EZEKIEL

Chapter 23

*Two Adulterous Sisters*

**The word of the LORD came to me:  2 “Son of man, there were two women, daughters of the same mother.  3 They became prostitutes in Egypt, engaging in prostitution from their youth. In that land their breasts were fondled and their virgin bosoms caressed.  4 The older was named Oholah, and her sister was Oholibah. They were mine and gave birth to sons and daughters. Oholah is Samaria, and Oholibah is Jerusalem. 5 “Oholah engaged in prostitution while she was still mine; and she lusted after her lovers, the Assyrians—warriors  6 clothed in blue, governors and commanders, all of them handsome young men, and mounted horsemen.  7 She gave herself as a prostitute to all the elite of the Assyrians and defiled herself with all the idols of everyone she lusted after.  8 She did not give up the prostitution she began in Egypt, when during her youth men slept with her, caressed her virgin bosom and poured out their lust upon her. 9 “Therefore I handed her over to her lovers, the Assyrians, for whom she lusted.  10 They stripped her naked, took away her sons and daughters and killed her with the sword. She became a byword among women, and punishment was inflicted on her. 11 “Her sister Oholibah saw this, yet in her lust and prostitution she was more depraved than her sister.  12 She too lusted after the Assyrians—governors and commanders, warriors in full dress, mounted horsemen, all handsome young men.  13 I saw that she too defiled herself; both of them went the same way. 14 “But she carried her prostitution still further. She saw men portrayed on a wall, figures of Chaldeans portrayed in red,  15 with belts around their waists and flowing turbans on their heads; all of them looked like Babylonian chariot officers, natives of Chaldea.  16 As soon as she saw them, she lusted after them and sent messengers to them in Chaldea.  17 Then the Babylonians came to her, to the bed of love, and in their lust they defiled her. After she had been defiled by them, she turned away from them in disgust.  18 When she carried on her prostitution openly and exposed her nakedness, I turned away from her in disgust, just as I had turned away from her sister.  19 Yet she became more and more promiscuous as she recalled the days of her youth, when she was a prostitute in Egypt.  20 There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses.  21 So you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when in Egypt your bosom was caressed and your young breasts fondled. 22 “Therefore, Oholibah, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will stir up your lovers against you, those you turned away from in disgust, and I will bring them against you from every side—  23 the Babylonians and all the Chaldeans, the men of Pekod and Shoa and Koa, and all the Assyrians with them, handsome young men, all of them governors and commanders, chariot officers and men of high rank, all mounted on horses.  24 They will come against you with weapons, chariots and wagons and with a throng of people; they will take up positions against you on every side with large and small shields and with helmets. I will turn you over to them for punishment, and they will punish you according to their standards.  25 I will direct my jealous anger against you, and they will deal with you in fury. They will cut off your noses and your ears, and those of you who are left will fall by the sword. They will take away your sons and daughters, and those of you who are left will be consumed by fire.  26 They will also strip you of your clothes and take your fine jewelry.  27 So I will put a stop to the lewdness and prostitution you began in Egypt. You will not look on these things with longing or remember Egypt anymore. 28 “For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to hand you over to those you hate, to those you turned away from in disgust.  29 They will deal with you in hatred and take away everything you have worked for. They will leave you naked and bare, and the shame of your prostitution will be exposed. Your lewdness and promiscuity  30 have brought this upon you, because you lusted after the nations and defiled yourself with their idols.  31 You have gone the way of your sister; so I will put her cup into your hand. 32 “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: “You will drink your sister’s cup, a cup large and deep; it will bring scorn and derision, for it holds so much. 33 You will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow, the cup of ruin and desolation, the cup of your sister Samaria. 34 You will drink it and drain it dry; you will dash it to pieces and tear your breasts. I have spoken, declares the Sovereign LORD. 35 “Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Since you have forgotten me and thrust me behind your back, you must bear the consequences of your lewdness and prostitution.” 36 The LORD said to me: “Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Then confront them with their detestable practices,  37 for they have committed adultery and blood is on their hands. They committed adultery with their idols; they even sacrificed their children, whom they bore to me, as food for them.  38 They have also done this to me: At that same time they defiled my sanctuary and desecrated my Sabbaths.  39 On the very day they sacrificed their children to their idols, they entered my sanctuary and desecrated it. That is what they did in my house. 40 “They even sent messengers for men who came from far away, and when they arrived you bathed yourself for them, painted your eyes and put on your jewelry.  41 You sat on an elegant couch, with a table spread before it on which you had placed the incense and oil that belonged to me. 42 “The noise of a carefree crowd was around her; Sabeans were brought from the desert along with men from the rabble, and they put bracelets on the arms of the woman and her sister and beautiful crowns on their heads.  43 Then I said about the one worn out by adultery, ‘Now let them use her as a prostitute, for that is all she is.’  44 And they slept with her. As men sleep with a prostitute, so they slept with those lewd women, Oholah and Oholibah.  45 But righteous men will sentence them to the punishment of women who commit adultery and shed blood, because they are adulterous and blood is on their hands. 46 “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Bring a mob against them and give them over to terror and plunder.  47 The mob will stone them and cut them down with their swords; they will kill their sons and daughters and burn down their houses.**

**48 “So I will put an end to lewdness in the land, that all women may take warning and not imitate you.  49 You will suffer the penalty for your lewdness and bear the consequences of your sins of idolatry. Then you will know that I am the Sovereign LORD.”**

That chapter 23 is a sort of sequel to chapter 16 is obvious. In both, sexual imagery is pressed almost to the limit—in about the same hyperbolic way Ezekiel treats other topics. It is probably coincidental that chapter 16 is the longest chapter in the book and chapter 23 is the second longest. But, it must be stressed, in both chapters the aim is not to titillate the audience with pornography, but to shock it, to dramatize how such behavior departed from Yahweh’s will as sharply as the people’s attitude toward him did in other respects. (CC)

**23:1-2** Other than the usual word-event formula and God’s continuing address of Ezekiel as “son of man,” the chapter opens abruptly without any charge to the prophet to speak or to set his face against someone (as in, e.g., 4:3; 13:17). In fact, the use of the third person until 23:21 indicates that Yahweh is depicted as simply narrating to the prophet a rhetorical account of the lives of the two sisters. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah are called “sisters” because of their common origin in the patriarchal era and exodus redemption through the united kingdom of David and Solomon. No attempt is made to arouse sympathy for the sisters, as was the case with the “foundling” in the opening verses of chapter 16 (16:2–5). Neither is the character of the “mother” adduced to explain the debased character of the daughters, as was done in 16:44. (CC)

**23:3** In chapter 16, Jerusalem’s immorality had been traced back only to its roots in Canaan, but here the beginnings of the sisters’ uncontrolled sexual appetites are located in their premarital (cf. the next verse) youth in Egypt. However, 20:7–12 had already referred to disobedience as early as the Egyptian period. There the accent was on idolatry, but 23:1–25 as a whole shows a greater interest in the political aspect of the relationship. In the metaphor here, the sisters are pictured as readily assenting to the Egyptian sexual advances and, once awakened, kept coming back for more the rest of their lives (23:8, 19–21). As noted earlier, it is fruitless to look for any specific historical referent, although there is no reason to doubt the main theological point: Yahweh elected the Israelites too while they were still sinners (Rom 5:8). Block plausibly suggests that Yahweh is putting “a political spin” on the Israelites’ frequent longing backward glances at the fleshpots of Egypt while in the wilderness (e.g., Num 11:18). In any case, Ezekiel’s overriding concern is rhetorical and theological, not historical. (CC)

**23:4** *Oholah.* Means “her tent.” (CSB)

 *Oholibah.* Means “My tent is in her.” Cf. the two sisters of Jer 3:6–12. “Tent” could stand for Canaanite high places, for the Lord’s tabernacle (except that Ezekiel never uses the word elsewhere for the legitimate shrine) or for Israel’s tent-dwelling origin. (CSB)

The simple assertion of marriage against the background given in 23:3 makes plain that the women were already given in venery (unlike the foundling of 16:8). The metaphor thus parallels Yahweh’s command to Hosea to marry Gomer, “a woman of whoredom” (Hos 1:2), who may or may not be identical with the “adulteress” of Hosea 3, whom he is to “love” (Hos 3:1). This context heightens and gives poignancy to the expressions of Yahweh’s wrath: he is a husband jealous for his marriage (explicit in the קִנְאָה, “zeal,” of 23:25; see also Yahweh as “jealous” in Ex 20:5; 34:14; Deut 4:24; 5:9; 6:15). In general, though, the following verses stress not so much the sisters’ unfaithfulness to their true husband as their promiscuous moving from one lover to another. (CC)

Like the woman of 16:20, the sisters here bear “sons and daughters” (23:4). These are not labeled as “children of whoredom” as Hosea’s were (Hos 1:2), but apparently merely provide concrete proof that the marriage had been consummated. (CC)

**23:5-7** Oholah “has taste; she is infatuated particularly by Assyria’s upper crust.” Not exactly run-of-the-mill camp followers, the northern Israelites might more easily be compared with the groupies surrounding the modern entertainment demimonde. Several examples of men of higher rank whom Oholibah might find “desirable” are listed. Some translations render בַּח֥וּרֵי חֶ֖מֶד as “handsome young men,” but in this context that is probably too weak. The noun חֶמֶד (“desire”) is from the verb חָמַד, which is used in the Ninth and Tenth Commandments (Ex 20:17; Deut 5:21a; Deut 5:21b uses the synonym הִתְאַוֶּה) and which implies an inordinate “coveting” of someone or something. Here the accent is on the young men’s potential for satisfying the woman’s insatiable lust. In chapter 16, the accent had been that the woman capitalized on her beauty, and there Yahweh’s rivals are idols. Here the paramours are human, and the accent is on the physical attractiveness of young men, and all the more if they possessed power and wealth. (CC)

But with that understanding, the fourfold כֹּל, “all,” in 23:6–7 emphasizes Oholah’s total lack of discrimination or restraint. Ezek 23:7b combines religious with political promiscuity (as 16:26–29 had added the political to the religious). In the ancient world, the two went hand in glove to such an extent that there is not the slightest reason to doubt their virtual synonymity. (CC)

**23:5** *prostitution.* Here represents political alliances with pagan powers—not idolatry as in ch. 16 (see note on 16:15). The graphic language of the chapter underscores God’s and Ezekiel’s disgust with Israel for playing the worldly game of international politics rather than relying on the Lord for her security—as clear a case of religious prostitution as idolatry. (CSB)

 *Assyrians.* See 2Ki 15:19. (CSB)

**23:8** *in Egypt.* Cf. 20:5–8. Israel’s entire history was marked by unfaithfulness. For her attachment to Egypt see Ex 17:3; Nu 11:5, 18, 20; 14:2–4; 21:5. (CSB)

In his very brief summary (23:5–10), Ezekiel has completely passed over most of Israel’s history from the sojourn in Egypt (nineteenth–fifteenth centuries b.c.) to the Assyrian period (ninth–seventh centuries b.c.) shortly before his own day. But here he reminds his audience that his historical omission does not imply any hiatus in Oholah’s unrestrained adulteries. (CC)

It is not easy to specify what historical occasions Ezekiel had in mind in this broadside against Oholah in 23:5–8. Generally, the northern kingdom was anti-Assyrian in political posture, like most of the neighboring Levantine countries threatened by the Assyrian juggernaut. A classic illustration is Ahab’s leadership in the coalition opposing Shalmaneser III at the great battle at Qarqar on the Orontes in 853. There were occasional exceptions, however. About twelve years later, when the coalition dissolved, Jehu voluntarily submitted to and paid tribute to Shalmaneser for protection from Hazael of Damascus, as recorded on the famous Black Obelisk. Similarly, a little over a century later, Menahem bought off Tiglath-Pileser III in 738 (2 Ki 15:19–20). But in 722, after a final rebellion *against* Assyria, Samaria is wiped off the map by Shalmaneser V, and the population deported by his successor, Sargon II. Similar to his broad strokes in previous chapters, it appears that Ezekiel has generalized Israel’s occasional flirtations with Assyria into characteristic behavior. (CC)

**23:9-10** These two verses summarize briefly the result of Oholah’s behavior. It is a short version of 16:35–43, which announced the judgment of Jerusalem the whore. More immediately, it is also a briefer version of the much longer judgment oracle on the sister Oholibah in 23:22–35. Ezek 23:9 puts the punishment in theological perspective, and 23:10 summarizes it historically. Since Oholah’s desire for Assyrian “love” cannot be slaked, Yahweh gives her what she thinks she wants, but what she gets turns out to be a total travesty. It is Yahweh who causes those she pursued so avidly to become the agents of his judgment. 2 Kings 17 is a long theological meditation on the same events, as Samaria is obliterated, her citizens deported, and non-Israelites brought in as replacements. The turn of events here reminds one of the primordial sin in paradise: the temptation to “be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5) is satisfied in a sense, but in a vastly different way than anticipated (Gen 3:22–23). (CC)

**23:10** *stripped her naked.* A reference to the fall of Samaria to the Assyrians in 722–721 b.c. (CSB)

**23:11** In very strong language, 23:11 states the thesis that Oholibah had not learned anything from her sister’s fate and far exceeded her in flagrancy. The succeeding verses expand upon that thesis. (CC)

**23:12-13** At first, the point is established that Oholibah veered off the straight and narrow path in essentially the same way that her sister had. Her inordinate affection for Assyria is described in 23:12 in virtually the same language as that describing Oholah (23:5). The historical referent is again uncertain, and, as usual in Ezekiel’s “surveys,” we cannot always find clear correspondences. In this case, the clearest reference appears to be Ahaz’s appeal to Tiglath-Pileser III for help against Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Damascus (2 Ki 16:5–20). This fateful move was forcefully denounced by Isaiah (chapter 7), the backdrop of the prophecy of Immanuel (Is 7:14). There the accent is not so much on Israel’s errant “love” as on her placing her trust in human machinations instead of in Yahweh’s sure promise (although ultimately the two sins amount to the same thing). Nevertheless, Israel’s misplaced faith would not prevent the fulfillment of the promise of Immanuel to be born of a virgin—Jesus Christ (Is 7:14; Mt 1:23; cf. Is 8:8; 9:6). (CC)

**23:14-16** With 23:14, the theme enunciated in 23:11 is taken up again, namely, that Oholibah’s behavior is even more outré than Oholah’s. (CC)

Ezek 23:14 illustrates how flighty and fickle Oholibah is. To judge from Ezekiel’s portrayal, she shifts her affections from the Assyrians to the Babylonians without a thought. The historical occasion remains opaque. 2 Ki 20:12–21 records the cordial reception Hezekiah gave to the Babylonian rebel Merodach-Baladan, apparently making common cause against Assyria, but drawing a dire rebuke from Isaiah (39:5–8). The initiative here, however, appears to be from Jerusalem, and, if that can be pressed, could imply prior unrecorded overtures from Judah. iBecause of the greater detail given here, others think of something more recent. Zimmerll and others think of Josiah’s fatal attempt at Megiddo in 609 to intercept Pharaoh Neco’s march north to Carchemish, and interpret it as implying that Josiah had cast his lot with Babylon as the certain successor to fallen Assyria. This is speculative in the extreme, however; Josiah’s action is more commonly understood as an attempt to establish Judah’s independence from any foreign hegemony. (CC)

We are not told where Oholibah saw the painted engravings of Babylonian officers, but as any handbook on Assyrian culture will amply illustrate, the verbal portraits here accord readily with sculptures and paintings on the inner walls of various Assyrian palaces at Kuyunjik (Nineveh), Khorsabad, Nimrud, and elsewhere. Presumably such art was common enough that Ezekiel and his fellow exiles might well have seen examples with their own eyes. (CC)

The escalation of Oholibah’s degeneracy consists in the fact that she not only lusts for men in the flesh but is inflamed with passion by gazing at mere pictures of them. One gets the impression that almost any man might have served, but the magnificent and colorful garb of Babylonian officialdom, with its implications of power and wealth, intensified her craze. (CC)

Possibly, Oholibah’s behavior would have seemed more bizarre to Ezekiel’s audience than it does to modern readers. At the gutter level, such behavior probably has been a constant of fallen humanity. However, we cannot forget the extent to which pornography of all sorts has flooded our culture in especially the last generation, usually excused with an appeal to the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. Such abuse supports the dictum “patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.” Traditionally, this means of sexual excitation has been associated with men more than women, but many strains of feminism have made it at least as socially acceptable among women. Statistics confirm the tremendous profitability of the pornography industry, and the anonymity afforded by cable, the Internet, and so on has obviously emboldened many who previously abstained for fear of exposure. Only God knows how many “good” Christians and Lutherans are among them. Confession and absolution are an essential part of the needed treatment for this addictive behavior. (CC)

Ezek 23:16 confirms that pictures alone had aroused Oholibah so much that she invites the Babylonians to an orgy from afar. (CC)

**23:14** *men portrayed on a wall.* Arousal through pictures was even more perverted (see 16:17 and note). (CSB)

 *portrayed in red.*† See Jer 22:14. (CSB)

**23:15** *belts.* Cf. Isa 5:27 for similar Assyrian military equipment. (CSB)

**23:17** The Babylonians are not at all reluctant to accept her invitation. But the relationship sours even more quickly than it began, implying not only fickleness on Judah’s part, but emotional—and spiritual—instability as well. Again the most likely historical setting might be a shift from generally pro-Babylonian sentiments throughout the seventh century to rebellion against Babylon under Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, here metaphorized into a sudden shift in extramarital affections. Minus the sexual metaphor, some of the same situation is reflected in Habakkuk, which laments the substitution of Assyrian tyranny with Babylonian. (CC)

**23:18** Because she flaunted her body so openly to multiple lovers, Yahweh reacts in a disgust comparable to her own recoil from Babylonian embrace (23:17). Ezekiel obviously pushes the metaphor of Israel as Yahweh’s wife about as far as he dares. Biblical usage forbids attribution of sexual desire to Yahweh, but otherwise the metaphor of the covenant as a marriage is almost foundational in Scripture. If possible, the applicability of the metaphor to the church as the virgin bride of Christ is even stronger (e.g., 2 Cor 11:2–3). (CC)

**23:19-21** These verses use nearly obscene imagery to bring the indictment to a climatic close. Jerusalem is depicted as caring not a wit about her progressive alienation from Yahweh, to the point of a complete rupture of the relationship on her side. She nostalgically reveals the frissons of her initiation into sex as a young girl in Egypt, and now, as an old, worn-out whore, she returns to the “house of bondage,” as Egypt is frequently called (e.g., Ex 13:3, 14; 20:2), where her steady slide into incorrigible depravity had begun. The sudden use of direct address (second person, “you,” 23:21) signals that the time of reckoning has come. The judgment in 23:22–35 parallels the sentence on the זוֹנָה, “whore,” in 16:35–52. (CC)

**23:20** *genitals.* See note on 16:26. (CSB)

**23:22-23** The turning of the tables (often expressed in the phrase שׁוּב אֶת־שְׁבוּת, “bring about the restoration of” [16:53; 29:14; 39:25; see also, e.g., Deut 30:3; Jer 33:7, 11, 26]) is a common concept in the OT for God’s redemptive (often eschatological) intervention on behalf of Israel; as Christians recognize, this climaxed on Good Friday and Easter. But God can also turn the tables in the other direction too. All those lovers whom Oholibah had so wantonly pursued are now roused by God to pursue her—in the judgment of invasion and war. The repetition in 23:23 of much of the earlier description of the “lovers” illustrates what a total turnabout it will be. (CC)

**23:23** *Babylonians … Chaldeans.* Often identified with one another (see 1:3 and NIV text note there; 12:13), here distinguished (as in v. 15), probably because the Chaldeans were relative newcomers. (CSB)

 *Pekod.* Aramaic people located east of Babylon. (CSB)

 *Shoa and Koa.* Babylonian allies of uncertain origin and location. (CSB)

**23:24** *their standards.* Which were cruel and gruesome (see v. 25). (CSB)

Previously, Oholibah was attracted by the luxurious garb of the nobility (23:12, 14–15; cf. 23:6), but now such men approach her hostilely in the full panoply of armaments. The emphasis that Yahweh allows the enemy, as his agents, to follow their own traditions, “according to their own standards” of justice, is intended to introduce the non-Israelite type of treatment of prisoners of war, which is described in the following verses. (CC)

**23:25** *fire.* See notes on 15:7; 20:47. (CSB)

The atrocities mentioned here are expanded somewhat in the next few verses. All of them are amply illustrated in Assyrian records, both in connection with war and with individual offenders, as the Israelites would have been well aware. What is more, the Assyrians typically boasted and gloated about their behavior. In general, the Babylonians were more humane conquerors than the Assyrians, but it was probably more of a difference in degree than in kind. The modern world is certainly no stranger to comparable “war crimes.” Even if it is not official state policy, all kinds of horrors are typically perpetrated without official sanction by individuals or localized groups. It remains to be seen whether the Hague, the United Nations, and other international tribunals will succeed in achieving much long-term and global improvement. (CC)

It is hardly surprising that similar barbarism did occur in Israel’s wars (e.g., 2 Ki 15:16), but the biblical sense of the sanctity of all human life and of ultimate accountability to the Creator seems to have tempered the impulse. The laws of חֵרֶם, the sacral ban to “destruction,” as illustrated vividly in the case of Achan (Joshua 7) and applicable to entire groups (e.g., the verb חָרַם in Deut 7:2), should not be understood as on the same plane as Gentile savagery. It was of a piece with the laws governing “Yahweh’s war”: the intent was to keep Israel (both God’s “church” and his state) free from syncretistic contamination, and there certainly was to be no gloating about it. Although Yahweh does not develop it in these terms in Ezekiel, it was precisely Israel’s failure to keep such laws (as shown already in the book of Judges) that led to the extremities with which Yahweh had to deal. Freed from political considerations, the Christian church is charged with comparable injunctions not be “conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2), to keep oneself “unspotted from the world” (James 1:27), and so on, that is, the unending “Christ versus culture” challenge. (CC)

**23:26** The same judgment as here was also described in 16:39 following a detailed account of the beautiful wardrobe Yahweh had given the foundling. There are other biblical references to this common humiliation (Jer 13:22, 26; Hos 2:10; Nah 3:5). It is especially associated with punishment for adultery, as here. The punishment matches the offense: as she had voluntarily bared herself to all her lovers, now they will forcefully and publicly strip her bare. (CC)

**23:27** *in Egypt.* See note on v. 8. (CSB)

This last verse of the first phase of the indictment (23:22–27) envisions a total change in Oholibah’s outlook. “Lift up … eyes” in this context probably has primary reference to amorous intent (as with Potiphar’s wife in Gen 39:7). But the phrase can also imply “look for help” (Ps 121:1), and so Ezekiel with one phrase can also make reference to Jerusalem abandoning her current expectation of help from Egypt in the face of the Babylonian threat. (CC)

“Remember,” as so often in biblical usage, refers not so much to mere memory of a bare fact as to an orientation or way of life in relation to something. In the context of this chapter, we think primarily of Jerusalem not remembering Egypt because of the obliteration of the northern kingdom in judgment. But if we peer between the lines, we may see a hint of the “new heart” and “new spirit,” of which Ezekiel spoke in 11:19 and 18:31 and will speak about further in due time (36:25–27; see also the gift of the “Spirit” in 37:14; 39:29). (CC)

**23:28** The second phase of the indictment (23:28–35) is supplemental to what has already been predicted. Ezek 23:28–30 largely reiterates previous material, but 23:31–34 returns to consider the sister, Oholah, and compare the fate of the two sisters. (CC)

In 23:28–29, the verb שָׂנֵא, “to hate,” and the noun שִׂנְאָה, “hate,” become prominent. They are an obvious foil to the repeated previous use of a participle of אָהַב, “love,” for the women’s “lovers” (23:5, 9, 22). “Your lovers” (מְאַהֲבַ֙יִךְ֙, 23:22) could be ambiguous without its context: the suffix, “your,” could be either an objective or subjective genitive, though the context showed that it was subjective; she sought out her paramours. However, even without context, there is no such ambiguity about “those you hate” (אֲשֶׁ֣ר שָׂנֵ֑את) in 23:28. Yet Yahweh will turn the tables again—with the devastating consequences described in the next two verses. (CC)

**23:29-30** In these climactic verses reiterating Oholibah’s sentence, note how Ezekiel is gradually easing into a linkage of the judgment on *both* sisters, which will continue throughout the rest of the chapter. In 23:29 Oholibah is stripped, robbed, and abandoned as Oholah had been (23:10). Her defilement with the idols of the nations—perhaps the images on the walls that had once infatuated her (23:13–16), which in principle had been Oholah’s offense (23:7b)—is here for the first time asserted as Oholibah’s offense as well. (CC)

**23:31-32** Oholibah will be given the same “cup” of God’s wrathful judgment (see the second textual note on 23:31) as Oholah because she had refused to learn her lesson from her sister’s fate and instead had behaved in essentially the same way. As such, 23:32 is about the cup and its capaciousness. It takes little thought to realize that anyone who drinks that much will become thoroughly intoxicated and will be an object of laughter and ridicule, as had already been asserted of Oholah (23:10). The obvious application of such a picture is to the intensity of the coming judgment. Jerusalem could no more escape that due reward of her behavior, enjoyable as it might have momentarily been, than one who has overindulged in alcoholic beverages can escape the inevitable result. (CC)

**23:31** *cup.* Filled with the anger of the Lord. To drink it was to die. For a development of the imagery cf. Ps 75:8; Isa 51:17, 22; Jer 25:15–29; 49:12; La 4:21; Ob 16; Hab 2:16; Mt 20:22; 26:39; Rev 14:10. (CSB)

**23:33** The verse edges gradually toward the grotesque scene of the next verse. Two literary devices are used to develop the picture. First, שִׁכָּר֥וֹן וְיָג֖וֹן, “drunkenness and grief,” is zeugmatic, meaning “the drunkenness that leads to grief/sorrow.” יָגוֹן indicates intense inner grief and emotional anguish, the hangover and depression after imbibing far too much. It is followed by a virtual hendiadys: “the cup of horror and devastation” (שַׁמָּ֣ה וּשְׁמָמָ֔ה), the horror or appallment after devastation or desolation. As in English, these terms can be used for both psychological and physical destruction. Thus the symbol and the reality converge, and as the last phrase of the verse shows, the real subject is the city, Jerusalem. (CC)

**23:34** The final picture is that of a woman’s alcohol-intensified remorse so extreme that her actions approach dementia. As she earlier shamelessly pursued her lovers, now she will smash the cup and try to retrieve any wine that had been absorbed by it. And in ultimate frenzy, she will use the sharp sherds (cf. Job scraping his sores with them in Job 2:7–8) to “destroy ‘the peccant members’ … , around which erotic memories lingered.” She who had once craved the fondling of her breasts will now mutilate herself so much that her erstwhile paramours will be revolted and abhor her. As is his custom, Ezekiel pushes the metaphor of the drunken woman to the extreme. (CC)

The double formulaic conclusion, “for I have spoken, says the Lord Yahweh,” underscores the horror and certainty of the reality expressed by the metaphor. (CC)

**23:35** Ezek 23:34 has brought the metaphor to a dramatic climax. It might appear as if nothing more need be said. But Yahweh makes a nonmetaphorical assertion to drive the theological point home. (CC)

As elsewhere (e.g., 16:43; 22:12), Yahweh underscores the core of Israel’s sin, and of all sin: the people had forgotten Yahweh, which was tantamount to worshiping other gods. The point is made vivid by use of the picture that the people “cast” God “behind [their] back,” an idiom used elsewhere only in 1 Ki 14:9 and Neh 9:26. Instead of facing him in adoration and thanksgiving, they have turned their backs on him while facing (worshiping) other deities, as in Ezek 8:16: “their backsides to the temple of Yahweh, and their faces eastward—and they were prostrating themselves eastward to the sun.” (CC)

After the motive clause beginning with יַעַן, “because,” one would expect the apodosis to begin with לָכֵן, “therefore.” Instead, it is shortened to גַּם, “you yourself must *also* bear …” The implication is that, like many who stray, Israel deluded herself into thinking that she was somehow exempt from Yahweh’s universal law. Exemption was available only through repentance and faith, and that she had scorned. (CC)

The verb “bear” (שְׂאִ֥י) needs and has no object in Hebrew, but in English “penalty, consequences” must be supplied. The picture is that of sin as a burden that will crush the one who carries it unless another party relieves him of it. The traditional wording of the Agnus Dei speaks of Christ *bearing(tollis, trägst)* the burden of the world’s sin for us. The more recent translation “take away” loses that picture. (CC)

**23:36 T**he section that begins with this verse and extends through 23:49 is the climax of the entire chapter: Ezekiel’s authorization to play the role of prosecutor in the heavenly court. The charges are repeated in 23:36–45, although a few appear that have not surfaced in this chapter before, then the verdict of guilty and the sentencing come in 23:46–49. (CC)

It is noteworthy that the charges are against *both* Oholah and Oholibah, that is, against both Israel and Judah. Historically, this is artificial, because the northern kingdom (Oholah) had disappeared from the map in 722 b.c., over a century before the time of Ezekiel. But earthly history does not always reflect God’s ultimate will. Yahweh had established an *Una Sancta* (“one holy catholic and apostolic church” in the words of the Nicene Creed) that in God’s good time (perhaps eschatological “time”) would be reestablished, as Ezekiel will emphasize later, especially in chapters 34–37, and political divisions can never thwart the divine will. God, not people, makes his kingdom come *ubi et quando visum est* (“where and when it pleases”) him, and the new Jerusalem will exceed the bounds of human language to articulate (Ezekiel 40–48; Revelation 21–22). (CC)

Having made that important point, however, beginning with 23:38 it will be clear that Ezekiel’s chief target is Jerusalem (Oholibah). (CC)

**23:37** *sacrificed their children.* See note on 16:20. (CSB)

A causal כִּי, “for,” leads to a description of the sisters’ sins. After the repeated use of זָנָה, “be a whore,” and cognate nouns in the preceding material, one is surprised to meet נָאַף, “commit adultery,” twice in this verse. Nouns derived from that verb will be used in following verses: נִאוּפִים, “adulteries,” in 23:43, and נֹאֲפוֹת, “adulteresses,” in 23:45. These terms are stronger in that they emphasize a woman’s violation of her marriage covenant; these are offenses against her husband. A stronger verb means far more serious infractions. The basic biblical picture of Israel as Yahweh’s wife, wed to him at the exodus, has always hovered in the background and now comes to the fore. Its NT counterpart is the depiction of the church as the bride of Christ (e.g., 2 Cor 11:2–3; Eph 5:21–33; Revelation 21–22; cf. Mt 22:1–14; 25:1–13).

Nor have we heard of bloodshed for a time. Other charges, new to this context, are “recycled” from chapter 16 (various verses, perhaps especially 16:17, 20–21, 32, 36, and 38). (CC)

After the general charges, clarification of each follows. Consorting with foreign nations inevitably involved the adultery of idolatry, that is, taking other husbands instead of Yahweh—or alongside of him, if that were possible (as the people might well have supposed). This is not merely Israelite propaganda; Near Eastern kings, while not actually deified as in Egypt, were closely identified with gods, and sometimes both kings and gods appear on paintings side by side in identical pose and attire. (CC)

Again the outrage of Molech worship is added to the indictment. (CC)

**23;38-39** These verses combine violations of the sanctity of both sanctuary and Sabbath (cf. 5:11; and 20:13, 16, 21; 22:8, respectively). The two are linked already in Lev 19:30. The first has to do with sacred space, the second with sacred time. Both were set apart from ordinary space and time. Paradoxically, the sacred space and time of paradise were “sacramentally” present in them (the eternal now/today), and they also were God’s bridgeheads for reclaiming the whole of creation, which had been befouled in the fall. In Christ, the reclamation has come near (cf. Mt 4:17), but the consummate stage is still awaited and longed for (Revelation 21–22). (CC)

The phrase “on the/that same day” in both 23:38 and 23:39 stresses that all the offenses were contiguous. In 22:26 defilement of holy things was attributed to priestly neglect, but here it is associated specifically with child sacrifice. Having already defiled themselves by bloodshed and idolatry, the people defile the temple by entering it in an adulterous rupture of proper relation to Yahweh. And the mention of the Sabbath in the same breath suggests that they had compounded the offense by doing it on the Sabbath, thus denying Yahweh’s lordship of time as well. The concern with temple trespasses reminds one of the temple abominations described in chapter 8. (CC)

The pronouns in “*my* sanctuary” and “*my* own house” underscore all the other personal pronouns referring to Yahweh in these chapters. As with Christianity, the sins were no mere violations of rules and abstract principles, but a personal affront to a personal God—in fact, a “husband.” Getting and keeping this straight is part and parcel of the proclamation that biblical faith is Gospel, not Law. (CC)

**23:38** *defiled my sanctuary.* See ch. 8. (CSB)

 *Sabbaths.* See note on 22:8. (CSB)

**23:40-41** The scene shifts to the past elaborate efforts of the adulteress to lure her lovers—as though that really had been necessary. It is futile even to ask which nation(s) are in mind as her lovers. Such behavior had become virtually instinctual and a way of life for the women. The scene is similar to that described in 16:16–19. (CC)

God refers to “my incense” and “my oil,” not only because they came from him as the Creator, but also because he, as the people’s Redeemer, had specified that the highest use of these gifts was in the portion to be returned to him as a eucharistic offering. For their proper use in worship, see, for example, Ex 25:6, 29; 27:20; Exodus 29–31; Leviticus 2; 8; 14; 16:12–13; Numbers 7. (CC)

Instead, the woman meretriciously squanders them. (CC)

**23:40** *They even sent messengers for men.* Possibly a reference to the Jerusalem summit meeting in Zedekiah’s time (Jer 27). *you.* Jerusalem. (CSB)

 *painted your eyes.* By daubing them with kohl, a soot-like compound, to draw attention to the eyes. (CSB)

**23:41** *couch, with a table spread before it.* Ready for a banquet (see Isa 21:5; also Pr 9:2). (CSB)

**23:42** *Sabeans.* Men from Sheba, located at the southwest corner of the Arabian peninsula (modern Yemen), known for trading (see Job 6:19; see also Eze 27:22; 38:13; 1Ki 10:1–10). But see NIV text note. (CSB)

The import of this difficult verse (see the textual notes) seems to be that the women have fallen so low that they welcome to their beds not only the ordinary populace (i.e., not merely the nobility with whom earlier verses seemed to limit their liaisons) but also drunken, nomadic men from the desert to satisfy their yen for kinky experiences. (CC)

**23:43** This most opaque verse (see the textual notes) could be spoken by Yahweh, or it could be an expression of the prophet’s personal outrage at Oholibah and what she represents—a vantage point that may continue through 23:45. Although Ezekiel rarely interposes personal observations, this may be an instance. The entirety of Scripture consists of the *ipsissima verba* (“very words”) of God, the divine author, yet part of the mystery of inspiration is that the human author can express himself personally while conveying God’s words. (CC)

If my (and Keil’s) take on the rest of the verse is correct, it expresses the idea that the old whore, though now worn out, will continue her nauseating behavior, although almost more as an impersonal, diabolical force than as an active, personal agent. Whoredom has virtually become personified and/or abstracted as a propensity that continues in full force even after the capacity of the woman herself is exhausted. That “whoredom itself will go whoring” almost sounds like a summary of humanity’s condition that led Christ to lead captivity captive (Ps 68:18; Eph 4:8) in his death and resurrection. (CC)

**23:44** The depth of degradation is indicated here by the use of two pejorative phrases, first of the one “woman” as a “whore” (אִשָּׂ֣ה זוֹנָ֑ה) and then of both Oholah and Oholibah as “depraved women” (אִשֹּׂ֖ת הַזִּמָּֽה). In their sex lives, there is only lust, no love; their partners need not be concerned about whether they are married or not; their beds are in the common domain (contrast Heb 13:4). (CC)

**23:45** Whether we think of this verse as concluding the prophet’s reaction (23:43–45) or of expressing the plans of Yahweh (if he is the speaker of 23:43–45) is of no moment, but the verse does anticipate or introduce the formal sentencing of Oholah and Oholibah in the remaining verses of the chapter. (CC)

The previous verse had described the women as behaving and being treated as unattached free agents, but the double use of נֹאֲפוֹת, “adulteresses,” in this verse signals that Yahweh takes his marriage covenant seriously and will hold them accountable for their failure to do likewise. The references to murder are probably reminiscences of the atrocities, including child sacrifice, connected with the worship of Molech. Both adultery and murder were, of course, capital crimes. (CC)

The phrase וַאֲנָשִׁ֣ים צַרִּיקִ֗ם at the beginning of the verse must be translated “righteous men,” but that can be misleading. As stressed many times, in the biblical usage of both Testaments, the word’s primary accent is not on deeds (sanctification), but on the alien righteousness of Jesus Christ that is imputed to the believer, who then is reckoned as righteous (Gen 15:6; Romans 4)—a condition or relationship of which God in Christ is the source and author: justification. Thus the righteous person is first of all one who is right before God, whose sins have been atoned for by Christ, and who receives Christ’s righteousness through faith (2 Cor 5:21). Since “Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture,” the OT must be read Christologically in this way. (CC)

The punishment of the women by “righteous men” indicates that their judgment will be righteous because it is in accord with Yahweh’s own holiness and is ordained by him. Yahweh does not specify what people or historical agents he will use. If this is taken to refer to pagan conquerors such as the Babylonians (or later, the Greeks and Romans), then he is not using the word “righteous” in any strict theological sense at all here, but only in the same relative sense as the related verb צָדַק was used in 16:51–52, where Yahweh said that Jerusalem had made Sodom and Samaria appear more “righteous” because she had fallen even farther than they. (CC)

**23:46** The chapter ends with the sentencing of Oholah and Oholibah. In principle, the material is similar to previous oracles of doom, but it is the almost inevitable conclusion to a narrative of a pair of hardened and habitual reprobates. The oscillation between the metaphor of the sisters and the countries or cities they represent continues in these verses. The reference to “terror and plunder” indicates that in this verse (as in 23:47), the primary concern is with the cities, but in 23:48–49, the two sisters are once more front and center. (CC)

**23:47** The ruthlessness of those who carry out the sentence recalls 16:41 and 23:25–26. (CC)

**23:48-49** The ridding of the land of depravity is similar to 16:41b. Women in general were mentioned in 23:10 (Oholah will be “a byword among women”). Here the punishment of the sisters is described in stronger terms as well deserved. With the goal that “all women may take warning,” the verse also takes a didactic direction and considers not only the nation corporately, but also individuals. This is a reminder that Ezekiel took his pastoral role as a “watchman” (3:17; 33:7) seriously. It is also a correction of the common canard that the OT has minimal concern with the sin of individuals. That canard is also disproven by Ezek 3:16–21; chapter 18; and 33:1–20. And, if needed, we may note with Block that “this appeal to women balances earlier appeals that had primarily men in view. (CC)