every side with buckler, shield, and helmet; and I will commit the judgment to them, and they shall judge you according to their judgments. And I will direct my jealousy against you, that they may deal with you in fury” (24-25a). Then it gets brutal. “They shall cut off your nose and your ears” (25b). She who lusted at the glistening bodies of her lovers will now have her own face deformed. Who will want to sleep with you then? “And your survivors shall fall by the sword. They shall seize your sons and your daughters, and your survivors shall be devoured by fire. They shall also strip you of your clothes and take away your beautiful jewels” (25c-26).

We’ve seen all this before, as we have the conclusion. “Thus I will put an end to your lewdness and your whoring begun in the land of Egypt, so that you shall not lift up your eyes to them or remember Egypt anymore” (27). “For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will deliver you into the hands of those whom you hate, into the hands of those from whom you turned in disgust, and they shall deal with you in hatred and take away all the fruit of your labor and leave you naked and bare, and the nakedness of your whoring

shall be uncovered” (28-29). It’s pretty overwhelming. Ezekiel has struck the mark.

Row 6 (29b-35): The Cup of Horror

We return to Oholibah in a recap so that she knows that in fact *she is her sister*. She’s *worse* than her sister. “Your lewdness and your whoring have brought this upon you, because you played the whore with the nations and defiled yourself with their idols. You have gone the way of your sister” (29b-31a).

For it, she gets *the cup of God’s wrath*, delivered to her in the form of a *qinah* 3-2 lament (wailing and lamentation): “Therefore I will give her cup into your hand. Thus says the Lord God:

“You shall drink your sister’s cup
that is deep and large;
you shall be laughed at and held in derision,
for it contains much;
you will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow.
A cup of horror and desolation,
the cup of your sister Samaria;
you shall drink it and drain it out,

and gnaw its shards,
and tear your breasts;
for I have spoken, declares the Lord GOD.

(31b-34)

This **haunting dirge** is **God's own sorrowful song** over His unfaithful bride, handing her the same bitter cup of judgment her sister Samaria drank of deeply, overflowing with horror, drunkenness, scorn, and self-inflicted pain. Yet even in this mournful pronouncement of desolation, the Lord is calling His people to see the ruin of their whoring, to feel the weight of their forgotten love, and to turn back before the cup is fully drained, because His heart still longs for them to know that He is the Lord. But if they will not, “**Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because you have forgotten me and cast me behind your back, you yourself must bear the consequences of your lewdness and whoring**” (35). **If one will not** have faith and repent and trust in God's love and goodness, all that is left is judgment.

Row 7 (36-49): Two Women, Same Fate

Sadly, that **judgment** is about to be pressed upon us in all of its horrific **weight and force**, as we come to the end of

the oracles and await the invasion of Jerusalem in the next chapter. Row 7 takes us to the conclusion of these many long chapters and of the allegory of the two women. What it teaches is that these two women would not repent until **God finally had to bring** the full force of the covenant curses against them both.

The first column returns us to the women and cements their sin. “**The LORD said to me: ‘Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Declare to them their abominations’**” (36). Yes, Ezekiel, you will judge them.

“**For they have committed adultery, and blood is on their hands. With their idols they have committed adultery, and they have even offered up to them for food the children whom they had borne to me**” (37). Their spiritual sin is **so grotesque** that they offered their children as human sacrifices to the foreign gods. The same practice continues in our own day, both in public (abortion) and in private (Satanic Ritual Abuse).

This in turn **profaned God’s sanctuary**—*his tent* and his Sabbaths, the days he gave them to remember him and celebrate his kind, light rule over them. “**Moreover, this they have done to me: they have defiled my sanctuary on the same day and profaned my Sabbaths. For when they had**

slaughtered their children in sacrifice to their idols, on the same day they came into my sanctuary to profane it. And behold, this is what they did in my house” (38-39). Ultimately, their names are a reflection of their own profanity against God’s temple.

“They even sent for men to come from afar, to whom a messenger was sent; and behold, they came. For them you bathed yourself, painted your eyes, and adorned yourself with ornaments. You sat on a stately couch, with a table spread before it on which you had placed my incense and my oil” (40-41). She prepared herself for her lovers. She wanted this. She begged for this. She spread a table for this. “The sound of a carefree multitude was with her; and with men of the common sort, drunkards were brought from the wilderness; and they put bracelets on the hands of the women, and beautiful crowns on their heads” (42). She convinced all of her people that this was for their good. She bribed them. She gave them iPhones and free hotels and all the free health care they could ever want. This will become the supper of ghouls and dinner of the dead.

The judgment in Col 1 concludes. “Then I said of her who was worn out by adultery...” (43a). Remember how she despised herself? After a long time of this, one becomes

worn out by it. They come to the end of themselves, but **still cannot stop**. The language hints at God’s compassion—they are worn out by their sin and he knows that, but **God must have his way**, for she must come to see what she has done. “**Now they will continue to use her for a whore, even her!**” For they have gone in to her, as men go in to a prostitute. Thus they went in to Oholah and to Oholibah, lewd women!” (43-44). It is heartbreaking even for God to watch in a sense. He isn’t doing this out of hatred, but out of covenant love for his bride.

“**But righteous men shall pass judgment on them with the sentence of adulteresses, and with the sentence of women who shed blood, because they are adulteresses, and blood is on their hands**” (45). Who are these “**righteous men?**” It could refer to the judicial, though not moral righteousness of the **Babylonian** and his allies. They are bringing the sword of justice at directed by God. But there are some left who have not forsaken him, men like **Ezekiel**, who even this very moment is also passing judgment. Ultimately, all righteous judgment is put into the hand of **Jesus Christ**, the Judge of the living and the dead, and he will judge all things rightly, even as he does here with these sisters.

“For thus says the Lord God: ‘Bring up a vast host against them, and make them an object of terror and a plunder. And the host shall stone them and cut them down with their swords. They shall kill their sons and their daughters, and burn up their houses. Thus will I put an end to lewdness in the land, that all women may take warning and not commit lewdness as you have done. And they shall return your lewdness upon you, and you shall bear the penalty for your sinful idolatry.’” (46-49a). And so it shall be done. **The judgment oracles have come to an end.** The women have not turned from their sin. No amount of pleading has stopped them in their tracks. The law has not been taken seriously. They have not returned to God by faith.

“But they shall know God, for that is the final drumbeat of the chapter. “And you shall know that I am the Lord God” (49b). Whether you want to, or not. All men will.

Two Women in Our Day?

Before leaving, I want to make an **application**. I know I’ve already kind of done this on the level of our own individual ability to sin, for as James says, a temptation occurs when one is lured and enticed by his own desire which then

conceives and gives birth to sin, after which when sin is fully grown brings forth death ([James 1:14-15](#)).

But I want to tell you about a thought I've had about this chapter for at least 25 years. This goes back to my early days as a Reformed Christian. Many years ago, *Modern Reformation Magazine* was soliciting essays from their readers. I decided to write one and send it in. It never got published as far as I know, so maybe they disagreed or maybe it just stunk, I don't know.

I realize that in what I'm about to say, one could easily do the same with the Roman-Eastern split around 1050 AD, or perhaps the Roman-Protestant split around 1517, or perhaps paedobaptist and anabaptists of centuries gone by. Many things could apply. But as I live in the modern [Evangelical world](#), and have thought much about what Evangelicalism was and has become, this is where I want to give a warning to us today. While I no longer have that essay, I remember the gist of it.

We Protestants in modern times have been lumped into [two categories](#): [Liberals](#) and [Evangelicals](#). These words once meant that one group apostatized from the gospel, while the other remained faithful to it. This has given Evangelicals a

sense of almost untouchable superiority, much like Jerusalem in our chapter. And one could certainly lump Reformed Christians in with Evangelicals—and we have been since the beginning in this strange coalition of Christians who came out of the modernist controversy in the Fundamentalist years of the early 1900s.

But let me give some definition. **By Liberalism**, I am not referring to the political left (Democrats, socialists, communists, etc.)—although many if not most modern Protestant Liberals are also on the political left. Liberalism arose in mainline Protestantism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in response to Enlightenment rationalism, higher criticism of the Bible, and Darwinian evolution. Theologians and church leaders (especially in Germany, then spreading to Britain and America) began treating Scripture as a mere **human document** rather than inerrant divine word of God, resulting in the denial or reinterpretation of core doctrines such as the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection, and miracles, ironically following the Deists that led the charge in the Rationalism movement.

These “liberals” — who eventually dominated many historic Mainline denominations (Presbyterian USA, United Methodist, Episcopal, United Church of Christ,

etc.) — came mostly from [the same confessional Protestant](#) stock as evangelicals but chose to *accommodate modernity* by prioritizing social ethics, scientific plausibility, and universal human experience over Reformation and Christian orthodoxy, producing what J. Gresham Machen famously called “[another religion](#)” in *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923).¹⁰ Today, when evangelicals use “liberal” pejoratively, they typically mean those Mainline heirs (or their theological descendants in evangelical spaces) who continue to downplay or deny historic Christian doctrines while emphasizing inclusivity, social justice, and cultural adaptation over biblical authority and substitutionary atonement. Their gospel is a “social gospel.”

In my mind, this in many ways equates to [the older sister](#), Oholah. For these churches openly courted the god of modernity. Today, many of the churches in these denominations openly espouse every form of pagan doctrine imaginable, as their social gospel has no ability to keep them from adopting every spirit of the age (from killing babies in the womb, to celebrating and actively promoting sexual deviancy, to demonizing justice while advocating for “social

¹⁰ [J. Gresham Machen](#), *Christianity and Liberalism* (Monergism reprint, 1923), 5.

justice” (the opposite), to openly worshiping the gods like Gaia and Oden and Athena).

This is pure [apostacy](#), and Evangelicalism was birthed by several groups that came together in the early 1900s to fight it. Called the [Fundamentalists](#), the movement peaked during the Scopes Monkey Trial around 1925 and major denominational splits during the next 10 years. Originally, a “Fundamentalist” was used to describe not pharisaical legalism (although there were certainly some in these groups that had that tendency), but those who said we will not compromise on the *fundamentals* of the faith—especially the creeds and the inerrancy of Scripture.¹¹

[Iain Murray](#) in his book *Evangelicalism Divided*¹² gives three benchmarks for the formation of the Evangelical movement. These are the [Billy Graham](#), the creation of *Christianity Today* Magazine, and the formation of [Fuller Theological Seminary](#). Each of these took the kind of “lesser” is better approach of the Fundamentalists, which wanted a big tent to fight the Liberals. I use “tent” on purpose.

¹¹ [R. A. Torrey](#); A. C. Dixon (eds), *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* Four Vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003, 1910-15). This is the classic collection of 90 essays from Arminians and Calvinists, Dispensationalists and Reformed Christians who came together to fight Liberalism.

¹² [Iain Murray](#), *Evangelicalism Divided: A Reformed of Crucial Change in the Years 1950-2000* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2001).

What started out as a term that clearly said, “We are not Liberal,” has not stayed that way. Unfortunately, this lesser-is-better approach which did not like Confessions of faith (neither did the Liberals, who locked them all away in their church basements), saw an ever shrinking number of “essentials,” first from the common 12 point statements of faith still seen in some denominations, to then 7, then 5, then 3. Now, many have none of their websites at all. Perhaps the *Evangelical Theological Society* is a good mirror here, as it only has two things you need to believe in order to be part of it: The Trinity and the Inerrancy of Scripture.

Murray catalogues the theological and religious drift of Evangelicals up till 2000, but surely, we have seen much more today, so much so that calling oneself an Evangelical these days does not guarantee that you aren't in fact looking at her twin sister: Liberalism. It is Evangelicals, neo-Calvinists, *Christianity today*, *The Gospel Coalition*, TG4, our seminaries, our churches—many Reformed—that once again openly promote social justice, now in its even worse neo-Marxist form, that can't articulate the Gospel in polls and that have confusion in their pews over even doctrines such as the virgin birth or the resurrection of Jesus. These stats have been out for decades now.

What truly bothers me is that in light of Ezekiel 23, it is so tempting and easy to look at *your sister* who came from the same mother as you did and say, “Good riddance to her,” while thinking yourself immune from God’s judgment. *Evangelical* is a word that people throw around like “The temple of the LORD” or “Jerusalem.” God couldn’t possibly get mad at us! We are the faithful! We have the name!

I’m seeing an increase in this same kind of attitude as it seduces many Evangelicals who realize that something is amiss as they rapidly run to Rome or Orthodoxy, churches which may confess the Creeds, but have a very different gospel from Galatians and Romans. They do not believe in justification by faith alone. They just don’t. They too say that God could never get mad at them. Why? They have Apostolic succession! Peter laid his hands on our pope. We go back to Antioch itself.

But Jesus says to the church at *Ephesus*—corporately now, I’m not talking about personal salvation, as neither is Ezekiel, “I will come and remove your lampstand from its place” (Rev 2:5). And that church was founded by Paul himself! He says he will war against *Pergamum* (2:14-16), throw *Thyatira* onto a sickbed, strike her children dead, and

give each according to their works (20-23), come like a thief against **Sardis**, and spit **Laodicea** out of his mouth.

How could he do this? It's because no church is not immune any more than humans are. You are not born a Christian and you do not stay a church just because you were started by an Apostle or have some guy who has apostolic succession. What God requires is faith in Jesus Christ and for churches, remaining faithful to the full Gospel, not just the creeds (which is vital), but also how we are saved. It doesn't matter if you start off well. It is how you finish.

Any group of Churches that will not remain faithful can be spit out of Christ's mouth. Period. That includes **conservative**, Evangelical, Reformed Presbyterians, Lutherans, Anglicans, or Reformed Baptists. And many of these, too, are now apostatizing. When the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on the earth?

Ezekiel 23 remains relevant because it is **a mirror for Christ's bride**. Our only hope, both individually and collectively, is that we see our sin, understand the cycle, and pray to God that he forgives us and justifies us of our disease through faith in Christ's death.

That's the lesson of Ezekiel 23. It's the lesson of the Twin Sisters. It's the lesson of the judgment oracles. It's the

lesson of the covenant of works. Praise God for the covenant of grace whereby we remain in Christ by grace alone.

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