EZEKIEL

Chapter 16

*An Allegory of Unfaithful Jerusalem*

**The word of the LORD came to me:  2 “Son of man, confront Jerusalem with her detestable practices  3 and say, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says to Jerusalem: Your ancestry and birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite.  4 On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths.  5 No one looked on you with pity or had compassion enough to do any of these things for you. Rather, you were thrown out into the open field, for on the day you were born you were despised. 6 “‘Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, “Live!”  7 I made you grow like a plant of the field. You grew up and developed and became the most beautiful of jewels. Your breasts were formed and your hair grew, you who were naked and bare. 8 ”‘Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine. 9 ”‘I bathed you with water and washed the blood from you and put ointments on you.  10 I clothed you with an embroidered dress and put leather sandals on you. I dressed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments.  11 I adorned you with jewelry: I put bracelets on your arms and a necklace around your neck,  12 and I put a ring on your nose, earrings on your ears and a beautiful crown on your head.  13 So you were adorned with gold and silver; your clothes were of fine linen and costly fabric and embroidered cloth. Your food was fine flour, honey and olive oil. You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen.  14 And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect, declares the Sovereign LORD. 15 ”‘But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his.  16 You took some of your garments to make gaudy high places, where you carried on your prostitution. Such things should not happen, nor should they ever occur.  17 You also took the fine jewelry I gave you, the jewelry made of my gold and silver, and you made for yourself male idols and engaged in prostitution with them.  18 And you took your embroidered clothes to put on them, and you offered my oil and incense before them.  19 Also the food I provided for you—the fine flour, olive oil and honey I gave you to eat—you offered as fragrant incense before them. That is what happened, declares the Sovereign LORD. 20 ”‘And you took your sons and daughters whom you bore to me and sacrificed them as food to the idols. Was your prostitution not enough?  21 You slaughtered my children and sacrificed them to the idols.  22 In all your detestable practices and your prostitution you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, kicking about in your blood. 23 ”‘Woe! Woe to you, declares the Sovereign LORD. In addition to all your other wickedness,  24 you built a mound for yourself and made a lofty shrine in every public square.  25 At the head of every street you built your lofty shrines and degraded your beauty, offering your body with increasing promiscuity to anyone who passed by.  26 You engaged in prostitution with the Egyptians, your lustful neighbors, and provoked me to anger with your increasing promiscuity.  27 So I stretched out my hand against you and reduced your territory; I gave you over to the greed of your enemies, the daughters of the Philistines, who were shocked by your lewd conduct.  28 You engaged in prostitution with the Assyrians too, because you were insatiable; and even after that, you still were not satisfied.  29 Then you increased your promiscuity to include Babylonia, a land of merchants, but even with this you were not satisfied. 30 ”‘How weak-willed you are, declares the Sovereign LORD, when you do all these things, acting like a brazen prostitute!  31 When you built your mounds at the head of every street and made your lofty shrines in every public square, you were unlike a prostitute, because you scorned payment. 32 ”‘You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband!  33 Every prostitute receives a fee, but you give gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from everywhere for your illicit favors.  34 So in your prostitution you are the opposite of others; no one runs after you for your favors. You are the very opposite, for you give payment and none is given to you. 35 ”‘Therefore, you prostitute, hear the word of the LORD!  36 This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because you poured out your wealth and exposed your nakedness in your promiscuity with your lovers, and because of all your detestable idols, and because you gave them your children’s blood,  37 therefore I am going to gather all your lovers, with whom you found pleasure, those you loved as well as those you hated. I will gather them against you from all around and will strip you in front of them, and they will see all your nakedness.  38 I will sentence you to the punishment of women who commit adultery and who shed blood; I will bring upon you the blood vengeance of my wrath and jealous anger.  39 Then I will hand you over to your lovers, and they will tear down your mounds and destroy your lofty shrines. They will strip you of your clothes and take your fine jewelry and leave you naked and bare.  40 They will bring a mob against you, who will stone you and hack you to pieces with their swords.  41 They will burn down your houses and inflict punishment on you in the sight of many women. I will put a stop to your prostitution, and you will no longer pay your lovers.  42 Then my wrath against you will subside and my jealous anger will turn away from you; I will be calm and no longer angry. 43 ”‘Because you did not remember the days of your youth but enraged me with all these things, I will surely bring down on your head what you have done, declares the Sovereign LORD. Did you not add lewdness to all your other detestable practices? 44 ”‘Everyone who quotes proverbs will quote this proverb about you: “Like mother, like daughter.”  45 You are a true daughter of your mother, who despised her husband and her children; and you are a true sister of your sisters, who despised their husbands and their children. Your mother was a Hittite and your father an Amorite.  46 Your older sister was Samaria, who lived to the north of you with her daughters; and your younger sister, who lived to the south of you with her daughters, was Sodom.  47 You not only walked in their ways and copied their detestable practices, but in all your ways you soon became more depraved than they.  48 As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, your sister Sodom and her daughters never did what you and your daughters have done. 49 ”‘Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.  50 They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.  51 Samaria did not commit half the sins you did. You have done more detestable things than they, and have made your sisters seem righteous by all these things you have done.  52 Bear your disgrace, for you have furnished some justification for your sisters. Because your sins were more vile than theirs, they appear more righteous than you. So then, be ashamed and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous. 53 ”‘However, I will restore the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters and of Samaria and her daughters, and your fortunes along with them,  54 so that you may bear your disgrace and be ashamed of all you have done in giving them comfort.  55 And your sisters, Sodom with her daughters and Samaria with her daughters, will return to what they were before; and you and your daughters will return to what you were before.  56 You would not even mention your sister Sodom in the day of your pride,  57 before your wickedness was uncovered. Even so, you are now scorned by the daughters of Edom and all her neighbors and the daughters of the Philistines—all those around you who despise you.  58 You will bear the consequences of your lewdness and your detestable practices, declares the LORD. 59 ”‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will deal with you as you deserve, because you have despised my oath by breaking the covenant.  60 Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you.  61 Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you receive your sisters, both those who are older than you and those who are younger. I will give them to you as daughters, but not on the basis of my covenant with you.  62 So I will establish my covenant with you, and you will know that I am the LORD.  63 Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done, you will remember and be ashamed and never again open your mouth because of your humiliation, declares the Sovereign LORD.’”**

Taken on its own terms, this longest single oracle in the whole OT is one of Scripture’s most powerful expressions of both God’s wrath and his love—of Law and Gospel. (CC)

In form, it is an allegory of Jerusalem as an abandoned girl who is rescued by Yahweh, and when grown into a beautiful woman, she is married to him and made a queen, richly clothed and fed. But she repays Yahweh’s gratuitous largesse by pathological infidelity, even paying lovers to sleep with her and surpassing even Sodom and Samaria in lewdness. Hence, judgment is unavoidable, but, after that, Yahweh will repay her faithlessness with faithfulness to his ancient covenant. Moreover, Yahweh will establish an “everlasting covenant” that includes not only Israelites, but also former pagans: Samaria, Sodom, and their children (16:60–62). Read in light of the NT, this is nothing less than the promise of the new covenant in Jesus Christ and the ingrafting of Gentiles into “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16), the Christian church. All this shall take place “when I make atonement for you for all you have done” (Ezek 16:63) through Christ’s unblemished life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection. (CC)

We can easily view the entire pericope as a unit with one major point of comparison: Israel’s gross unfaithfulness in contrast to God’s gracious love. Thus it may be more of a parable than an allegory, although one can find both labels for it in secondary literature. Subsumed under the one main point are various correspondences. As the capital city of united Israel and then Judah, “Jerusalem” represents Israel, the people God had called out of heathenism (16:3, 45; see also Gen 12:1–3) to be his own according to his covenant of grace. “Samaria” represents the northern kingdom, which had apostatized under Jeroboam and had been conquered by Assyria in 722 b.c. (about 129 years before Ezekiel’s ministry began). “Sodom” had been destroyed over a millennium earlier (Genesis 19), but its name lived on as a byword representing the ultimate in depravity. The extended picture of Jerusalem’s harlotry has the historical and political referent of Israel’s flirtations (alliances) with her pagan neighbors, liaisons that inevitably entailed worship of pagan gods. Exact connections between the specific acts of whoredom and particulars in Israel’s history are sometimes impossible to establish and probably should not be expected. (CC)

Throughout the Bible God often portrays his covenant relationship with his people as a spiritual marriage. The OT suggests that Yahweh wedded Israel as his wife through his exodus redemption of her. The marriage metaphor appears frequently already in the Torah of Moses (Ex 34:15–16; Lev 17:7; 20:5; Deut 32:15–18; and elsewhere). According to traditional Jewish and Christian interpretation, the Song of Songs relates the marriage of Solomon and one Shulammite to that between Yahweh and Israel, typifying (in Christian interpretation) that of Christ and his body and bride, the church. Psalm 45, a royal wedding psalm, shares many affinities to the Song of Solomon. In the eighth-century b.c. Isaiah employs the theme (Is 61:10; 62:1–5), and the marriage of Hosea and Gomer embodies it (Hosea 1–3). Ezekiel’s older contemporary uses it especially in Jeremiah 2–3. (CC)

The picture in Ezekiel 16 and 23 of Israel’s marriage to Yahweh anticipates the NT depiction of the church as the bride of Christ—already betrothed through the washing of Baptism (Eph 5:25–27), but awaiting the consummation after his second coming, whereupon “the bride” shall become “the wife of the Lamb” (Rev 21:9). That NT theme appears in Jesus’ wedding parables (Mt 22:1–14; 25:1–13) and sayings such as Lk 5:34–35; Jn 3:29–30 (cf. Jn 2:1–11). Of the many passages that portray the church as the body and bride of Christ, Eph 5:21–33 is the best known. And the canon of Scripture ends with an extended picture of Jerusalem as the virgin bride finally united with her Bridegroom (Revelation 21; cf. Rev 22:17). (CC)

The depiction of idolatry as adultery likewise is found throughout the Scriptures. It is implicit in Ezekiel’s references to divine “jealousy” (קִנְאָה in 5:13; 8:3, 5), as confirmed by the use of the same term in 16:38, 42; 23:25 (see also 6:9). The NT too correlates idolatry and spiritual infidelity with sexual sins (e.g., Rom 1:18–32; 1 Cor 6:12–20; Gal 5:16–26). (CC)

As a priest (Ezek 1:3), Ezekiel no doubt was familiar with those OT texts that predated him, yet he develops and elaborates the marriage theme in a unique way in two extensive chapters (16 and 23). No other biblical book depicts the divine relationship with such explicitly sexual language (e.g., 16:7–8). Nor will anyone who has read this far in the book be surprised by the explicitness with which Ezekiel discusses sexual matters in chapters 16 and 23. (Such explicitness may reflect his priestly background, since comparable directness can be found in parts of Leviticus.) Were Ezekiel not divinely inspired for the purpose of eliciting repentance and faith, one might call chapters 16 and 23 pornographic. Perhaps the grossness of our contemporary culture makes it less shocking today than the chapters might have seemed even a generation ago. But still, the ordinary Christian reader may not expect to find such language in the Bible. The fact that most English translations avoid rendering some of the language literally (e.g., 16:25–26, 36) shows that it continues to offend. (CC)

**16:2** While this first section of the chapter accents Jerusalem’s original calling by grace, this review of covenant history is recited for the purpose of highlighting her current degradation, as Yahweh commands Ezekiel, “make Jerusalem know her abominations.” (CC)

**16:3** Cf. Dt 26:5. (CSB)

Yahweh begins his long, searing indictment of the current depravity of Israel by exposing the hollowness of the people’s pride in allegedly being descendants of Abraham. He is not challenging the Genesis account of Israel’s origins; rather, his concern is with her spiritual descent. There may well have been some in Ezekiel’s audience who could trace their physical descent back to Abraham himself. Even so, Yahweh had led a mixed multitude out from Egypt (Ex 12:38). Through mixed marriages, a large proportion of the population had Canaanite, Amorite, and/or Hittite blood in their veins. Even Moses had married a Cushite (Num 12:1), and by grace various foreigners had been incorporated into Israel (e.g., Rahab, the Gibeonites, Ruth). (CC)

The problem was that Israel had adopted many of their pagan neighbors’ religious beliefs and practices. The three peoples Yahweh names (“Canaanites … Amorite[s] … Hittite[s]”) are symbols of all that “Israel” was called to oppose. The “land of the Canaanites” had a reputation as the locus of the worst heathen “abominations” (16:2), of human depravity at is worst (16:44–52). It was for that reason that the invading Israelites were commanded to treat the previous inhabitants so harshly, to exterminate those who were not driven out (e.g., Deut 7:1–5; Joshua 1–12). But the Israelites had failed to carry out that covenant command completely (e.g., Josh 13:1–7; Judges 1–3). They often tolerated and intermarried with the remaining Canaanites, and in spite of brief reformations, they had persistently adopted their religious practices. Thus one could say that “Jerusalem had paganism in its blood.” (CC)

Ezekiel’s confrontation here with his Israelite audience is phenomenally similar to one Jesus had with the Jews of his day, as recorded in Jn 8:31–59. To the Jews’ boast that “Abraham is our father,” Jesus responds, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do what Abraham did. … You are of your father, the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him” (Jn 8:39, 44). (CC)

Christians today are unlikely to pin their hope for salvation on their ancestry, although nationalistic pride or separatism based on ethnic origin may virtually become a religion. More likely today is the narcissistic conceit that some “spark of the divine” is each individual’s birthright, enabling him to embark on his own “faith journey” and forge his own “spirituality.” Arminian decision theology and semi-Pelagianism are prominent in many Protestant churches. Appeals to the transferable merit of saints are still part of official Roman Catholic doctrine. No Christian is immune from the temptation to think that his place in heaven is secure because of his pedigree of past faithfulness or good works (based on what Lutheran theologians call the *opinio legis*, the Law-based thinking that persists in all sinful people). (CC)

*Your ancestry and birth.* Jerusalem had a centuries-old, pre-Israelite history (Ge 14:18), and the city long resisted Israelite conquest (Jos 15:63). It became fully Israelite only after David’s conquest (2Sa 5:6–9). (CSB)

*father … mother.* A reference to Jerusalem’s non-Israelite origin generally, not to any specific individuals. (CSB)

*Amorite.* Cf. v. 45. Like the Canaanites, the Amorites were pre-Israelite, Semitic inhabitants of Palestine (Ge 48:22; Jos 5:1; 10:5; Jdg 1:34–36). (CSB)

*Hittite.* The Hittites were non-Semitic residents of Canaan, who earlier had flourished in Asia Minor during the second millennium b.c. (see Ge 23:10–20; 26:34; 1Sa 26:6; 2Sa 11:2–27; 1Ki 11:1). (CSB)

**16:4** *rubbed with salt.* This practice has been observed among Palestinian Arab peasants as late as a.d. 1918. (CSB)

Ezek 16:4 is simply a list of four (or five) things normally done for a newborn in the ancient Near East. The first two are universal, while the last two (alien to us in the modern West) are still attested in remote parts of the Near East. If the umbilical cord is not tied and cut relatively soon after birth, the infant can bleed to death. Bathing the newborn would follow almost instinctively. The Hebrew may refer to a subsequent application of oil, or the oil and salt may have been mixed together. Rubbing with salt probably was for cleansing or hygienic reasons. The Hebrew text actually does not refer to rubbing, but simply to salting with salt—possibly applied to the swaddling clothes to inhibit bacteria. Some commentators give it an apotropaic meaning, seeing it as a superstitious practice to ward off demons or evil spirits, and in the light of Ezekiel’s general picture of Israelite “spirituality,” such notions might well have been part of the action. Wrapping tightly in swaddling clothes comforts a newborn, and in the ancient world doing so (sometimes on a straight board) was apparently thought to help limbs develop straightly. (CC)

*wrapped in cloths.* Cf. Lk 2:7. (CSB)

That last act not done for infant “Jerusalem” was done for the infant Lord, since the Gospel of Luke records that at Christ’s nativity the Virgin Mary wrapped him in swaddling cloths (Lk 2:7), showing her care for him and serving as part of the divine “sign” to the shepherds (Lk 2:12) (CC)

**16:5** *thrown out into the open field.* Abandoned to die. Exposure of infants, common in ancient pagan societies, was abhorrent to Israel. (CSB)

In contrast, Ezek 16:5 spells out the malevolent motivation behind not doing those things for infant “Jerusalem.” Her neglect implies not only the repression of natural parental compassion, but the repudiation of the offspring by abandonment. Parents who abandoned a baby officially rejected all their parental rights and obligations and renounced the child as their own. If the baby happened to be rescued before death, he or she could then legally be adopted, but most likely the child, even if discovered by others, would be left to die. (CC)

It must be remembered that the exposure of unwanted babies (especially girls) was widespread throughout the ancient world. Even classical philosophers and lawgivers such as Plato and Plutarch recommended the practice, whatever the reason or motivation. However, given the sanctity of all human life according to the OT and NT, orthodox Israel did not tolerate that practice, nor did subsequent Christianity. The founding of orphanages and other eleemosynary institutions by Christians in the late Roman Empire is well documented. The parallel to abortion must not go unnoticed. (CC)

**16:6** *blood.* Of childbirth. (CSB)

Yahweh’s description of his compassionate love for Jerusalem is divided into two sections, her childhood (16:6–7) and her married life (16:8–14), each beginning with “I passed by you and I saw you” (16:6, 8). The Hebrew might imply that Yahweh came upon her unintentionally (“I happened to pass by”), and if pressed, that could be misunderstood as denying God’s prior salvific intent to choose Israel—as well as Christ and his church. But the Hebrew can also be used of deliberately coming to a person (see the textual notes), and the Scriptures teach that God willed and planned our salvation from all eternity! The clause in this context must underscore again the element of sheer grace. A person who finds a helpless infant will feel compassion (as did Pharaoh’s daughter, Ex 2:6), but not because the baby somehow merits or has earned it. There is no historical or logical, “worldly” or Law-based reason why God chose Israel, or why he has chosen any of us to believe in Christ and so to be saved. The doctrine of election is a mystery that must be filled out according to the Gospel alone. If any idea of merit, worthiness, anything at all in a person (*aliquid in homine*), or even *intuitu fidei*, is allowed into the equation, it will lead to some form of works-righteousness. On the other hand, if the doctrine of election is filled out wrongly with appeal to God’s punitive judgment, that can lead to the error of double predestination, namely, that God not only elected some to salvation, but also others to damnation. (CC)

That God “saw” the infant (16:6; cf. 16:8) reverses the human neglect expressed by “an eye did not have pity on you” in 16:5. God provides what no human did or, from a theological perspective, could. Theologically, from where else could salvation come? (CC)

*Live!* † God’s desire for all people, summed up in one word (see 18:23, 32; 1Ti 2:4; 2Pe 3:9). (CSB)

Yahweh’s repeated statement, “I said to you, ‘In your blood, live!’ ” (16:6), refers first of all to biological life. Physical life is always the first of God’s gifts, and he gives it to all people, even to unbelievers, even though they do not acknowledge him as the giver or receive the gift with thanksgiving (cf. Mt 5:45). Allen’s instinct is sound when he senses here a certain analogy to the doctrine of creation. (CC)

Yet the ancient Near Eastern context gives this statement a greater depth of meaning. To take a baby in his or her amniotic fluid and birth blood implied a legal adoption of the child, who then could not be reclaimed by the natural parents. In the biblical context, “live” implies also spiritual life in this world and bodily resurrection followed by eternal life in the world to come (cf. Jn 10:10; 11:25–26). That God here enables the girl to “live” simply by speaking his Word points toward the rebirth by the power of the Word in, for example, 1 Pet 1:3–5, 23, and to Baptism, wherein the water is accompanied by God’s Word (“the washing of water with the Word,” with bridal imagery in Eph 5:26. On a theological level, this OT imagery corresponds to the NT portrayal of the second birth and adoption as children of God that takes place in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism (e.g., Jn 3:3–8; Gal 3:26–29; Titus 3:4–7). (CC)

**16:7** The idiomatic Hebrew rendered “I made you thrive” again finds a parallel in section 185 of the Code of Hammurabi, where it describes the rearing of an adopted child by his or her legal parents. Thus the adoption metaphor of the previous verse is continued. The subsequent simile (“like a sprout of the field”) indicates how excellent the parenting was. Some have seen in this clause an allusion to the rapid growth of the Israelite slaves in Egypt (Ex 1:7, 12, 20–21), and if such an allusion is intended, one might also think of the rapid growth of the early church despite fierce persecution (e.g., Acts 2–12), but I judge that one must be cautious in seeking such specific parallels. In any event, the newborn had been left to die in the “field” (שָׂדֶה, 16:5), but after Yahweh’s intervention, here the “field” (שָׂדֶה, 16:7) becomes the place where the girl thrives. This hints at the great reversal, a central theme of biblical soteriology and eschatology (“the last shall be first,” Mt 20:16; God chooses the weak and lowly, 1 Cor 1:26–28). (CC)

*hair.* Pubic hair (see Isa 7:20). (CSB)

With unblushing frankness, Ezekiel depicts the onset of puberty and the girl’s growth into womanhood. It is probably as futile as elsewhere to seek a historical analogue in Israel’s history for the woman’s stark nakedness even after maturing. If it can be pressed, it possibly implies that Israel’s status as the chosen people was no birthright nor a product of her “search for truth” nor of any other action by her or quality in her. She was nothing before God and had nothing until he gave her his covenant and promises, as the following verses will emphasize. (Later in the chapter, nudity will be associated with promiscuity and prostitution, but that theme is not yet on the horizon here.) (CC)

**16:8** *spread the corner of my garment.* Symbolic of entering a marriage relationship (see notes on Dt 22:30; Ru 3:9). (CSB)

*covenant.* Since the maiden symbolizes Jerusalem, this does not refer to the Sinai covenant but to marriage as a covenant (see Mal 2:14). (CSB)

The spiritual wedding takes place here as Yahweh “swore [an oath]” and “entered into a covenant” with her. Since this is not ordinary nuptial language (see the textual note), we begin to see a little of the underlying reality to which the allegory points. That Yahweh initiates the covenant at this point suggests that the metaphorical wedding occurred in Israel’s history at the time of the exodus redemption and Sinai covenant, as affirmed by Jeremiah’s comparable allegory (Jer 2:2–6) and the traditional Jewish interpretation of the Song of Songs. It might also be supported by the “field” in Ezek 16:5, 7 if that hints at Israel’s wilderness wanderings. “You became mine” (16:8) alludes to the frequent OT covenant formula “I shall be your God and you shall be my people,” expressed in wedding language (see the commentary on 11:20; 14:11). (CC)

The background of Yahweh’s gracious oath, covenant, and wedding provides much of the pathos and poignancy during the following picture of her gross amnesia, ingratitude, and whoredom (16:15–58). It also provides the basis for the anthropopathism that pervades most of the book of Ezekiel: God suffers (described in human terms) at such a base response by his bride (e.g., Hos 11:8). This suffering culminates in that of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who (like Yahweh in Ezekiel 16) lamented over Jerusalem’s rejection of him (Mt 23:37; Lk 13:34). (CC)

No matter how unfaithful his people may be, God does not lie (2 Tim 2:13). He will not break his oath or abandon the promise of life and eternal blessing intrinsic to his covenant. Yet the oath and covenant also entail judgment if his faithfulness is not believed and reciprocated in a life of faith in him. The gracious God is also just, and his justice requires that aspect of the covenant promises now to be carried out, so that a righteous remnant might be preserved. At this point, however, Ezekiel does not spell out all the implications, both positive and negative. The ultimate resolution of the “tension” between God’s love and his justice comes only at Calvary, where the entirety of divine punishment for human sin was borne by the sinless Son of God, whose vicarious atonement (see 16:63) procured mercy for all. In the new covenant too, the benefits of God’s faithfulness are appropriated through faith and are reciprocated in a life of faith in him; without such faith a person forfeits God’s mercy and stands under his judgment. (CC)

**16:9** I BATHED YOU – If 16:8–13 is taken as strictly sequential, it might seem strange from a human standpoint that Yahweh cleanses, anoints, and adorns his bride *after* the wedding. According to the cultural customs to which the metaphors refer, the cleansing, clothing, and adornment may have been done first as preparation for the wedding or as part of the ceremony itself. The textual notes above pointed out that much of the same vocabulary was used in Genesis 24 for jewelry given to Rebekah prior to her wedding to Isaac, and women in Esth 2:9–13 were given choice food, anointed, and adorned before union with the king. Also in the royal wedding psalm (Ps 45:13–15]) and the Song (1:9–11; 4:1–7), the bride is adorned with jewelry for or at her wedding. (CC)

However, on the theological level, the literal sequence in these verses is all important. God does not demand holiness or cleanness as a prerequisite for those who would enter his covenant of grace. On the contrary, he bestows these unmerited gifts upon his bride *sola gratia*, “by grace alone.” Thus the washing of Israel with water may allude to her exodus redemption through the Red Sea waters, which St. Paul expounds as a type of Holy Baptism in 1 Cor 10:1–2. The NT too speaks of the Lord washing his bride: Christ “gave himself up” for his bride, the church, “so that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word, so that he himself might present the church to himself as glorious … holy and blameless” (Eph 5:25–27). The Christian Sacrament of Baptism is the “washing of rebirth/regeneration” (Titus 3:5). In a new act of creation, God makes his redeemed people into a “*holy* nation” (Ex 19:6; cf. 1 Pet 2:9). Thus, we can confess belief “in one *holy* catholic and apostolic church … one Baptism for the remission of sins” (Nicene Creed). (CC)

Anointing with oil accompanied Baptism as a sign of the “unction” of the Holy Spirit, perhaps already in NT times (if that is part of the sealing in, e.g., Eph 1:13; 4:30) and certainly at an early date in church history, as it still does in some baptismal liturgies. That probably explains why the Vulgate and a Greek translation related the “oiling” in Ezek 16:4 to salvation in Christ (CC)

*blood.* Menstrual blood, indicating sexual maturity (see NIV text note on v. 7). (CSB)

**16:10-13** In great detail, Ezekiel continues to describe the lavish clothing and expensive jewelry showered upon the bride, not to speak of the stunning natural beauty with which God endowed her. It is a minor point, but these gifts are probably best not thought of as specifically wedding gifts (the wedding is past, so 16:8), but rather as the boundless demonstrations of love by a devoted and faithful husband “as long as [they] both shall live.” (CC)

In my judgment the application of the metaphor peers through the words also here. We cannot overlook the many correspondences between 16:10–13 and the objects and vocabulary associated with the tabernacle, the priestly vestments, and the liturgical sacrifices (see the textual notes on the first three words listed below). These correspondences include the “finest woven material” (רִקְמָה, 16:10, 13, 18), “luxury leather” (תַּחַשׁ, 16:10), “the best linen” (שֵׁשׁ, 16:10, 13), “fine flour” (סֹלֶת, 16:13, 19), “oil” (שֶׁמֶן, 16:13, 18, 19), and “incense” (קְטֹרֶת, 16:18). “Fine flour” and “oil” are especially prominent in the grain offerings of the sacrificial rituals. Gold was abundant in the tabernacle and temple, especially as one approached the Holy of Holies. While we are not told any specifics about articles of silver in the temple, there were ones of silver in the tabernacle. The temple also served as the national treasury of gold and silver. (CC)

As Jerusalem in these passages is synecdochical for all of Israel, so the temple is synecdochical for God himself. There God was “incarnationally” present among his people, and only his holy presence and sanctifying work through the means of grace enabled Jerusalem to be a holy city. (CC)

Analogically, the treasures of the holy church are God’s means of grace: his Word, which is preached in the sermon and spoken in the absolution, and the Sacraments, by which the Gospel is conveyed to members of the body of Christ. (CC)

That she “attained royalty” (16:13) explains the significance of the “crown of glory” placed on her head by Yahweh (16:12). Her royal status was due to her union with her God and King. This too is part of the great reversal theme: the ignoble infant of heathen lineage (16:3) is privileged to become not just a member of God’s kingdom, but his queen. (NIVtranslates the last phrase of 16:13 with “queen,” but the Hebrew does not use that term, perhaps to avoid any thought that she deserved the position by her birth.) The Christological wedding psalm (Ps 45:10–15) and the Song of Songs (6:8–9) contain this same theme that the woman married by grace to the king is thereby elevated and given the gift of royalty. The NT affirms that all baptized believers in Christ are members of the kingdom of God by grace and shall reign with Christ in eternity, and in a sense even now reign with him during the church age (Rev 20:4, 6). (CC)

**16:10** *embroidered dress … leather sandals … fine linen.* Representative of the very best garments. (CSB)

*embroidered dress.* See 27:16, 24; colored, variegated material fit for a queen (see Ps 45:14). (CSB)

*leather sandals.* The same kind of leather was used to cover the tabernacle (“hides of sea cows,” Ex 25:5; 26:14). (CSB)

**16:11** *bracelets on your arms.* See Ge 24:22. (CSB)

**16:12** *ring.* Not piercing the nose but worn on the outer part of the nose (see Ge 24:47). (CSB)

*earrings.* Circular ear ornaments, worn by men (Nu 31:50). The Hebrew for this word is not the same as that used in Ge 35:4; Ex 32:2–3. (CSB)

*crown.* The wedding crown (see SS 3:11, where the groom wears it). (CSB)

**16:13** *gold and silver.* Cf. Hos 2:8. (CSB)

*fine flour.* Used in offerings, therefore of high quality (see v. 19; 46:14). (CSB)

*olive oil.* Cf. Hos 2:8. For the combination of honey and oil see Dt 32:13. (CSB)

*You became very beautiful.* Cf. Eph 5:27. (CSB)

**16:14** *your fame spread.* Especially in the time of David and Solomon. (CSB)

The picture of God’s boundless gifts comes to a climax with the bride’s unparalleled fame, beauty, perfection, and splendor. As Ezekiel wrote and preached, Jerusalem was threatened, and his audience would hear in such language an evocation of the so-called “theology of Zion” (see, e.g., Lam 2:15; Pss 48:2; 50:2). Unfortunately, his audience probably heard such language as describing the “inviolability of Zion,” that is, that Jerusalem could not be destroyed, no matter how much she sinned. That was a confusion of “Jerusalem” as merely another earthly city with “Zion” as the holy city wherein God dwelt (to the extent that the two terms are distinguishable). (CC)

Zion/Jerusalem as a type of the Christian church receives language similar to Ezek 16:14, as in the hymn “Glorious Things of You Are Spoken” (LW 294), or in a more eschatological vein, “Jerusalem the Golden” (LW 309) and “Jerusalem, O City Fair and High” (LW 306). These portraits reflect that of the new Jerusalem (the church triumphant) as the bride adorned for her Bridegroom in Revelation 21, and that of the church as the cleansed bride of Christ, who even now by virtue of his gracious baptismal washing is “glorious, not having a spot or wrinkle or any of such things, but … holy and blameless” (Eph 5:27). (CC)

Finally, this section of the chapter ends with the salutary reminder that everything the woman had and all she had become was that “which I had bestowed upon you, says the Lord Yahweh” (Ezek 16:14). She would quickly forget what we too so easily forget—that this absolute, perfect beauty was not innate, but bestowed, a righteousness imputed solely for Christ’s sake, a holiness which by nature is God’s alone. In the NT, see, for example, 1 Cor 4:7–8; Rev 1:5b–6. This final reminder that “we are unworthy servants” (Lk 17:10), or, according to Luther’s last written words, “we are beggars” (AE 54:476), serves as a foil for the abrupt transition to follow. (CC)

**16:15** *prostitute.* The accusation of prostitution referred both to spiritual turning away from the Lord and to physical involvement with the fertility rites of Canaanite paganism (cf. Jer 3:1–5; Hos 4:13–14; 9:1). (CSB)

That Jerusalem “played the whore” is a summary of the rest of the chapter from 16:15–58 down to the eschatological reversal at its end (16:59–63). The initial division in 16:15–22 deals with the origin and nature of Israel’s apostasy, described in terms of whoring. The verb זָנָה, “play the whore,” its participle, זֹנֶה, “whore,” and the noun תַּזְנוּת, “whoring, whoredom,” together occur twenty-one times in 16:15–41. This language refers not only to literal sexual sins, but also to spiritual unions with false gods (idolatry). The reader must remain aware of this double entendre, even if we are unable to match precisely the actions here with specific events in Israel’s history. (CC)

*favors.* Sexual favors. Verb and noun forms of the Hebrew for this word occur 23 times in this chapter. (CSB)

In short, Israel’s new status and power “went to her head.” I cannot improve upon two expositions, the first from Block:

For Jerusalem the newly found beauty and fame were intoxicating. In her inebriation she lost all sense of history, perspective, and propriety; the temporal and ephemeral replaced the eternal; the gift displaced the giver. (CC)

That Jerusalem “trusted in [her] beauty” (16:15) is remarkably similar to the sin of Tyre and her prince (27:3–4, 11; 28:12, 17) and that of Assyria (31:8–9), and in both cases the sin is likened to the primeval hubris of Satan, who sought to elevate himself above God (28:2, 6, 9, 12–19; 31:8–9, 15). Hence Zimmerli is also worth quoting. He characterizes Israel’s behavior as an attempt to seize equality with God—the very thing of which the sinless Christ was not guilty (οὑχ ἁρπαγμὸν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ); instead he emptied himself and became a servant (Phil 2:6–7). Zimmerli says of Ezekiel’s prophecy:

This is not addressed to the “world,” but to the people of God, the Church. Thereby it is laid down that nothing is so holy, even the sacramental inheritance of the Church, that it cannot become a means of the worst abuse when it is used selfishly. (CC)

Thus when we Christians, especially Gentile believers, read of Israel’s degeneracy, we must not think that the Israelites were any more susceptible to the temptations to which they succumbed than we are. Instead, we must read Israel’s history as a warning for us not to do the same, as St. Paul explains in 1 Cor 10:1–13. What is more, we read knowing that the prophetic promises (Ezek 16:59–63) have now been fulfilled in Christ, and in us—if we remain in Christ. (CC)

*anyone who passed by.* Cf. Ge 38:14–16. (CSB)

Israel’s promiscuous liaisons with “every man passing by” (כָּל־עוֹבֵר, 16:15, 25) are clearly intended as a contrast with the One who passed by earlier (וָאֶעֱבֹר עָלַיִךְ, “I passed by you,” 16:6, 8), first to save her life (16:6), and then to make her his wife and share his splendor with her (16:8). That she gave herself to these lovers (the apparent meaning of the Hebrew translated “his you became,” 16:15) meant that she had flagrantly and repeatedly broken the marriage covenant. (CC)

Ezekiel does not specify any specific situation or period in Israel’s history, but “trusted in your beauty” and “reliance on your fame” (16:15) might allude to the era of David and Solomon, when Israel was at the height of her outward prosperity. Nevertheless, apostasies and rebellions punctuated Israel’s history from the wilderness era down to the fall of Jerusalem. The same can be said about church history from the betrayal of Christ down to the present. (CC)

**16:16-17** The verb וַתִּקְחִי, “and you took,” begins 16:16, 17, 18, 20. All of 16:16–22 describes Israel’s whorish misuse of God’s gifts, even of her children (16:20), as if, instead of gifts to be received with thanksgiving, they were hers alone to take and use as she pleased without responsibility or accountability to anyone. These verses set the rebellion of the Israelites in sharp relief by their repeated contrast between Yahweh’s original gift of the objects (which really were still his) and her taking of them to devote to pagan uses. (CC)

As St. Paul states about humanity in general in Rom 1:23, she exchanged the glory Yahweh gave her for inglorious images for harlotry: “You took your articles of glory from my gold and my silver which I had given to you, and you made for yourself images of the male and you played the whore with them” (Ezek 16:17). This recalls the “crown of glory” Yahweh had given her in 16:12, and also 7:19–20, where Israel made idols out of gold and silver, perhaps taken from the temple treasury (see the commentary there). It may also recall how the Israelites made the golden calf from personal jewelry at the very start of Israel’s national history (Ex 32:2–4). Here, the statements that the “images” were “of the male” and that she “played the whore” with them leads to speculation that they were phallic symbols (to which the Hebrew of Is 57:8 also seems to refer). The centrality of ithyphallic processions and festivals are well-known in the ancient pagan world. Possibly, the specification that the images were “of the male” refers to Baal (Hadad). Baal was the dominant male fertility god in Canaanite religion, and many statues and engravings of him, often as a bull, have been found in Canaan. The Bible repeatedly refers to the ongoing battle between the true worship of Yahweh and the seduction of God’s people into worship of Baal, most famously in 1 Kings 18. The NT equates the faithful remnant who did not worship Baal with the Christian church, comprised of believing Jews and Gentiles in Christ (Rom 11:4 in its larger context). (CC)

**16:16** *garments.* All of the Lord’s previous gifts were used by Jerusalem in prostituting herself. Cloths of some kind were needed in the Asherah cult practices (see 2Ki 23:7). They may have been used as curtains or as bedding (see Am 2:7–8). (CSB)

**16:17** *male idols.* Phallic symbols or pictures of naked men (see 23:14). (CSB)

**16:18-19** These two verses continue the theme of the repudiation of the true Giver of all gifts by the dedication of his gifts to the glory of non-gods. Only rarely does the Bible give such specific allusions to Israelite idolatrous rituals. Much of the vocabulary and details parallel those of the orthodox Israelite cultus according to the Torah. For example, “oil,” “incense,” “fine flour,” and “bread” were all used in the divine service according to the Torah. The casual observer of some of these actions perhaps would no more be able to tell what religion was being practiced than a visitor to many churches today could be sure, based on the outward forms of worship, of what is really believed, taught, and confessed there. (CC)

Yet closer scrutiny reveals differences in detail, and certainly in underlying theology, between the rites described here and those in the Torah. In orthodox Israelite worship there was no image of Yahweh, so the covering of an image with clothing was a heterodox act. The notion that the deity needed to be fed is prominent in Mesopotamian and Egyptian ritual (probably that of Canaan too), but it is mocked in the Scriptures (e.g., Ps 50:7–15). (CC)

“A fragrant sacrifice” (רֵיחַ נִיחֹחַ, Ezek 16:19) is a frequent phrase in Leviticus (e.g., Lev 1:9, 13) describing God’s favor toward the divinely prescribed rituals, but Ezekiel uses the phrase only three other times besides here (see the textual note on it in 6:13). Ezekiel uses it for pagan rituals in 6:13; 16:19; 20:28, but in 20:41 he uses it metaphorically for the Israelites themselves after they have been regathered in an eschatological act of redemption. Although sacrifice and incense as “a pleasing fragrance,” “a soothing odor,” or “a tranquilizing scent” (as the Hebrew phrase might also be translated) were understood in a propitiatory sense in both Yahwism and paganism, in heathen religions it is a matter of attempting by human works to placate an often capricious deity, whose relationship with his people is based on law. In Yahwism, on the other hand, it was simple obedience to God’s command to make use of the “sacramental” means by which his justice might be satisfied. Thus it is comparable to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and the doctrine of Christ’s vicarious satisfaction in the Christian doctrine of atonement. (CC)

The use of “honey” in sacrifice is explicitly forbidden in Lev 2:11. Possibly it is mentioned in Ezek 16:19 as an introduction to the sacrifice of children (worship of Molech) in 16:20–21; compare Is 57:9. (CC)

The concluding signatory formula, “says the Lord Yahweh,” perhaps is intended to help the reader catch his breath, as it were, before the most monstrous apostate act, which comes next. (CC)

**16:20-22** The list of offensive practices in idolatrous worship obviously climaxes in these verses. Children had not been mentioned in the earlier list of Yahweh’s gifts in Ezekiel 16, but from the very start of the Scriptures (e.g., Gen 1:28; 9:1) and the beginning of covenant history (e.g., Gen 12:1–3; 15:4–6; 17:1–8), children were chief among God’s blessings. Childlessness was considered a great tragedy, as many biblical narratives attest. In the Hebrew language, as in those of many of Israel’s neighbors, the frequency of theophoric personal names formed by the name or title of the deity (El or Yahweh in Hebrew) plus נָתַן, “give,” or a similar verb or noun, witnesses to the common belief that children were gifts of God, for example, “Nathaniel” (“God gives”), “Jonathan” (“Yahweh gives”), and “Matthew” (“gift of Yahweh”). Because children were considered among the greatest of Yahweh’s gifts (cf. Abraham’s anguish in Genesis 15–17 before Isaac’s conception), they were also, potentially at least, the greatest possible sacrifice (cf. the rhetorical question in Micah 6:7b). That children were born *for* or *to* the husbands (in this metaphor, Yahweh) is indicated by the common idiom יָלַד לְ, as in Ezek 16:20 (אֲשֶׁ֣ר יָלַ֣דְתְּ לִ֔י, “which you bore for me”). (CC)

After circumcision on the eighth day (of males), babies (of both genders) were presented at the tabernacle/temple (on the fortieth day for males and the eightieth for females, Lev 12:1–8). In addition, there were special requirements for the “redemption” of the firstborn, connected with the exodus (Ex 13:1, 11–16; Num 3:40–51; 18:15–16). However, instead of Israel dedicating her offspring to Yahweh, here she sacrifices them to other gods by slaughtering them and making them pass through fire (Ezek 16:20–21). And she offers them to idols “to eat” (לֶאֱכ֑וֹל, 16:20), something unthinkable in any presentation to Yahweh, who needs no food of any sort from humans, and that humans would be his food elicits utter revulsion. (CC)

Three expressions are used to describe the ritual practice. Ezek 16:20 uses זָבַח, “to sacrifice,” in its pagan sense of slaughtering a victim to propitiate a deity and to provide a meal for the god(s)—and Israel’s children are the pièce de résistance. In orthodox Israelite liturgy, this verb may be used quite generally for any type of sacrifice. The cognate noun (זֶבַח) can refer specifically to the one “sacrifice” in which part of the victim was returned to the sacrificers to be used as a meal to be eaten in the tabernacle/temple precincts (Leviticus 3; 7:11–21). The full nominal expression is זֶבַח שְׁלָמִים or זֶבַח הַשְּׂלָמִים, and apparently because of the similarity of the second element with שָׁלוֹם, this type of sacrifice has traditionally been referred to as “the peace offering.” A much more descriptive label would be “communion sacrifice,” because in the meal before Yahweh the worshipers celebrated what they had in common/communion with him. (CC)

The analogy with the Christian Sacrament of Holy Communion is obvious and not only verbal. The location of the sacrificial meal is not prescribed in Leviticus 3 and 7:11–21, but it could have been in the forecourts of God’s house or in the worshiper’s home (the location of celebrations of the Sacrament in Acts 2:46; cf. Lk 24:30, 35; Acts 2:42; 20:7). In either case Yahweh was present at the meal in some sense and surely was acknowledged as such by the worshipers, although Yahwism repudiated any notion of alimentation of the deity (a thought so prominent in pagan sacrifice; see above on 16:18–19) so the meal itself was in no sense an offering of food for Yahweh. It probably was taken for granted, but the OT says nothing explicitly about Yahweh being the host of the meal, perhaps to prevent pagan misunderstanding. In the NT, Christ was the host of the Last Supper and is the host (both literally and spiritually) in every celebration of the Sacrament, in which communicants receive his true body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins (the Words of Institution). (CC)

Ezek 16:21 introduces the verb שָׁחַט, “to slaughter,” sometimes used of everyday butchering of livestock, but usually with sacrificial overtones. Ezekiel will use the verb again in 23:39 for sacrificing children to idols. There is no way to combine the ideas of “sacrifice” and “slaughter” in any one English word, but “slaughter” does convey the crescendo of repugnance in the passage. (CC)

The climax comes in 16:21 in the summary statement that the woman “offered” Yahweh’s children “by making them pass through [the fire] to them [the images]” (see the textual notes; cf. 23:37–39). A similar phrase with “fire” is in 2 Ki 16:3. A few scholars try to limit the meaning to a mere purification by fire, as in Num 31:21–23, where metallic spoils of war are made to pass through fire and then water is applied in a rite of lustration to render them clean. But the context here, as well as other biblical and archaeological evidence, makes plain that nothing quite so benign is in view here. (CC)

As is true of most other pagan rituals, we know only the basic outline of the ceremony, even though there is considerable modern literature on the subject. The god involved is usually referred to as Molech, which may simply be an honorific title of Baal (since he is the god to whom children are sacrificed in Jer 19:5; see also Jer 32:35) as “king” (מֶלֶךְ) contemptuously supplied with the vowels of בֹּשֶׁת (“shame”). The place where the rites took place and where the remains of the children were buried is usually referred to as a *topheth*, after תֹּפֶת in 2 Ki 23:10; Jer 7:31–32; 19:6, 11–14. The *topheth* at Carthage in North Africa has been excavated, and apparently some others on the Phoenician coast. Indications are that the rites varied in different places, so the external evidence is of arguable value for illuminating apostate Israelite practice. The Bible consistently locates Jerusalem’s *topheth* in the Valley of Hinnom (e.g., 2 Ki 23:10; Jer 7:31), running on the south side of ancient Jerusalem, a tributary of the Kidron on the east. Later, the area seems to have simply become the city’s dump, and because of the continuous fires there, it became a symbol of hell, or “Gehenna” (the Greek and Latin adaptation of גֵּי הִנֹּם, “Valley of Hinnom”). (CC)

The giving of children to Molech is prohibited in Lev 20:2–5, which indicates that the practice was present among the Canaanite population already in Mosaic times. 2 Ki 17:17 indicates the cult’s presence among the Israelites in the northern kingdom, but it apparently first became popular in the south under Ahaz (2 Ki 16:2–3; 2 Chr 28:1–3) and became even more widespread under Manasseh (2 Chr 33:6). Josiah attempted to eliminate it in his reformation in about 622 b.c. (2 Ki 23:10), but subsequently Jer 32:35 refers to it, so it may have returned. The supposition that, despite Josiah’s reformation, it continued until Jerusalem’s fall would explain why both Jeremiah (7:31; 19:5; 32:35) and Ezekiel (16:20–21; 23:37–39) vociferously denounce it. Jeremiah emphasizes that Yahweh had never commanded it or even imagined it (Jer 7:31; 19:5; 32:35), so we might surmise that syncretistic or “ecumenical” circles in Jerusalem taught that Yahweh had instituted it. That would represent complete amnesia of the Torah of Moses, explaining why Yahweh states, “You did not remember the days of your youth” (Ezek 16:22). (CC)

In her slaughter of Yahweh’s children, as well as her harlotry and adornments, apostate Jerusalem is like Babylon the Great Harlot, who is the antithesis of the church, the virgin bride of Christ, and who will receive her just judgment when Christ returns:

The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet and was gilded with gold and precious stone and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominable things, indeed, the unclean things of her immorality. And on her forehead a name had been written, a mystery: “Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominable things of the earth.” And I saw the woman in a drunken stupor from the blood of the saints and from the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. (Rev 17:4–6) (CC)

Just as abortion is a modern counterpart to killing infants by abandonment (see the commentary above on Ezek 16:4–5), so too apostate Jerusalem (Ezekiel 16) and Babylon the Harlot (Revelation 17–19), who slaughters God’s children, embody those who condone abortion and sexual immorality, including homosexuality and lesbianism, which are currently gaining acceptance in some nominally Christian denominations. (CC)

**16:20** *sons and daughters … sacrificed.* See 20:26, 31; 23:37; 2Ki 21:6; 23:10; Jer 7:31; 19:5; 32:35. Laws against child sacrifice are recorded in Lev 18:21; 20:2; Dt 12:31; 18:10. (CSB)

**16:23-25** Jerusalem’s harlotry becomes more brazen, and Yahweh’s exasperation increases, as indicated by the outburst at the beginning, “Woe, woe to you, says the Lord Yahweh!” Some of the details of her increasingly flagrant behavior are obscure (see the textual notes on the “domed tent” and “platform”), but the general picture is clear: she conducts her whoring in the most public places and is accessible to all. She made abominable her “beauty,” and trust in her “beauty” had begun her downward spiral in 16:15. Whereas 16:15 used more general language, “you lavished your whorings on every man passing by,” 16:25 leaves nothing to the imagination: “you spread your legs for every man passing by.” (Both verses contrast the passers-by with Yahweh, who “passed by” her in 16:6, 8.) כֹּל (“every, all”) is repeated three times in 16:24–25, adding to the tone of excess, painting a picture of a nymphomaniac out of control. “You *multiplied* your whorings” (16:25) will be repeated in 16:26 and 16:29 (where it is translated somewhat differently). Ezek 16:24–25a will be largely repeated in 16:31a. (CC)

**16:24** *mound … lofty shrine.* Cultic prostitution was moved from the high places (v. 15), which were outside the towns, into Jerusalem. (CSB)

**16:26-29** The public setting of her whoring in places of commerce in 16:24–25 may hint at what these verses make explicit: Israel’s sexual partners are the neighboring nations. Political and economic entanglements with foreign countries were part and parcel of the whoredom. “Alliance meant dalliance.” Objections to foreign alliances were especially central to Isaiah’s preachments over a century earlier. They must not be read as some sort of isolationist foreign policy, but intrinsic to the character of Israel in the ancient world. Israel, like other nations in the ancient Near East, knew nothing of “the separation between church and state” and would have considered the idea heretical. Every nation fostered worship of its god(s) for protection and prosperity. Political alliances inevitably involved recognition and veneration of the deities of the partner nations; sometimes the deities of the two countries were simply equated with each other, which was generally easy in paganism, where the different pantheons were personifications of the same forces of nature, merely called by different names in the various languages. In terms of religious influence (as well as military and economic influence), smaller nations were unequal partners with great empires, whose religions would take precedence. For Israel to ally with or rely on another nation always involved the underlying failure to “let God be God,” to fail to trust his promises and to succumb to the basic human conceit that we are really the ones who make and control history. (CC)

The order in which Ezekiel mentions nations with which Jerusalem made unholy alliances roughly reflects the historical order in which Israel came into close contact with them. The liaison with Egypt (16:26) began with Israel’s sojourn there for four centuries (Gen 15:13; Ex 12:40), from the time of Joseph to that of Moses. Ever since Assyria rose to be a threatening world power in the ninth century b.c., both the northern and southern kingdoms had appealed to Egypt for military help against her. But Egypt was no longer the power she pretended to be, and so Sennacherib’s general taunts Hezekiah for his reliance on “that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it” (Is 36:6 || 2 Ki 18:21). Ezekiel is especially concerned with Zedekiah’s alliance with Pharaoh Psammetichus II, a topic to which he will return in the next chapter. Egypt will also figure in oracles in Ezek 20:7 and 23:3. (CC)

The Philistines (16:27) had apparently invaded the Mediterranean coast shortly after Joshua led the Israelite incursion from the east to secure the promised land (ca. 1400 b.c.). Israel and the Philistines had been competitors for control of Canaan until David’s victories. But the Philistines did not disappear for a long time, and 16:57 will mention them as contemporaries of Ezekiel. In fact, Neh 13:23–24 indicates that, at least culturally and religiously, some of them continued to menace even the Israelites returning from exile, and 1 Macc 5:68 and 10:84 show that the problem continued even in Maccabean times. (CC)

The best commentary on “I gave you up to the desire of those who hate you, the daughters of the Philistines” (16:27) appears to come from an extrabiblical account. The Bible records only the miraculous failure of the Assyrians to capture Jerusalem at the end of the eighth century (Is 37:36–37 || 2 Ki 19:35–36). Sennacherib fails to explain that failure but does record that he awarded some adjacent Judean territories to three Philistine cities, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gaza, who had not joined Hezekiah in his revolt. Those three cities must be the “daughters of the Philistines” mentioned here (16:27). (CC)

Yahweh’s assertion that the Philistines, Israel’s historic enemies, “were embarrassed by your way of lewdness” (16:27) would have been taken by Ezekiel’s audience as a biting comment. All evidence indicates that the Philistines acculturated to Canaanite ways shortly after they invaded Canaan, and surely they were no paragons of virtue. We may think of the similar way St. Paul shames a Christian church:

It is actually heard that there is a sexual sin among you, and this sort of sexual sin is not even among the pagans. (1 Cor 5:1) (CC)

By Ezekiel’s time (sixth century b.c.), the once-mighty empire of the Assyrians (Ezek 16:28) had ceased to exist, but in much of the ninth–seventh centuries it had been an almost constant menace. It began to eliminate Judah when Ahaz offered vassaldom to Tiglath-Pileser III in return for protection from a feared Israelite-Damascene attack (2 Ki 16:7–18; Isaiah 7–8), and it conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 b.c. (CC)

Judah’s last “affair” was with Babylon, not referred to by that name, but as “the land of merchants, … Chaldea” in Ezek 16:29. The relationship began with Hezekiah’s favorable reception of Merodach-Baladan’s envoys (2 Ki 20:12–19 || Is 39:1–8) in an unsuccessful attempt to thwart Assyria (ca. 703 b.c.). Babylon had become a major force only after Assyria fell, and it bested the Egyptians in the contest at Carchemish in 605 b.c. over who would replace the fallen tyrant. Babylon was Jerusalem’s major current “lover” in Ezekiel’s own time. The implication is that the insatiable, incorrigible city of Jerusalem would continue her dissolute behavior indefinitely if God’s judgment did not bring it to a halt. (CC)

**16:26** *lustful.* The Hebrew is more graphic: “having oversized organs.” The language reflects both God’s and Ezekiel’s disgust with Jerusalem’s apostasy. (CSB)

*neighbors.* Nowhere else in the OT are the Egyptians called “neighbors.” (CSB)

**16:27** *reduced your territory.* After the 701 b.c. siege of Jerusalem, the Assyrian king Sennacherib gave some of Jerusalem’s territory to the Philistines. (CSB)

**16:30-31** With another expression of Yahweh’s increasing ire, a new paragraph begins. As in 16:20–22, the portrait of apostate Jerusalem resembles that of Babylon the Great Harlot in Revelation 17–19. She is not just rebellious, but a dominatrix, even as Babylon the Harlot, together with the beast on which she rides (Rev 17:3, 7), dominates the nations using political and economic pressure (as well as other means of oppression) especially against Christians. That Jerusalem does not receive a harlot’s pay but actually hires lovers from foreign countries undoubtedly refers to the commerce Israel conducted with pagan nations, which profited those other nations and impoverished Israel. Similar is the picture of the international trade of Babylon the Harlot, which made many other merchants rich, so that they lament her demise (Rev 18:3, 11–19). (CC)

**16:32** This verse (perhaps in conjunction with 16:30b, since “woman” there could also be translated as “wife”) reintroduces a somber theological note. The woman is not only a pathologically immoral harlot, but specifically a philandering “wife,” and “her husband” (16:32) is no less than Yahweh, as the earlier part of the allegory had emphasized (16:8). She compulsively breaks her marriage vow to Yahweh and even pays for her clients, instead of being paid by them. (CC)

“Strange men” (זָרִים) may underscore the point. Solomon used the same term for “strange men” who could adulterously enjoy a man’s wife (Prov 5:17), metaphorically pictured as a spring of water (Prov 5:15). Proverbs also uses the feminine form (זָרָה) for the “strange/foreign/forbidden woman,” who is any partner outside the marriage bond (Prov 2:16; 5:3, 20; 7:5; 22:14). The masculine is also used more generally for foreigners and foreign nations (Ezek 7:21; 11:9; Lam 5:2) and for foreign gods (e.g., Deut 32:16). Thus it evokes the whole range of infidelities referred to in this context. (CC)

**16:33** *you give gifts to all your lovers.* Jerusalem’s perversity is here pictured as worse than adultery and ordinary prostitution (see also v. 34). (CSB)

The “gifts” the woman uses to solicit customers are more than merely the reverse of the fees a prostitute would ordinarily charge. These “gifts” were the ones originally given to her by Yahweh, the Creator and Redeemer: her physical life and natural sexual development (16:6–7) as well as her “beauty” (16:14, 15, 25) and her dowry of other possessions and promises (16:8–14) which she has squandered on illicit pursuits. (CC)

**16:34** The emphasis specifically on adultery in 16:32 has reverted to a more general emphasis on the woman’s abnormal promiscuity. This verse does not just describe an inversion of the natural created order, in which sexual fidelity is the norm (and is outwardly maintained by many, even after the fall into sin), but an inversion of the usual practice of prostitution within reprobate humanity after the fall. Zimmerli appropriately compares it to St. Paul’s phrase “contrary to nature” (παρὰ φύσιν) in Rom 1:26, speaking of lesbianism. Instead of normal sexual relations with her husband, the woman had become like an animal in frenzied heat. *Corruptio optimi pessima*: “the corruption of the best is the worst of all.” The church of Jesus Christ easily becomes a “synagogue of Satan” (Rev 2:9). (CC)

**16:35-36** Before Yahweh pronounces her just judgment, he first addresses her as “whore” (16:35) and issues a comprehensive, four-part indictment (16:36), beginning with the strongest and most graphic language imaginable (which English Bibles do not translate literally): “your vaginal fluid was poured out.” Since she has relinquished what her Husband had given and made her, before God she retains nothing desirable. Such was ancient Jerusalem, and such are those called to be the bride of Christ who forsake Christ’s gifts of grace to prostitute themselves with the world in order to gain human praise. (CC)

**16:37** *strip you.* A reversal of the marriage covering (v. 8) and a return to the state described in v. 7. (CSB)

Somewhat corresponding to the four charges against Jerusalem in 16:36, there now follow four stages of Yahweh’s sentence, his response to Jerusalem’s behavior. The first and second appear in 16:37; the third in 16:38; and the fourth (with three subdivisions) takes up 16:39–41. (CC)

The punishment will fit the crime as the tables are turned. First, as she had gathered her neighbors for assignations, now Yahweh will gather them as agents of his wrath, both “all those [men] you loved” and “all those [rival women; cf. ‘many women’ in 16:41] you hated” (16:37). But that they are Yahweh’s agents, albeit unwittingly, does not exculpate them. Since they too fail to recognize his lordship and instead act with human arrogance and seek absolute power, they, in turn, will pay for their own behavior. So Isaiah had spoken of the Assyrians, both as “the rod of my anger” to punish Judah (Is 10:5) and as a people to be devastated by Yahweh in his good time (Is 10:12–34). In the political application of Ezekiel’s metaphor, the application will be to the Babylonians and to all those scored in the Gentile oracles of the book, Ezekiel 25–32. (In the punishment of Babylon the Great Harlot too, the kings who first were in league with her turn and help destroy her [Rev 17:16–17].) (CC)

Second, Yahweh will publicly strip the woman naked (Ezek 16:37). She who exposed herself so readily for sin will now be publicly exposed in punishment. This action is a reversal of the symbolic gesture of Yahweh spreading the edge of his robe over the woman as a gesture of marital commitment (16:8). Now it was a matter of the annulment of the woman’s married identity, that is, a divorce. There is copious evidence, both biblical and extrabiblical, that such exposure was a common practice in the ancient Near East as a gesture of punishment for unfaithfulness, leading to divorce. Probably the most vivid biblical parallel is Hos 2:2–3, but it is also alluded to in Nah 3:5 and Jer 13:22, 26. The exact relationship between the stripping mentioned in this verse and that in Ezek 16:39 is not clear. Conceivably, they are identical, or Ezekiel may have telescoped them. But Greenberg may be correct in distinguishing the momentary turning back of the woman’s clothing in this verse before the trial from the permanent stripping after the trial and before her execution in 16:39–40. (CC)

A context like this inevitably occasions consideration of the “social issue” of rampant divorce. The Bible is universal in its condemnation of the practice. Evidently stripping of the divorcee or adulteress had ceased by NT times and has never been a part of the Christian ethos. But the NT is no more approving of divorce than the OT. The key NT text is Mt 5:31–32, our Lord’s endorsement of the strict understanding of Deut 24:1–4 by the early rabbinical school of Shammai and a repudiation of the laxity of Hillel. The topic is, of course, too broad to pursue further here, but this aspect of Ezekiel’s metaphor is another warning sign to churches that have accommodated and conformed to the pagan culture (perhaps attempting to justify their resignation in the guise of “tolerance” and “love”). And such a spirit of accommodation readily metastasizes until both Law and Gospel disappear. “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1 Cor 5:6; Gal 5:9). (CC)

The theological application of the metaphor of stripping is not developed here, but it is no stretch to make the soteriological application: stripped of the cloak of Yahweh’s promise and the gift of righteousness won by Christ, the unbelieving sinner stands naked and defenseless before the righteous Judge (cf. Rev 3:17). The divorce, in effect, takes place already at the death of the unbeliever, but will be made public on the Last Day and will necessarily end in eternal damnation (Rev 20:11–15). Church art traditionally shows the damned as naked and the saints in glory as clothed in white garments (see, e.g., Rev 3:4–5; 4:4; 6:9–11). Christ himself exhorts:

I counsel you to acquire from me gold which has been refined by fire so that you may be wealthy and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen. (Rev 3:18) (CC)

**16:38** *sentence you.* The punishment was death (see Lev 20:10; Dt 22:22) by stoning (see v. 40; Dt 22:21–24; Jn 8:5–7) or burning (Ge 38:24). (CSB)

In the third part of the judgment, the metaphor shifts back again to more specifically the offense of “adultery,” as well as the shedding of blood, a reference to the woman’s sacrifice of the children she bore for Yahweh (16:20–21, 36). Yahweh pronounces capital punishment: “I will make you blood(y).” That this refers not just to injury, but to her blood being shed, is affirmed by the references to the shedding of “blood” in 16:36 and immediately preceding in 16:38. The accent on blood brings us full circle to the chapter’s beginning, where the newborn girl had been found “thrashing about in [her] blood” (16:6, 22). Her life will end as it began, forsaken by all. (CC)

Capital punishment in no way conflicts with the Fifth Commandment. Churches err if they try to equate capital punishment with abortion in some allegedly unified “ethic of life.” Scripture’s high view of the sanctity of life requires capital punishment for capital offenses. Adultery was a capital crime for both men and women (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22), as was murder, in this case of the woman’s own children (Ezek 16:20–21, 36). Yahweh, as both cuckolded husband and sovereign judge will pass the sentence “in wrath and passion” (16:38). As noted at the start of the commentary on this chapter, the monogamous image of Yahweh’s righteous jealousy permeates Ezekiel and indeed the whole Bible, even when the vocabulary is more subtle. (CC)

**16:39** *your mounds … your lofty shrines.* The cultic centers within the city (see v. 24). (CSB)

The fourth and final part of Yahweh’s verdict upon Jerusalem for her abominations is that he “deputizes” her former “lovers” as his agents to carry out his *opus alienum* (a favorite phrase of Luther, based on Is 28:21), his alien work of judgment under the Law. In this way he destroys the unholy liaisons she had sought to establish by her whorings. Her paramours turned executioners carry out her execution in three phases (16:39–41), and it becomes increasingly difficult to separate the metaphor itself and what it relates to, namely, the physical destruction of Jerusalem. (CC)

Phase 1 is that her former clients will destroy the facilities she built for her whorings (the “domed tent” and “platform(s)” she built in 16:31) and strip her of Yahweh’s remaining gifts, her “clothes” and “jewelry of glory” (which he gave her in 16:10–13), so that she is “naked and nude,” just as she was in 16:7, before Yahweh married her. Thus, once again we are returned to the chapter’s beginning: a stark naked woman, this time, however, not because of helpless neglect, but in judgment for her abuse of God’s gifts. (CC)

**16:40** *mob … will stone you.* Cf. 23:47. (CSB)

Phase 2 is that a mob will stone her to death, following the prescription of Deut 22:23–24. There is no biblical parallel to the subsequent hacking of her body to pieces, but it graphically illustrates the fury of Yahweh’s judgment. Her dismemberment would make burial difficult or impossible and suggests that she would not be raised to eternal life (cf. 2 Ki 9:10, 36–37). (CC)

**16:41** *burn down your houses.* A common form of punishment (see Jdg 12:1; 15:6). (CSB)

The third and final phase is that “they will burn down your houses with fire and execute on you judgments in the sight of many women.” The language of this verse almost breaks away from its metaphorical packaging into an explicit politico-military prediction of what happened to Jerusalem in 586 b.c. The metaphor with both men and women is continued consistently with earlier parts of the chapter: her former male allies are the ones who torch her dwellings and execute judgments on her, while rival women (called “those who hate you” in 16:27 and “those you hated” in 16:37) look on with glee at her elimination. She who had been so open in her depravity will be a public spectacle in open view of the whole world when, Yahweh says, “I will make you cease from being a whore.” (CC)

*no longer pay your lovers.* See v. 33. (CSB)

**16:42** In the anthropopathic language of the verse, God will find emotional satisfaction only after his righteous justice has been satisfied and Jerusalem has paid the full penalty. Similar anthropopathic language occurred before (especially 5:13) and will occur later (e.g., 24:13). She could have avoided this punishment had she repented and cast herself upon God’s free grace, but she had long ago hardened her heart against that. (CC)

Zimmerli considers Yahweh’s words in 16:42 to introduce a note of consolation here, an assurance of salvation beyond the judgment, anticipating 16:60–63. Although that might be defensible theologically as a proleptic thought (God’s ultimate salvific intent), the immediate context indicates that Yahweh’s words have the opposite force: he will not be satisfied until he has completely executed judgment on the woman. Ultimately, the full severity of his wrath will fall upon the sinless Christ on the cross, and in that way Christ’s vicarious sufferings will make full satisfaction for humanity’s sins. (CC)

**16:44** *Like mother, like daughter.* Referring to Jerusalem’s continual and seemingly hereditary tendency toward evil (cf. vv. 3, 45). (CSB)

Israel’s wild behavior had been so open and flagrant that everyone knew and talked about it, distilling their revulsion into a popular proverb, “Like her mother is her daughter.” The mother, called a “Hittite” in 16:3 and 16:45b, represents the heathen Canaanites, while her daughter is Jerusalem, representing, as throughout the pericope, all Israel. (CC)

**16:45** This verse expands the basic metaphor of the chapter: Jerusalem is not the only child of her pagan mother and father (16:3, 45) but has two sisters. All three sisters exhibit the same congenital defect as their mother: neglect of their responsibilities to their husbands and children. Where is the evidence of this neglect? Since the genre of the material is quasi-allegorical metaphor, we must not try to “squeeze blood out of a turnip.” The “family” relationship is not biological or genealogical, but theological, with sociological and moral implications. From that viewpoint, values and behavior, which reveal the underlying theology, are the real indicators of family ties. (CC)

The text does not indicate who the sisters’ husbands might represent metaphorically, but the verse should not be taken to mean that God expects each people to worship their patron deity faithfully. Instead, all three sisters are guilty of idolatry, even though Jerusalem has greater culpability because of the privileged position she had. The children abused by Jerusalem’s sisters may well be victims of Molech worship (even though evidence about the cult’s antiquity and extent is scanty), since Jerusalem slaughtered her own children, apparently to that deity (see the commentary on 16:20–21). We have even less specific information along those lines about the Hittites (the sisters’ “mother,” 16:3, 45), although their pantheon is by now fairly well-known. Regardless of details, the implication is surely that the veneration of any other deity is idolatry and defection from Yahweh, who is the one true God, and who rules over all peoples, whether or not they know it and acknowledge him in worship. Keil quotes from the fifth-century church father Theodore to that effect:

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. (CC)

Block nicely compares Yahweh’s argumentation here with that of Jesus in Jn 8:39–47, where the Lord declares that the Jewish leaders are descendants of the devil rather than of Abraham and God. The NT makes plain that all peoples are called to forsake their idols (e.g., Acts 17:22–31) and worship the one true God through faith in Jesus Christ, who is the sole way to God the Father (e.g., Jn 14:6). Christ is “the true God and eternal life”; all others are idols (1 Jn 5:20–21). (CC)

**16:46-47** These two verses express in brief what 16:48–51 will expatiate upon. Both Sodom and Samaria were notorious for their behavior, which had led to their downfall. The use of them as bywords was not new. Already Isaiah had called Jerusalem “Sodom” (Is 1:10), and Jeremiah had likened the false prophets of Jerusalem to those of Sodom and Gomorrah (Jer 23:14). For further examples about Sodom, see the textual notes on Ezek 16:56. As for Samaria, in Micah 6:16 Jerusalem is accused of adopting the practices of Omri and Ahab, and in Jer 3:11 the same charge was made as here: Judah (here Jerusalem) is more guilty than Israel (her sister Samaria). (CC)

**16:46** *daughters.* Suburbs or satellite cities. (CSB)

**16:47** *more depraved than they.* The Bible frequently compares a city or people to Sodom (see v. 46) as the epitome of evil and degradation (see Dt 29:23; 32:32; Isa 1:9–10; 3:9; Jer 23:14; La 4:6; Mt 10:15; 11:23–24; Jude 7). (CSB)

**16:48-50** Jerusalem is first compared unfavorably with Sodom (reversing the sequence of Samaria then Sodom in 16:46). Yahweh affirms on oath that even Sodom, the very archetype of wickedness, was no match for that now found in Jerusalem. Ezekiel is engaging in a little “shock therapy” here, but it was not immediately effective. In the indictment of Sodom, the initial term “iniquity” is singular and all encompassing: “this was the iniquity [עָוֹן] of Sodom” (16:49). Similarly, Christian theology speaks first of all of “sin” in the singular (sinful nature; the state of sin) before speaking of individual sins. The overriding issue with “sin” or “iniquity” is basic orientation: the failure to fear, love, and trust the one true God above all things, and the worship of others in his place (thus the First Commandment is a summary of the Decalogue). The same point can be made about the singular “abomination” (תּוֹעֵבָה) in 16:50. (CC)

The picture limned here of Sodom’s sin does not recount the attempted homosexual gang rape in Genesis 19 for which the city lives on in infamy, even though it is a classic example of the depravity Ezekiel so often condemns. Instead we have a picture of arrogance, complacency, gluttony, and shirking of social responsibilities toward the poor. Critics have often hypothesized some alternate, even contradictory tradition about why Sodom was destroyed. The homosexual lobby has been only too happy to champion that supposition and to declare this passage, not Genesis 19, to present the real reasons (as if the Bible does not have enough additional condemnations of homosexuality as an abomination). (CC)

However, the view of Sodom here is fully consistent with that in Genesis 19, and the Hebrew texts indicate how readily the “two traditions” are really one. Ezekiel states that Sodom and her daughters committed “abomination” (תּוֹעֵבָה, 16:50), and in Lev 18:22 and 20:13 homosexuality is specifically labeled an “abomination” (תּוֹעֵבָה), so Ezekiel’s language easily encompasses that particular sin. Moreover, the luxuriant apathy in Ezek 16:49 could be encompassed by the Hebrew terminology in Genesis 19. Thrice the Genesis text refers to the “outcry” from Sodom that had reached heaven (זְעָקָה, Gen 18:20; צְעָקָה, 18:21; 19:13). This “outcry” would be from people suffering from the misbehavior of their fellow residents and could be from the oppressed poor as well as those grieving at the abomination of homosexuality (cf. Ezek 9:4). Other OT passages use the same nouns (and cognate verbs) to refer to the “outcry” of the oppressed poor (e.g., זְעָקָה in Prov 21:13; צְעָקָה in Ex 22:23; Job 34:28). Isaiah’s wordplay on צְדָקָה (“righteousness”) and צְעָקָה (“outcry”) shows that “outcry” can be used as a comprehensive term for all kinds of human sin and as the very antithesis of Yahweh’s “righteousness” (Is 5:7). (CC)

The Bible never advocates any simplistic equation of wealth with profligacy, nor is the Gospel a manifesto to attempt to correct the gross imbalance in the distribution of wealth in this life (as recent liberation theology often intimates). Nevertheless, history provides many examples where prosperity has led to arrogance and ungodliness, including Jerusalem in this chapter (see also Tyre and its prince in Ezek 27:27–28:19; and Babylon the Harlot in Rev 18:7–20). Even today statistics indicate that the poor generally give a higher percentage of their income to charity, including the church, than do the rich. Nevertheless, it is a timely reminder (perhaps especially to Lutherans, who are so often accused of being weak on sanctification by those who do not really grasp their theology) that the “sins” we too must confess are not only heinous outrages, but the more subtle ones of middle-class security (cf. James 2:15–26). (CC)

“So I removed them [Sodom and her daughters]” (Ezek 16:50) alludes ever so briefly to the fiery conflagration in Gen 19:23–29, which Jude 7 describes as “a judgment of eternal fire” (πυρὸς αἰωνίου δίκην). (CC)

**16:49** *sin of your sister Sodom.* Here social injustice rather than sexual perversion (Ge 19) is highlighted. (CSB)

**16:51-52** Without specifying northern Israel’s faults, Yahweh only states that “Samaria did not sin like even half of your sins.” Since the chapter spends so much time on Jerusalem’s (“your”) sins, the reader can easily infer what Samaria’s were. Chapter 23 will more than make up for this imbalance by describing Samaria’s sins and comparing hers to Jerusalem’s in great detail! (CC)

“Characteristically, Ezekiel carries the thought to an extreme” by saying, “You made your sisters appear righteous by all your abominations” (16:51). Among sinners one can distinguish between relative degrees of manifest sinfulness, and the worst are those who have the greatest exposure to the Gospel but reject it. Thus the Lord stated about Capernaum and the cities who rejected him, “It will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you” (Mt 11:24). Samaria and Sodom will certainly not be excused or “justified” in the proper theological sense, but they could use the alibi that the accused employ almost instinctively: “I am not as bad as he/she is.” This completely deflates the self-righteousness of Jerusalem, who misunderstood the grace of election as some sort of magical guarantee of her superiority over her neighbors. When the scales finally fall from her eyes and she realizes that hers is the greater guilt, the result can only be disgrace in the eyes of others and shame in her own eyes. When she must own the greater shame, she will only be able to confess about her reprobate sister (as Judah did about Tamar), “She is more righteous than I” (Gen 38:26; see the textual notes on Ezek 16:51). Only when the Law has brought her to that point, so that she can only throw herself on the mercy of the heavenly court, is there an opening for the Gospel, the true justification of the ungodly (Rom 4:5). That point will come with the fall of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 33. (CC)

“Be ashamed and bear your disgrace” (16:52) may be a flashback to Ezekiel’s earlier forecast that the Israelites will eventually come to regard their past with revulsion (6:9). Ezekiel does not explicitly use Jeremiah’s metaphor of a “whore’s forehead,” which knows no shame (Jer 3:3), but the picture is clearly of one who can now only approach in sackcloth and ashes, and by the miracle of justification and regeneration (Ezek 11:19–20; 16:59–63) regain in a new creation the birthright that was hers by adoption and marriage (16:6–9), which correspond to Holy Baptism: Baptism effects adoption (Gal 3:26–29) and is the betrothal of the church to Christ (Eph 5:25–27). (CC)

**16:53** What all is implied by the language of “restoration” must be determined from the context. Even though the phraseology (שְׁבִית /שְׁבוּת שׁוּב) itself is not used all that often, one must be aware of its pivotal significance in the history of biblical thought. Much like Ezekiel’s use of it here, Job 42:10 illustrates its basic meaning: restoration in the fullest sense, not just to the previous state (the status quo ante), but to something much better. Hence restored Job had twice as much of everything as he did in the beginning (Job 1), and most importantly, he had a far greater faith in Yahweh than he did before he lost everything and endured prolonged suffering. (CC)

The language of eschatological restoration and release leads into the “now–not yet” or “Law-Gospel” paradox that is constitutive of all orthodox theology. (CC)

**16:54** This verse is a continuation of the sentence begun in 16:53. It stresses that the immediate reason for mentioning Sodom’s and Samaria’s restoration is negative: pure Law to impress upon Jerusalem the destructive results of her rebellion. A comparable point had already been made in 16:51–52 and will be explained further in 16:56–57, as well as in 16:63 and 20:43. Anyone who, like apostate Jerusalem, gives comfort to such as Samaria and Sodom, that is, anyone whose flagrant sin makes it possible for others to extenuate their own sinfulness, must realize how damaging to God’s purposes his behavior is. Through the ages, the misdeeds of church members have always been a major alibi for unbelievers to reject any missionary invitation to the Gospel. (CC)

**16:56-58** These verses continue the great reversal theme involving restoration (16:53) and represent a “turning of the tables,” but they are still very much part of the condemning work of the Law that is prerequisite for full restoration by the Gospel. She who once in her conceit had fancied herself especially blessed and had found her neighbors convenient objects of gossip and derision will now find herself at the receiving end of the same kind of ridicule. To be a public laughingstock is part of God’s direct judgment upon the people. Just as Sodom is a byword throughout the Scriptures (see the textual notes on 16:56), so apostate Jerusalem shall become. (CC)

There is a Gospel side implicit in this situation, but it does not surface until 16:59–63. If Yahweh can restore someone who has fallen as far as Jerusalem has, he can restore anybody. The church, individually and collectively, prays that it will not have to learn the hard way that it is indeed “chief of sinners.”

**16:56** *day of your pride.* Referring to a time long before Ezekiel, when Jerusalem (as an Israelite city) was still relatively uncorrupted—as in the days of David and the early years of Solomon. (CSB)

**16:57** *scorned by the daughters of Edom.* The OT frequently condemns Edom for this (see 25:12–14; 35; Isa 63:1; Obadiah). (CSB)

**16:59** *covenant.* See v. 8 and note. (CSB)

Whether this verse is a question or a statement (see the textual notes), it makes an emphatic transition to the powerful Gospel section in 16:60–63. The Law aspect of 16:53–58 is well summarized in the severe assertion here of all that Jerusalem was guilty of doing: “who despised the oath, thereby breaking the covenant” (16:59). The same phraseology reappears in 17:13–19, referring to Zedekiah’s rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar, which is the political counterpart to the religious rebellion Ezekiel is describing metaphorically in this chapter. If Yahweh operated strictly on the principle of reciprocity, Jerusalem, of all the cities of the world, would bear the brunt of Yahweh’s wrath. (CC)

While אָלָה, “oath,” is a common, generic word, in the OT it is usually used in covenantal contexts. Sometimes the word is simply paired with בְּרִית, “covenant” (e.g., Deut 29:12, 14). The oath played a prominent role in the ritual of covenant making, which would include both positive oaths (promises, blessings) and negative oaths (imprecations to be implemented if either party broke the covenant). Human “covenants” or contracts were usually bilateral, and some of this feature continues in the Sinaitic covenant. But the Abrahamic covenant was prior (Gal 3:17), and it was unconditional and unilateral (God alone issued his promise). Yahweh’s description of his original “marriage” to Jerusalem alluded to his unconditional, unilateral oath: “I swore [an oath] to you and entered into a covenant with you” (16:8). (CC)

The Hiphil of פָּרַר and the noun בְּרִית form the usual OT idiom for “break a covenant.” Jeremiah’s famous “new covenant” prophecy (Jer 31:31–34, the OT Lesson for Reformation Day) uses this idiom for the old, Sinai covenant (“they broke my covenant,” Jer 31:32). The affinities between the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel will be even more evident in 16:60. (CC)

**16:60** Regardless of whether 16:59 is a question or a statement (see the textual notes on it), the transition to Gospel promises requires translating with a major disjunctive: “*On the contrary*, I myself will remember my covenant …” (16:60). The rest of the chapter looks forward to the new eon after Yahweh heals the rupture caused by human sin. The language and theology have many antecedents, and the theology will be developed in greater detail in chapters 34, 36, and 37. Only a few retrospects will remind Ezekiel’s first audience (and us) of the “not yet.” Coming as it does at the end of so long and so lurid a chapter, the words here make an even greater impact, expressing the magnitude of God’s grace almost beyond what human language can express. (CC)

The anthropomorphism of Yahweh “remembering” his covenant occurs only here in Ezekiel, but the idiom frequently occurs elsewhere (e.g., Gen 9:15–16). See especially Lev 26:42, 45, because of that chapter’s many reverberations in Ezekiel. As usual in biblical idiom, “remembering” is no mere intellectual activity but implies implementation as well. (CC)

In “I will establish for you an everlasting covenant” (16:60), instead of the common verb כָּרַת, literally, “to cut” a covenant, Ezekiel uses הֵקִים “to establish, institute.” Older source criticism once used these two verbs to distinguish Pentateuchal sources, alleging that הֵקִים was a sure sign of “P” (the priestly source). The only grain of truth in that is that הֵקִים usually appears in more liturgical contexts, with which priest-theologians would be especially familiar. But Ezekiel, himself a priest (1:3) and prophet, gives the lie to any pitting of the two verbs against each other by his use of כָּרַת (“cut” a covenant) in 17:13; 34:25; 37:26. (CC)

Nevertheless, the two verbs often may have different nuances. כָּרַת (“cut”), probably derived from the world of commerce and its contracts (as the plural of בְּרִית could then often be translated), had a more bilateral tone to it (*do ut des*, “I give in order that you give”), and it was the normal word to use for brand-new agreements. With careful qualifications, Yahweh’s covenant with Israel could be called “bilateral” in that God had expectations and obligations for his people, but such language is best avoided since it can easily leave the door open for the fatal misunderstanding that Israel (or we) must or even could do something to earn, deserve, or qualify for God’s gifts. (CC)

In contrast, הֵקִים (“establish, institute”) more clearly conveys divine monergism in salvation and the divine initiative in all of God’s covenant making. Sometimes נָתַן too can be used to underscore the sheer gift quality when God literally “gives a covenant” (e.g., Gen 17:2; Num 25:12; cf. Is 42:6; 49:8). In addition to its initiation, הֵקִים (“establish”) can also imply the maintenance of a covenant, and some prefer to translate the verb “maintain” here. Certainly there are elements of continuity as well as discontinuity here, as also in the climactic application of “covenant” to the two Testaments that constitute our Bible. The continuity of the “covenant [made with Israel] in the days of [her] youth” with the “everlasting covenant” (16:60) is evidenced by the fact that Yahweh remembers the former when he establishes the latter. Note well that Yahweh’s motive is *not* his remembrance of Israel’s youth nor any time or act of her fidelity, but rather his own promises that he issued to her in her youth. Yahweh remains faithful to his Word despite all human infidelity (2 Tim 2:13). Thus הֵפֵר (that his people were “breaking” his covenant) in 16:59 and הֵקִים (that he himself will “establish” the everlasting covenant) in 16:60 are precise antonyms. (CC)

The message in 16:60 may well echo Leviticus 26, which summarizes the blessings and curses of the Sinaitic covenant. After a recital of the terrible curses that would befall a disobedient Israel, Lev 26:40–45 nevertheless concludes that the blessings of the covenant would return once the people repented. The “*everlasting covenant*” (Ezek 16:60) cannot be forgotten or annulled, but its benefits may be suspended or forfeited entirely if the receiving party refuses to acknowledge them. We may compare Is 55:3: “And I will make [וְאֶכְרְתָ֤ה] for you an everlasting covenant, [fulfilling my] faithful mercies to David [חַֽסְדֵ֥י דָוִ֖ד הַנֶּאֱמָנִֽים].” And the Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7; cf. Psalm 2), with the promise of the Son who would build God’s house and rule on his throne forever, is simply an extension of the one with the patriarchs. In 2 Sam 23:5 David himself calls the covenant God had made with him “everlasting.” And as Ezek 16:63 will shortly emphasize even further, its eternalness does not depend upon any human attempt to fulfill the Law, but solely on God’s forgiving grace. Jer 31:31–34, the *locus classicus* of the “new covenant,” with its links to Ezek 16:60, makes the same point in its own way. Ezekiel will expand on the role of the new David (Jesus Christ) in establishing the new covenant in 34:23–25 and 37:25–26. (CC)

**16:61** The continuity between God’s remembering in the previous verse and Israel’s here is obvious. Not only will there be a reversal of the almost total amnesia from which she seemed to suffer before, but her memory will be sharpened and more focused. The memory of the people’s depraved past will not only evoke “a Lenten memorial” in their hearts, but God, far from holding a grudge, will grant them even greater blessings. “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Rom 5:20 KJV)thus, in one sense, intensifying their shame. In this eschatological era, we may take Sodom and Samaria as representing heathen nations generally—Sodom perhaps those who previously had never heard the Gospel and who had sunk into the deepest moral degradation, and Samaria those who had fallen from the state of grace. These cities that had previously been “sisters” are now received as “daughters.” That is, they will now be dependencies, not in any political or imperialistic sense, but in the recognition that there is but “one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:6). (CC)

**16:62** It is almost surprising that the recognition formula (“then you will know that I am Yahweh”), which is so prominent throughout the book, does not come until the penultimate verse of this long chapter. Israel did not come by that confession easily, nor do we. There may be the implication that only in eternity will we fully “know” all that is involved in the divine name—as can also be said about the name of Jesus (Mt 1:21; Phil 2:6–11; Rev 19:16). Nor should we overlook the use here again of the emphatic pronoun: “*I myself* will establish my covenant with you.” Since he will do this through the incarnate and crucified One, the pronoun summarizes the *sola gratia* import of the entire chapter. (CC)

**16:63** The last verse in the chapter is an expansion of the recognition formula in a complex purpose clause. In retrospect, after acquiring the full knowledge of Yahweh, the shame and awakened memory can only lead the people to “never again open [their] mouth.” It is hard to say whether their silence is in contrast to earlier specific circumstances or whether Yahweh is making a more general theological statement. Their silence may be in contrast to the arrogance they had once shown in speaking of Sodom (16:56). Chapter 18 will confront their vocal complaints that God has not treated them fairly and has reneged on his covenant commitment. Chapter 37 addresses their lament that, like dry bones, they have no future. The book of Habakkuk, written not too long before Ezekiel, shows that even among the faithful, the cry of the saints “How long?” readily arises. In the interim between Christ’s first and second advents, even the saints in heaven ask that question (Rev 6:10) as they await the final defeat of all evil on earth, the resurrection of their bodies, and their entrance into the new heavens and new earth (Revelation 21–22). (CC)