EZEKIEL

Chapter 22

*Jerusalem’s Sins*

**The word of the LORD came to me:  2 “Son of man, will you judge her? Will you judge this city of bloodshed? Then confront her with all her detestable practices  3 and say: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O city that brings on herself doom by shedding blood in her midst and defiles herself by making idols,  4 you have become guilty because of the blood you have shed and have become defiled by the idols you have made. You have brought your days to a close, and the end of your years has come. Therefore I will make you an object of scorn to the nations and a laughingstock to all the countries.  5 Those who are near and those who are far away will mock you, O infamous city, full of turmoil. 6 ”‘See how each of the princes of Israel who are in you uses his power to shed blood.  7 In you they have treated father and mother with contempt; in you they have oppressed the alien and mistreated the fatherless and the widow.  8 You have despised my holy things and desecrated my Sabbaths.  9 In you are slanderous men bent on shedding blood; in you are those who eat at the mountain shrines and commit lewd acts.  10 In you are those who dishonor their fathers’ bed; in you are those who violate women during their period, when they are ceremonially unclean.  11 In you one man commits a detestable offense with his neighbor’s wife, another shamefully defiles his daughter-in-law, and another violates his sister, his own father’s daughter.  12 In you men accept bribes to shed blood; you take usury and excessive interest and make unjust gain from your neighbors by extortion. And you have forgotten me, declares the Sovereign LORD. 13 ”‘I will surely strike my hands together at the unjust gain you have made and at the blood you have shed in your midst.  14 Will your courage endure or your hands be strong in the day I deal with you? I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.  15 I will disperse you among the nations and scatter you through the countries; and I will put an end to your uncleanness.  16 When you have been defiled in the eyes of the nations, you will know that I am the LORD.’” 17 Then the word of the LORD came to me:  18 “Son of man, the house of Israel has become dross to me; all of them are the copper, tin, iron and lead left inside a furnace. They are but the dross of silver.  19 Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘Because you have all become dross, I will gather you into Jerusalem.  20 As men gather silver, copper, iron, lead and tin into a furnace to melt it with a fiery blast, so will I gather you in my anger and my wrath and put you inside the city and melt you.  21 I will gather you and I will blow on you with my fiery wrath, and you will be melted inside her.  22 As silver is melted in a furnace, so you will be melted inside her, and you will know that I the LORD have poured out my wrath upon you.’” 23 Again the word of the LORD came to me:  24 “Son of man, say to the land, ‘You are a land that has had no rain or showers in the day of wrath.’  25 There is a conspiracy of her princes within her like a roaring lion tearing its prey; they devour people, take treasures and precious things and make many widows within her.  26 Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things; they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean; and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.  27 Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain.  28 Her prophets whitewash these deeds for them by false visions and lying divinations. They say, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says’—when the LORD has not spoken.  29 The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice. 30 “I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.  31 So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD.”**

This chapter consists of three separate oracles: (1) 22:1–16; (2) 22:17–22; and (3) 22:23–31. The same word-event formula, “the Word of Yahweh came to me,” introduces each of the three oracles, since it is repeated in 22:1, 17, 23. Comparably, the recognition formula, “you will know that I am Yahweh,” concludes the first oracle (22:16) and a variation of it concludes the second oracle (22:22). The signatory formula, “says the Lord Yahweh,” ends 22:31 and closes the chapter. (CC)

Formally, the three oracles are addressed to different audiences, although in reality they are identical: (1) the bloody city; (2) the house of Israel; and (3) the unclean land. The themes of the three are similar, but with different approaches or metaphors: (1) a general indictment of Jerusalem for a great variety of moral and ceremonial violations; (2) the use of metallurgical imagery to describe “the house of Israel” (22:18) as all dross that must be purged in the fire of judgment; and (3) the offenses of all classes of Israelite society. (CC)

**22:2** *will you judge her?* Cf. 20:4. (CSB)

The general indictment of Jerusalem opens with the same rhetorical questions that we met in 20:4. The repetition (“will you arraign, will you arraign?”) indicates that, despite all the intervening variation, the overarching theme has been reproof of the city. The use of the question twice here indicates excitement. As in 20:4, the use of the interrogative particle implies indignation and virtually turns the question into an imperative (“arraign!”). Since the prophet himself is not the one who will effect the judgment, “arraign” is a more suitable translation of שָׁפַט than a literalistic “judge”; it is Yahweh who will execute the judgment. (CC)

*this city.* Jerusalem, the usual focal point of Ezekiel’s prophecy (see 5:5). (CSB)

CITY OF BLOOD – The epithet “bloody city” is, literally, “city of bloodshed” (עִיר הַרָּמִים, 22:2), which will be repeated in 24:6, 9. The plural רָּמִים (“bloods”) is regularly used idiomatically for “murder, bloodshed,” conceivably because of the drops or pools of blood involved. As the context will make plain, the primary reference is to judicial murder, an actionable abuse of administrative power. We have heard Jerusalem or Israel described in similar terms in 7:23; 9:9; 11:6; 16:38, and we will meet such descriptions again in 23:45 and 24:6–9. But we must struggle to hear the phrase in Ezekiel’s priestly frame of reference. “Bloodguilt” is a quite comprehensive category of guilt. It involves not only the taking of a person’s physical life, but also social oppression and ritual misbehavior, which we would probably classify separately. For example, its applicability to ritual is illustrated in Lev 17:3–4, where improper slaughter of animals is considered “bloodguilt.” (CC)

Much of the cogency of the epithet “bloody city” (Ezek 22:2) at least to the original audience, lay in the fact that Ezekiel appears to have taken it from the prophet Nahum (3:1), who was active sometime in the half century preceding (the second half of the seventh century b.c.). Nahum had applied it to the Assyrians, who were infamous because of their brutal treatment of captives, a reputation of which they seem to have been proud. One can easily imagine the shock value that the epithet’s application to Jerusalem would have to the city’s inhabitants. (CC)

CONFRONT HER – The second half of the verse (22:2) is a sort of an apodosis of the first half, and it continues in 22:3. “Tell her [וְה֣וֹדַעְתָּ֔הּ, Hiphil of יָדַע] all her abominations” implies far more than merely to “make them known” in a cognitive sense. Intellectually, Jerusalem was well aware of the inadvisability of its actions, but acknowledging them as תּוֹעֵבוֹת (conventionally, “abominations”) was something else. Ezekiel had earlier used that favorite word of his for Israel’s idolatrous (e.g., 5:11; 7:20) and sexual offenses (e.g., 16:22, 36), but in the following verses the two accents converge. (CC)

**22:3** *shedding blood … making idols.* Two categories of sins are developed: social injustices and idol worship. (CSB)

*idols.* See note on 6:4. (CSB)

“Shedding blood” and “manufacturing idols” are mentioned in the same breath. These twin “abominations” (22:2) equally bring defilement and judgment. As Zimmerli well summarizes: “where a proper fear before the One, who alone is holy, is lost and men impiously prepare their unclean idolatry, there reverence for life and the life of one’s neighbor disappears.” (CC)

**22:4-5** The two interlocked atrocities of murder and impurity or defilement because of idolatrous practices will, in the short term, precipitate the mockery and taunts of all who hear of Jerusalem and, in the long term, hasten the day of reckoning. The ridicule is intensified because of the disconnection between what the people claimed to be and their behavior in the eyes of outsiders—as is still the case with the church and supposedly devout believers. Far from being the holy city, even uniformed unbelievers would laugh at her sexual and social offenses specified in the following verses (22:6–12). (CC)

The “name” (22:5) of the city is probably more than mere reputation. In OT thought, a “name” was not only an identification, but a window to a person’s or entity’s interior being. This is evident in many biblical birth narratives, at least in the hopes and prayers of parents, and especially when a name is divinely ordained. *Nomen est omen*. The same idea inheres in the “Christian” names we are given at Baptism or “*christ*ening,” although consciousness of that usage has fallen into desuetude in our secular culture, even within the church. For Yahweh, Jerusalem had become so irreparably polluted that in the vision given Ezekiel of the new Jerusalem, it is given a new name, יְהוָ֥ה ׀ שָֽׁמָּה, “Yahweh is there,” the very last words of the book (48:35). Compare similarly Is 62:2, 4; Rev 2:17; 3:12—not to speak of the host of other “new” things God creates (Ps 51:10; 2 Cor 5:17; Rev 21:1–5). (CC)

The final phrase, “great in confusion/turmoil/tumult” (מְהוּמָה, Ezek 22:5), aptly summarizes a society that has lost both chart and compass (cf. Amos 3:9). One is tempted to apply it to contemporary Western culture. (CC)

**22:6** *princes of Israel.* Leaders generally, not kings; contrast 21:12 with 19:1. (CSB)

The first group of condemnations involving bloodshed (שְׁפָךְ־רָּם, 22:6) consists of 22:6–8. Whether “rulers” refers specifically to kings or to anyone in authority, this verse speaks of leaders whose motto is “might makes right.” Even the nonbiblical literature of antiquity describes rulers whose duty it is to take care of the widow and the orphan, who usually were the most powerless members of ancient society. But the rulers of Jerusalem, instead of maintaining justice, had set an example that undermined divine norms. They had forgotten that the strong arm of dominion and deliverance belongs to God alone (see, e.g., Deut 4:34; Jer 21:5; Ezek 20:33–34), who also breaks the arm of the wicked (Ps 10:15). (CC)

**22:7** *mistreated the fatherless and the widow.* Cf. Isa 1:17. (CSB)

Ezekiel’s dependence on the Torah of Moses is obvious in this verse. Often, especially in Deuteronomy, “the alien/sojourner … the orphan and widow,” who are easily victimized, even appear in this same order (e.g., Deut 24:17, 19–21). Also reflected here are other parts of the Torah: the so-called Covenant Code (Ex 22:21–22) and the Holiness Code (Lev 19:33–34). (I use the traditional scholarly terminology, minus the critical baggage often accompanying it, and affirming Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. “Code” is misleading because these passages offered examples more than legal precedents.) (CC)

Singular collectives (“father and mother …”) are used throughout this verse to speak of the individuals who are being mistreated. The abusive subjects of the verb, “*they* have dishonored,” apparently are not to be limited to the rulers denounced in the previous verse, but refer to undefined persons, probably to virtually anyone in a position to behave that way. Compare similarly 22:9b. The first outrage clearly refers to disobedience to the Fourth Commandment. The Hebrew verb (הֵקַ֣לּוּ) rendered “dishonored” is an absolute antithesis to the one used in that commandment: כַּבֵּד (Ex 20:12; Deut 5:16), a Piel imperative of a root that in the Qal means “to be heavy” and so in the Piel means to treat or regard as a “heavy,” someone important, influential, or authoritative—traditionally translated “honor.” Here Ezekiel uses the Hiphil of קָלַל, “to be light,” and thus to treat someone as a “lightweight,” of no real importance, triflingly, contemptuously, and so on. The English “*dis*honor” linguistically expresses the Hebrew antonym. (CC)

The remaining two verbs are virtually interchangeable. Ezekiel could have used the simple verb עָשַׁק, “to cheat someone of his due, take advantage of, exploit.” Instead, he uses the cognate noun, עֹשֶׁק, preceded with עָשָׂה, so בַעֹ֖שֶׁקעָשׂ֥וּ is, literally, “treat with exploitation.” This construction possibly indicates ongoing behavior, not merely a solitary offense (cf. עָ֣שַׁק עֹ֗שֶׁק, “practices extortion,” in 18:18). (CC)

The Torah too is much concerned with the גֵּר, “alien” (22:7), a refugee or temporary resident, who is partially protected by law, but whose rights are also curtailed, and hence who is easily taken advantage of, whether out of xenophobia or unscrupulousness. Today one can hardly help but think of the masses of immigrants, legal or otherwise, who flood the United States. Government programs and the law can do only so much; the responsibility to a large extent depends upon individual concern, which, however, is easily forgotten. An orthodox church’s concern with doctrinal integrity or justifiable fear of a “social gospel” is neutralized (at best) if it and its members disregard the needs of the disadvantaged “in [their] midst” (22:7). (CC)

**22:8** *Sabbaths.* A major concern in Ezekiel (see note on 20:12). (CSB)

The verse seems to be formulated as a direct contrast to the commands of Lev 19:30. Ezekiel gives it his own touch by reversing the order of the two clauses. Yahweh uses almost exactly antonymous verbs from those in Lev 19:30 to make the accusation. Instead of “you shall fear/revere/reverence [יָרֵא] my sanctuary” (Lev 19:30), here Yahweh says, “You have despised [בָּזָה] my holy things,” using a verb Ezekiel employs elsewhere to describe contempt of the covenant oath (16:59; 17:19; cf. 17:16, 18). And instead of “you shall keep/guard [שָׁמַר] my Sabbaths” (Lev 19:30), Yahweh accuses, “You have … profaned [חִלֵּל] my Sabbaths.” (CC)

Ezekiel also broadens the scope of the transgression by expanding מִקְרָּשִׁי, “my sanctuary,” in Lev 19:30 to קָדָשַׁי, “my holy things,” a very comprehensive term involving not only the sanctuary, but all other *sacra*: the sacrifices, the temple accoutrements, the rituals, and so forth. In modern times, to “despise” these might signify secularism, but in antiquity it would undoubtedly mean the transfer of religious devotion to other cults. (CC)

As in Lev 19:30, one plural noun, here “my holy things,” is paralleled by a second: “my Sabbaths.” The plural may refer only to Sabbath *days*, but may also mean to include the expansion of “rest” in the sphere of time to the realm of space, the Sabbatical Years and the Jubilee (Leviticus 25). The centrality of these observances to Israelite identity and theology can hardly be overstated. Christians celebrate the fulfillment of this “rest” in Christ’s Easter victory, although on earth only proleptically. (CC)

**22:9** SLANDEROUS MEN – The second group of condemnations (22:9–11) involving bloodshed (שְׁפָךְ־רָּם, 22:9) seems to inch gradually into its main concern with sexual transgressions. How slander or gossip connects is not self-evident, except possibly by the association of the Hebrew word translated “slanderers” with itinerant merchants (see the textual note on 22:9). The text’s own immediate association is that “slanderers are present to shed blood” (22:9). It is not immediately apparent what the connection is between slander and bloodshed. Lev 19:16, to which Ezekiel is probably referring, makes the same connection. Cooke is probably correct in understanding the connection as efforts “to get rid of persons obnoxious to those in power by means of false accusations.” (CC)

That practice is scarcely unknown today. Nor has the Christian church been particularly successful in eliminating such behavior, not even in its own internal politics. If one looks for evidence of original sin, few examples will serve better. It is noteworthy also that the OT mentions slander as such a common, everyday sin (so much so that we almost fail to acknowledge it as sinful) virtually in the same breath with the gross immoralities to be targeted shortly. How readily the malice or hate involved in malicious gossip involves or turns into bloodshed is developed in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:21–26). Many other biblical passages could also be cited of course. (cc)

*eat at the mountain shrines and commit lewd acts.* See notes on 6:3; 16:15; 18:6. (CSB)

Eat on the mountains” (Ezek 22:9) undoubtedly refers to participation in pagan ritual meals on the high places. This was already condemned in 18:6. The connection with sexual debauchery is now quite clear: the apparently orgiastic character of the pagan rituals. (CC)

COMMIT LEWD ACTS – The last clause in the verse, “act depravedly in your midst” (22:9), serves as an explicit transition to the next two verses. זִמָּה, “depravity, lewdness,” is one of the strongest and most comprehensive biblical terms for unchastity and forbidden sexual unions. Five specific examples appear in 22:10–11. (CC)

**22:10** FATHER’S BED – he translation is deliberately free to accord with English usages. The Hebrew here does not use the common שָׁכַב, “lie with,” that is, “sleep with” in a sexual sense. Instead, for cohabitation with one’s mother, it uses גִּלָּה (Piel perfect of גָּלָה), literally, “[He] uncovers the nakedness of a father,” meaning that he uncovers his mother’s nakedness, which is lawfully uncoverable only to the father (Lev 18:8; 20:11). According to Lev 20:11, violation of this was a capital crime. The Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Old Testament of Ezek 22:10 has the singular verb גִּלָּה, “[He] uncovers” (as in Lev 20:11), while all the versions have a plural verb, matching the parallel plural verb עִנּוּ (Piel perfect of עָנָה), men “force themselves” upon women. The singular may be a sort of deliberate euphemism for the shocking expression. (CC)

*violate women.* Cf. 18:6. (CSB)

The clause describing the violated women is harder to translate literally. The Hebrew places the object (a construct phrase) before the verb, literally, “the unclean of menstruation they violate in you” (טְמֵאַ֥ת הַנִּרָּ֖ה עִנּוּ־בָֽךְ). The uncleanness of women for seven days during menstruation is part of the ceremonial law (Lev 15:19), mentioned earlier in Ezek 18:6. In Lev 18:19, the euphemistic קָרַב, “approach,” was used in the prohibition of intimacy during menstruation, but Ezekiel uses the stronger verb עִנּוּ, “they violate, humiliate, subdue, overpower, force themselves upon,” implying the woman’s unwillingness to acquiesce. The singular of the same verb (עִנָּה) recurs in the last clause of 22:11. “Rape,” of course, is a possible translation but may be a bit too strong, depending upon precisely how the word is defined. (CC)

The parallelism between 22:8 and 22:10 is a good example of how the OT places moral and ceremonial laws beside each other without the sharp distinction between them later made by Christians. Christ fulfilled the entirety of the OT for our sakes. The ceremonial law has been rendered obsolete, and indeed since the destruction of the temple in a.d. 70 much of it is impossible to perform, but God’s moral law remains normative for Christians and for all peoples. To the best of my knowledge, no Christians prohibit intimacy during menstruation. However, even most secular societies regard mother-son incest as heinous, and this is also an excellent example of “natural law.” (CC)

**22:11** *detestable offense.* All the sins mentioned in this verse were specifically forbidden in the law (Lev 18:7–20; 20:10–21; Dt 22:22–23, 30; 27:22). (CSB)

The mores of our society still tend to disapprove of the three sexual aberrations listed in this verse, but it is no longer a matter of law, except for the suggestion of rape in the third instance: “some force themselves [עִנָּה] on a sister” (for the verb, see the commentary on 22:10). Believers who view these three as more than “mores,” however, will be aware that there are self-styled “progressive” or “liberated” groups who believe that they are little more than ancient taboos that may be discarded and who lobby to that effect. (CC)

**22:12** *usury and excessive interest.* See note on 18:8. (CSB)

The sins in the third group involving bloodshed (שְׁפָךְ־רָּם, 22:12) are all covered by this single verse. Although the specifics are debated (see the textual note), the gist is perfectly clear. It turns from sexual to economic transgressions. Fallen man’s unruly sexual impulses and greed are mentioned in the same breath, as it were. Of course, Ezekiel’s perspective is that of the Torah, but the problems are universal. Both problems are, at best, barely held in check by law but will yield only to a change of heart, which will never be fully realized in this world. The secular temptation is always to try to solve the problem by a new “system,” or at least by multiplying rules and regulations. The twentieth century was convulsed by the battle between capitalism and socialism/Communism, or some amalgam of each. The West is largely convinced that some version of “free enterprise” is, at least, the lesser of two evils, but even here, without playing politics, Christians may serve as salt to remind capitalists that the profit motive built into the system easily falls prey to unvarnished greed—an amoral concern with only “the bottom line,” the mantra that “our first obligation is to our stockholders,” and so forth. (CC)

But the theological pièce de résistance of the entire section comes in the final two Hebrew words of the bill of indictment: וְאֹתִ֣י שָׁכַ֔חַתְּ, literally, “me you have forgotten.” If one is not careful, it is easy to overlook the tremendous significance of this clause as merely the last in a list of discrete offenses of various sorts. Instead, it clearly is a climactic and comprehensive charge, encompassing all of the individual ones preceding. Underlying the objective reality of broken laws is the personal offense of having forgotten Yahweh and all his redemptive acts and promises. The “I” of a personal Creator-Redeemer-Sanctifier confronts the “you” of an apostate city. The people might have fostered some hidden “spirituality” of their own syncretistic manufacture, but those who remember Yahweh know that confession of his name manifests itself in loyalty in all the multiplicity of concrete situations of everyday life. (CC)

It is true that Ezekiel does not often speak so plainly of faith, and thus it becomes easy to dismiss him as only another legalist. He speaks of forgetting Yahweh only once more, in 23:35. It joins the list of other important, mainline theological expressions that occur only once in the book: the use of בָּחַר, “to choose,” only in 20:5; מָלַךְ, “to rule (as king),” applied to Yahweh only in 20:33; and זָכַר, “to remember,” has Yahweh as its object only in 6:9, where “will remember me” is the counterpart of “forgetting me” in 22:12 and 23:35. “To remember” is shorthand for saving faith, while “to forget” implies apostasy and complete loss of faith. (CC)

Like all biblical writers, Ezekiel has his own favorite way of expressing things; compare the writings of St. John with those of St. Paul in the NT. Ezekiel’s own characteristic way of expressing that everything depends on faithful remembering is by use of antonyms such as the verb מָרָה, “to rebel” (5:6; 20:8, 13, 21), and his description of the city and its people not as “the house of (true) Israel,” but (literally) “a house of rebellion” (מְרִי). (CC)

If all this is overlooked by the reader, Ezekiel will easily be read as a major exemplar of a legalistic OT religion—especially if one is disposed to view the OT as an antithesis to the NT to begin with. Nor should the church—which is “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16), the spiritual heir of the OT “house of Israel”—think that it is immune from committing the same sins Ezekiel condemns in Israel (cf. 1 Cor 10:1–13). We forget that, in principle, we confess “sin,” that we *are* sinners, before we confess specific sins. Or put positively, although “love is the fulfilling of the Law” (Rom 13:10), yet because “we daily sin much,” we are still bound to what dogmaticians call “the third use of the Law.” (CC)

We forever teeter on the ledge between legalism and antinomianism. And here one of the great fault lines of Protestantism emerges. The Reformed tradition with its “Gospel as preparation for the Law” orientation easily slides into (quasi-)legalistic preoccupation with rules and empirical experience. Lutheranism, however, proclaims that the Law has condemned the old Adam, who has been crucified and buried with Christ, and the baptized believer is now raised with Christ and thus has been set free from the Law (e.g., Rom 6:1–14). Yet Lutheranism is always tempted to soft-pedal the third use of the Law and at times even to deny its very existence or applicability for a particular behavior. The church, whose doctrine and life are drawn from and normed by the Scriptures alone (*sola Scriptura*), needs constantly to ponder the whole counsel of God in the Scriptures to maintain the proper distinction and application of Law and Gospel to the Christian faith and life. (CC)

**22:13** *strike my hands.* In anger (see 21:14, 17). (CSB)

After the long list of tergiversations (22:6–12) follows the announcement of the sentence in 22:13–16. Only the people’s fraudulent business practices and their bloodguiltiness are mentioned again, but they obviously are a sort of shorthand for the whole catalog of sins mentioned earlier. Here Yahweh himself is anthropomorphically described as clapping his hands, a gesture of exasperation indicating that his patience is exhausted. Israel may have forgotten him (22:12), but he has not forgotten the Israelites, and “it will be sheer terror to understand the message” (Is 28:19). (CC)

**22:14** In two rhetorical questions that assume negative replies, Yahweh virtually mocks Jerusalem’s bravado and machismo. In contrast, by adducing his own efficacious Word (רִּבַּ֥רְתִּי, “I … have spoken”), Yahweh virtually takes an oath that the promised judgment will not fail to come. The following verses describe the nature of the judgment. (CC)

**22:15** Singular forms continue to be used, but the reference is now clearly to the inhabitants of the city, not the city as such—although it is a distinction Ezekiel barely makes. The judgment will consist in the scattering of the people in all directions at the same time that their uncleanness will be purged. The verb תָּמַם (“I will … *eliminate* your uncleanness”) will be used again in 24:10–11 and 47:12. Here the removal of uncleanness is not a reassuring statement (as it will be in 36:25), but a remorseless annihilation of every stain. At this point we have pure Law. (CC)

**22:16** The verb used here, “defiled, desecrated, dishonored” (וְנִחַ֥לְתְּ, Niphal of חָלַל), is essentially synonymous with טֻמְאָה, “uncleanness,” of the previous verse. If we followed the ancient versions (also RSV and NRSV)in emending to a first person, so that Yahweh is the one who will be “profaned,” the idea would be that the nations fail to recognize Yahweh’s judicial role in the destruction of Jerusalem and take it as evidence of his inability to save his people. But the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Old Testament seems to be describing the last and climactic punishment: the people will be “defiled … in the eyes of the nations.” Ezekiel seems to pick up on the Deuteronomic picture that in exile the people initially will be able to defile themselves to their hearts’ content (Deut 4:27–28; 28:36–37, 64), but when they finally realize the depths to which they have fallen, only *de profundis*, “out of the depths” (Ps 130:1 [Vulgate 129:1]), will they again cry out to Yahweh and know him. (CC)

**22:17** With this verse begins one of the shortest oracles in the book; it continues only through 22:22, whose ending is similar to the recognition formula concluding 22:16 (“you will know …”). The legal atmosphere of the previous verses is replaced by a metaphor in the third person drawn from the realm of metallurgy. With a variety of verbs, Yahweh is described as a smelter, extracting valuable metals from ore. The picture is not unique to Ezekiel. Lexical links with Is 1:21–23, 25 and Jer 6:28–30 indicate a likelihood that Ezekiel was drawing on common prophetic imagery. (CC)

**22:18** *dross.*† For references to Jerusalem as a furnace see Isa 1:21–26; Jer 6:27–30. Israel is like ores which when melted down leave no residue of silver but only worthless dross. (CSB)

The harsh message of this oracle is summarized in this verse. That Israel in Yahweh’s eyes had become only worthless slag is a metaphor that requires little explanation. But we must hear the picture against the backdrop of other biblical passages where Israel is described as God’s סְגֻלָּה, his special, personal, prized “treasure,” especially Ex 19:5, but also Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Mal 3:17; Ps 135:4. Naturally, such a self-understanding would be cherished infinitely more than the one presented here. Of course, Yahweh had not changed, had not revoked his election promises, but the people most certainly had. That the Exodus 19 passage could be quoted almost verbatim in 1 Pet 2:9 and applied to Christians suggests the ease with which the oracle can be applied to us as much as to ancient Israel—and perhaps more so because “to whom much is given, much will be required from him” (Lk 12:48). The message here parallels that contained in the metaphor or allegory of the vine in Ezekiel 15. Compare also our Lord’s similar use of the vine metaphor in Jn 15:1–11. (CC)

Because Ezekiel himself does not elaborate, we must use our imagination a bit in attempting to understand the role that silver plays in the oracle. If our exegesis is correct, it must be noted that the concluding words of the verse indicated that the one precious metal, silver, is indeed present but has not yet been successfully extracted. If “the house of Israel” can be distinguished from the “silver” (22:18), the latter may be a reference to Ezekiel’s present audience in exile with him. God’s future plans lie with the exiles, while those momentarily spared back in Judah soon will be skimmed off as dross. The remaining verses in the oracle will have more to say about the “silver.” (CC)

**22:19** As the metaphor of the disposition of the slag continues, the introductory thesis, “because you have all become dross, I am about to gather you inside Jerusalem,” introduces the pair of similes in 22:20–22a. If it were not already evident, the verse clearly identifies Yahweh as the smelter who gathers the ore for the furnace. It also identifies the furnace as Jerusalem. In the face of Nebuchadnezzar’s imminent siege, the people may have gathered behind Jerusalem’s walls for safety (common behavior in antiquity), perhaps still deluding themselves into expecting miraculous divine intervention. But Ezekiel declares that their action was a deliberate act of Yahweh, setting them up for his intended judgment. (CC)

To follow the line of Ezekiel’s thought in 22:19–22, it is necessary that the reader note that the metallurgical metaphor from here on is somewhat different from 22:18. In 22:18, the metals listed were elements in the dross to be removed from the furnace after the ore had been heated. In 22:19–22, the picture is that of the earlier refining process; the metals are raw material thrown into the furnace to be melted down. That is, the order of the verses (22:18, followed by 22:19–22) is the reverse of what would actually happen in the smelting process. First, a smith would do the refining (22:19–22), and only after that would he discover that the ores are all worthless dross (22:18). But in the prophecy, the result was placed first (22:18), before the process that led to the result (22:19–22), to emphasize the coming punishment—the near obliteration of the people, which is the prophet’s main point. (CC)

**22:20-22** It is doubtful if anything can be made of the mention of “silver” in 22:20, 22. If my interpretation of 22:18 correctly identified the “silver” as Ezekiel’s present audience in exile with him (versus the “dross” in Jerusalem), the repetition of “silver” in 22:20, 22 may be intended to caution that the exiles too must continue to experience Yahweh’s fiery wrath before any pure and useful silver will be available. Ezekiel himself is here silent about the ultimately salutary effects of the remnant from which Yahweh will restore his people. But once they have acknowledged and digested the fact that their exile was all because of Yahweh’s anger at their relentless sinfulness, the possibility presents itself that Yahweh may once again do something positive with them. This is the Law-Gospel dynamic that is at work throughout the Scriptures: the Law must do its preparatory work of driving us sinners to repentance (e.g., Romans 2–3) before we can receive the Gospel as the Good News of forgiveness through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whose grace empowers our new life in the service of God (e.g., Romans 4–6). (CC)

**22:23** Now begins the final oracle of the chapter, a sort of miscellany detailing aspects of the all-pervasive ungodliness of all strata of society, necessitating in God’s justice, a final judgment upon Jerusalem. Rulers, priests, prophets, and even the ordinary citizenry openly flout God’s will. The oracle divides itself into two uneven parts: after the survey of the pervasive corruption in 22:23–29, the final two verses (22:30–31) describe how, after Yahweh has vainly sought for someone to stand in the breach before him, he is left with no alternative but to carry out the judgment. (CC)

Commentators have long noted a striking similarity between this oracle and Zeph 3:3–4, written probably about a half-century earlier (early in the reign of Josiah, whose reign began in 640 b.c.). It is very plausible that Ezekiel has deliberately expanded Zephaniah’s rebukes and applied them to his own day. (CC)

The oracle is full of Hebrew perfect verbs, which tempts many critics to read it as a late retrospective addition written by Ezekiel or some other redactor after the fall of Jerusalem in summer 586 b.c. While this possibility cannot be ruled out of court, it is more likely that they are prophetic perfects, which describe the future as already past (“as good as done”), since Ezekiel uses them often. (CC)

**22:24** Ezekiel had used the same kind of language and metaphor in 13:11, 13 for torrential “rain” (גֶּשֶׁם; cf. גֻשְׁמָ֖הּ in 22:24) that would dissolve the flimsy plaster the false prophets had used to deny the problem. Here it is given a more eschatological application, which will appear again in 38:22. Behind the metaphor may well stand the narrative of the worldwide deluge in Genesis 6, implying it as a type of the final judgment. 1 Pet 3:20–21 reminds us that *coram Deo*, not only eschatologically, but also in the existential sense, every day is Judgment Day, and that the Sacrament of Baptism saves us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As reprobate humanity perished in the flood, so the sinful nature must perish in Baptism—daily—and be buried with Christ (cf. Rom 6:1–4; Col 2:11–13). As the “eight” (1 Pet 3:20) saved through the ark began humanity anew (eight representing the start of a new week and a new creation), so also Christ’s resurrection on the first day of the new week has begun the new creation for all in Christ, the firstfruits (cf. 1 Cor 15:20; 2 Cor 5:17; James 1:18). (CC)

**22:25** *princes.* Ezekiel begins to speak plainly concerning the “dross” of vv. 18–22. All of Jerusalem’s leaders and people were included: princes (here), priests (v. 26), officials (v. 27), prophets (v. 28), people (v. 29). (CSB)

We have a picture of a thoroughly corrupt and avaricious royal house, which, with the collusion of an equally corrupt judiciary, will stop at nothing, not even “legalized” murder, to aggrandize its power and wealth. Prophets apparently receive their “cut” too, or at least “bless” such behavior—but that will be the subject of 22:28. The episode of 1 Kings 21, describing Ahab and Jezebel’s murder of Naboth and the confiscation of his property, is a classical illustration of this verse’s lament, and we are given to understand that such deportment was not particularly rare, especially when “Elijahs” were not to be found. Of course, the other writing prophets are replete with denunciations similar to that of Ezekiel’s here. Jeremiah was the only other one active at Ezekiel’s time, and he himself records the hostile reception he received. False prophets, who prophesy “smooth things” (Is 30:10), on the other hand, are always welcomed. (CC)

*like a roaring lion.* Cf. v. 27; 13:4; Zep 3:3. (CSB)

**22:26** *distinguish between the holy and the common.* The main duty of priests (see 44:23). (CSB)

Yahweh’s “holy” things might be profaned in many ways. We find an example in the behavior of Eli’s sons (1 Sam 2:12–25). Or it would have been easy to eat the sacred offerings when in a state of impurity (Lev 22:1–9). Any number of other regulations governing sacrifice could have been ignored, and hypocritical priests might easily have failed to set an example of holy living. (CC)

The distinction between the sacred and the profane is first enjoined in Lev 10:10, and in Ezek 44:23, Ezekiel is careful to require its inculcation in the eschatological priesthood. Like the difference between clean and unclean, much of this will be a matter of literal obligation only in the b.c. era, but the general idea of proper reverence for God’s Word, for preaching and administering the Sacraments faithfully, is no less mandatory in the years of our Lord (a.d.). (CC)

*Sabbaths.* See note on v. 8. (CSB)

Ezekiel, as we have noted many times before, places special emphasis on the Sabbath (literally, “from my Sabbaths they hide their eyes,” 22:26). We are left to speculate what all “hiding the eyes” from the Sabbath entailed, but it may well have included both the priests’ own disregard for the Sabbath rest as well as the failure to reprove those who did likewise. We regularly restate the Third Commandment (Ex 20:8; Deut 5:12) to help apply it to “the Lord’s day” (Rev 1:10) of the new covenant. (CC)

And that all this was far more serious than superficial infractions of “law” is shown by the final clause, “with the result that I am profaned among them.” To treat God’s will as mere custom or a matter of personal choice is finally to treat God himself as though, at best, he were only another take-it-or-leave-it moralizer; no matter what sort of “spirituality” remains, this is to deify oneself. (CC)

**22:27** With only slightly different expressions, the “officials” (people of lesser power) are accused of essentially the same thing as the “princes” were in 22:25. (CC)

**22:28** *whitewash.* See 13:10 and note. (CSB)

A harsher assessment of the prophets is scarcely imaginable. The tone is very similar to Jeremiah’s in Jer 23:23–40. And we have heard almost exactly the same language earlier in Ezekiel 13: whitewashing the truth (13:10–16), giving lying visions and oracles (13:6–9), and perhaps most heinous of all, claiming to be speaking God’s Word when Yahweh has never been in communication with them (13:6–7). (CC)

However, when false prophets use exactly the same formula (“hear the Word of Yahweh,” 13:2) as Ezekiel and other true prophets do, we sense how hard it must have been for the masses, who probably were only minimally instructed in the Torah, to decide who was a true prophet and who was false. It is, in principle, not at all different today. “Religious” spokesmen talk glibly about “God,” “the Lord,” “Jesus”—whatever—and perhaps even profess a belief in a “verbally inspired, inerrant Scripture,” but their message may not be scriptural in substance or evangelical (in the historic sense) at all. (CC)

**22:29** *people of the land.* See 7:27 and note. (CSB)

So pervasive is the amoral atmosphere that even the ordinary citizenry behaves as consciencelessly as the upper classes, especially to the detriment of those without full rights (aliens) or those in need of special assistance such as the “the poor and the needy” (two common virtual synonyms are used). The Torah already contained admonitions against such abuses (e.g., Deut 24:14), and the true prophets since the days of Amos (eighth century b.c.) had condemned them (e.g., Amos 8:4–14). But obviously all of that meant nothing in such a society. (CC)

**22:30** *I looked for a man.* Cf. Isa 51:18; 59:16; 63:5. (CSB)

*stand before me in the gap.*† See note on 13:5. To intercede with God in behalf of the people was part of a prophet’s task (Ge 20:7; 1Sa 12:23; Jer 37:3; 42:2). (CSB)

The last two verses quickly bring the third and last oracle (22:23–31) to a close. They describe Yahweh’s response to the wholesale defection of his people. This verse portrays his futile attempt to find someone who could intervene and avert the impending invasion of the land and the destruction of the city. (CC)

“Someone among them” (מֵהֶ֡ם אִ֣ישׁ) casts a wide net, referring to all the classes of society previously mentioned. Here pedigree does not count, but only someone with sufficient “standing” before God to satisfy his wrath. In the broader biblical context, this can only refer to some “righteous person”—and not in a moralistic sense, but who by justification has received an alien righteousness. Christians cannot think such thoughts without reference to Jesus Christ, our μεσίτης, “mediator, intermediary, arbiter,” before the Father (1 Tim 2:5). (CC)

The metaphor of our text, where someone closes a breach in a wall is, as such, not specifically developed in the NT. However, virtually the same thing is developed in sundry ways throughout the NT and by preachers in expository and homiletical contexts. A breach in the wall surrounding a city represents an attacking enemy who soon would rush through the breach and annihilate the city’s inhabitants. To take one’s stand in the breach makes one vulnerable to the full force of the enemy, risking death for the sake of saving the inhabitants. It is not hard to apply this picture to Christ’s entire vicarious redemptive work on our behalf, using the metaphor that he closed the breach between God and man caused by our sin. Jesus willingly sacrificed himself on the cross to absorb God’s righteous judgment against humanity’s sin, thus averting judgment from all believers in him, and, rising on the third day, he defeated Satan and death on our behalf. (CC)

The picture of a breach plays a somewhat more explicit role in the OT, even when the root פרץ (“breach”) is not used. It is very possible, as many commentators think, that Ezekiel is here echoing Jer 5:1–6, where God commands that prophet to search throughout Jerusalem for someone who was faithful. Zeph 1:12 describes Yahweh himself as searching Jerusalem with lamps (bringing superficial comparisons with Diogene’s lantern), but there the idea seems to be to search out and punish the evil—almost the opposite of the thrust of Ezekiel here. The enigmatic פֹּרֵץ, “one who breaches,” of Micah 2:13 seems to be a messianic figure who breaks out and leads God’s people through the gate (almost an answer to Ezek 22:30, if the contexts were at all related). In different vocabulary, Is 63:1–6 describes Yahweh coming from Edom to save his people after he found no one to do it for him. In a specifically historical context, David names the site near Jerusalem where he won his epochal victory over the Philistines, “Baal-perazim,” that is, “the Lord of breaches/breaking through,” in effect crediting Yahweh with the victory (2 Sam 5:20). Perhaps Isaiah (28:21) refers to the same event—in the verse that in the Vulgate uses the phrase *alienum opus* (“alien/foreign work”), so prominent in Luther’s thought. (CC)

Ps 106:23, using virtually identical language as this verse, speaks of Moses as the one who “stood in the breach before him [God]” (עָמַ֣ד בַּפֶּ֣רֶץ לְפָנָ֑יו) and averted God’s destructive wrath. The reference is obviously to Ex 32:11–14, where, by his intercessory prayer, Moses dissuades God from destroying the Israelites after the golden calf apostasy. The use of the nearly identical phrase here in Ezekiel (וְעֹמֵ֨ד בַּפֶּ֧רֶץ לְפָנַ֛י, 22:30) plainly makes the intercessory idea at least as prominent as the martial one. And that concept can hardly be considered without mentioning the famous episode of Gen 18:22–33, where Abraham bargains God down to only ten righteous people, who, if found within Sodom, would be sufficient to spare the city. (CC)

But all of this seems to leave the impression that the mere presence of one “righteous” person (a sinner justified by grace) would have been enough to save Jerusalem. Obviously that would contradict 14:12–20, not to speak of virtually the whole of chapter 20 as well as 3:16–21 and 33:7–20 (cf. similarly Jer 5:1–9; 6:13; 8:6, 10). Ezekiel surely does not contradict Ezekiel any more than Scripture contradicts Scripture! The presence of God the Son would be another matter. But Ezekiel is a book of biblical, exegetical theology, not of systematics or dogmatics. Greenberg summarizes it well: “But each proposition is a rhetorical necessity in its context. … Rhetoric that serves a given context may contradict that of another context. … For all his love of rules Ezekiel was not a systematic theologian.” (CC)

**22:31** In relatively formulaic language, the point of the entire oracle is summarized here. Since everyone was too busy with his own nefarious activities to dissuade Yahweh (portrayed here as the enemy) from sending the Babylonian hordes through the breach that the people’s attitude has opened up in the city’s wall, the catastrophe becomes inevitable. (CC)

The oracle ends abruptly and almost ominously with the divine signatory formula, “says the Lord Yahweh.” Yahweh, the commander in chief, has signed his own order to destroy Jerusalem, and there will be no reprieve. (CC)