

# Ezekiel 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Ezekiel chapter 16. Again the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations, and say, Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem, Your origin and your birth are of the land of the Canaanites. Your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite. And as for your birth, on the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you, but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred on the day that you were born. And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, Live! I said to you in your blood, Live! I made you flourish like a plant of the field, and you grew up and became tall, and arrived at full adornment. Your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown, yet you were naked and bare. When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you, and covered your nakedness. I made my vow to you, and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord God, and you became mine. Then I bathed you with water, and washed off your blood from you, and anointed you with oil. I clothed you also with embroidered cloth, and shod you with fine leather. I wrapped you in fine linen, and covered you with silk, and I adorned you with ornaments, and put bracelets on your wrists, and a chain on your neck, and I put a ring on your nose, and earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen, and silk, and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour, and honey, and oil. You grew exceedingly beautiful, and advanced to royalty, and your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendour that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord God.

But you trusted in your beauty, and played the whore because of your renown, and lavished your whorings on any passerby. Your beauty became his. You took some of your garments, and made for yourself colourful shrines, and on them played the whore. The like has never been, nor ever shall be. You also took your beautiful jewels of my gold and of my silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself images of men, and with them played the whore. And you took your embroidered garments to cover them, and set my oil and my incense before them. Also my bread that I gave you. I fed you with fine flour, and oil, and honey. You set before them for a pleasing aroma. And so it was, declares the Lord God.

And you took your sons and your daughters, whom you had borne to me, and these you sacrificed to them to be devoured. Were your whoring so small a matter, that you slaughtered my children, and delivered them up as an offering by fire to them. And in all your abominations and your whorings, you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, wallowing in your blood. And after all your wickedness, woe, woe to you, declares the Lord God, you built yourself a vaulted chamber, and made yourself a lofty place in every square. At the head of every street you built your lofty place, and made your beauty an abomination, offering yourself to any passerby, and multiplying your whoring. You also played the whore with the Egyptians, your lustful neighbours, multiplying your whoring, to provoke me to anger.

Behold therefore, I stretched out my hand against you, and diminished your allotted portion, and delivered you to the greed of your enemies, the daughters of the Philistines, who were ashamed of your lewd behaviour. You played the whore also with the Assyrians, because you were not satisfied.

Yes, you played the whore with them, and still you were not satisfied. You multiplied your whoring also with the trading land of Chaldea, and even with this you were not satisfied. How sick is your heart, declares the Lord God, because you did all these things, the deeds of a brazen prostitute, building your vaulted chamber at the head of every street, and making your lofty place in every square.

[ 4 : 19 ] Yet you were not like a prostitute, because you scorned payment, adulterous wife, who received strangers instead of her husband. Men give gifts to all prostitutes, but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from every side with your whorings. So you were different from other women in your whorings. No one solicited you to play the whore, and you gave payment, while no payment was given to you. Therefore you were different. Therefore, O prostitute, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God, because your lust was poured out, and your nakedness uncovered in your whorings with your lovers, and with all your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them. Therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved, and all those you hated. I will gather them against you from every side, and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness. And I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy. And I will give you into their hands, and they shall throw down your vaulted chamber, and break down your lofty places. They shall strip you of your clothes, and take your beautiful jewels, and leave you naked and bare. They shall bring up a crowd against you, and they shall stone you, and cut you to pieces with their swords. And they shall burn your houses, and execute judgments upon you in the sight of many women. I will make you stop playing the whore, and you shall also give payment no more. So will I satisfy my wrath on you, and my jealousy shall depart from you. I will be calm, and will no more be angry.

Because you have not remembered the days of your youth, but have enraged me with all these things. Therefore behold, I have returned your deeds upon your head, declares the Lord God. Have you not committed lewdness in addition to all your abominations? Behold, everyone who uses proverbs will use this proverb about you, like mother, like daughter. You are the daughter of your mother, who loathed her husband and her children, and you are the sister of your sisters, who loathed their husbands and their children. Your mother was a Hittite, and your father an Amorite, and your elder sister is Samaria, who lived with her daughters to the north of you, and your younger sister, who lived to the south of you, is Sodom with her daughters. Not only did you walk in their ways, and do according to their abominations, within a very little time, you were more corrupt than they in all your ways.

As I live, declares the Lord God, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom. She and her daughters had pride, excessive food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did an abomination before me, so I removed them when I saw it. Samaria has not committed half your sins.

You have committed more abominations than they, and have made your sisters appear righteous by all the abominations that you have committed. Bear your disgrace, you also, for you have intervened on behalf of your sisters. Because of your sins in which you acted more abominably than they, they are more in the right than you. So be ashamed, you also, and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous. I will restore their fortunes, both the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters, and the fortunes of Samaria and her daughters, and I will restore your own fortunes in their midst, that you may bear your disgrace, and be ashamed of all that you have done, becoming a consolation to them. As for your sisters, Sodom and her daughters shall return to their former state, and Samaria and her daughters shall return to their former state, and you and your daughters shall return to your former state. Was not your sister Sodom a byword in your mouth in the day of your pride, before your wickedness was uncovered. Now you have become an object of reproach for the daughters of Syria, and all those around her, and for the daughters of the Philistines, those all around who despise you. You bear the penalty of your lewdness, and your abominations, declares the Lord. For thus says the Lord God, I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant. Yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant. Then you will remember your ways, and be ashamed when you take your sisters, both your elder and your younger, and I give them to you as daughters, but not on account of the covenant with you. I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the Lord, that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord God. Ezekiel chapter 16 is a long, important, and troubling passage.

It's a prophetic oracle that develops the motif of Israel as the unfaithful bride of the Lord. This is a motif familiar from many other parts of scripture, most notably in places like the book of Hosea. The passage presents the sin of the house of Israel in a manner that conveys the scale of its betrayal and the magnitude of its offense. By the extended development of the analogy of gross, marital infidelity, the intended audience are brought to feel the force of the message of the oracle on a visceral level. The analogy also involves a jarring retelling of the story of the house of Israel, which shakes the house of Israel's conventional self-understanding to its very foundations. People and nations understand themselves in terms of big narratives, narratives that can often have an almost sacred status. Those who challenge such narratives can get themselves in trouble, they can excite fierce opposition. A reconstruction of your people's core history in the manner of Ezekiel chapter 16 will infuriate many. It also challenges people to consider the familiar from a perspective that might lead them to see what is closest to them in a radically different manner.

[10:30] As several commentators observe, while this is softened in most translations, the language of this oracle has a near pornographic character at points. So graphic is it in its development of the analogy. It describes male and female genitalia, also in their states of arousal. Some chalk this down to scripture's greater earthiness, and that's partly true. But we should recognise that the immodesty of the language is calculated to accentuate a sense of disgust at the obscenity of what the house of Israel did. This is not the sort of language one finds typically used of licit sexual relations. The chapter is one of biting satire of caricature and hyperbole, as Joseph Blenkinsop argues.

The oracle begins with an instruction to Ezekiel to make known Jerusalem's abominations to her. The oracle serves the purpose of presenting the iniquity of the people in the very sharpest relief, articulating it in a way that would provoke revulsion in all hearers. This is done through a parabolic telling of the story of Israel. The people of Israel were likely accustomed to telling their story in a way that accentuated the faithfulness of their father Abraham, the deliverance of the exodus, and the Lord's identification with Israel as his people, especially seen in his establishment of the temple as his dwelling place in their midst in Jerusalem.

For those used to hearing the story told in such a manner, Ezekiel's retelling could not be more jarring. Abraham and his call drops out in Ezekiel's telling. Rather, Israel finds its origins in the land of the Canaanites, a land of paganism and idolatry, set apart for destruction by the Lord.

Their parentage, far from being traced back to faithful Abraham and Sarah, is recorded as that of an Amorite father and a Hittite mother, the two leading peoples of the land prior to the conquest.

These associations are shocking. Surely these are the very peoples that Israel displaced. These statements should not be taken in an overly literalistic manner. The point is not that of denying Abrahamic ancestry altogether. Rather, the ancestry being given is primarily spiritual ancestry. That said, on the other hand, we shouldn't miss the degree to which the literal claim could be made. Israel has intermarried with the Canaanites extensively over the course of the years.

[ 12 : 50 ] The idea that they could claim Abrahamic pedigree for themselves without considering their far more spiritually determinative ancestry from the idolatrous Canaanites is rather presumptuous on their part.

They may regard themselves as the true children of Abraham, but the Lord sees them very, very differently. Furthermore, the prophecy is partly about Jerusalem. It's a city that pre-existed its Israelite inhabitation, being a Jebusite city at the time of its capture. The exposure of unwanted infants after their birth was ancient society's counterpart to abortion in contemporary society.

Jerusalem suffered such cruel abandonment, coming into the world unwelcomed and unloved. It did not receive the customary treatment that a newborn child would receive, the cutting of the umbilical cord, washing with water, rubbing with salt. The exact purpose of this is unclear, but it remains practiced in some societies down to the present day. And wrapping and swaddling cloths, left out to die in the open field, whether being consumed by wild animals or dying of exposure to the ailments or of starvation, Jerusalem's fate seemed hopeless. No one was concerned for or pitied her. At this point, the Lord happens to pass by and to see the vulnerable and abandoned infant Jerusalem taking pity upon her. In this situation of abandonment, he claims the unwanted child as his own, adopting her through deliverance. On account of the Lord's care, the girl thrived and grew to sexual maturity. The growth here should presumably be related to Israel's multiplication in the land of Egypt, for instance. Having visited Israel in her earliest life, in the time of the patriarchs, the Lord visits her again when she arrives at sexual maturity, when she is at the age for love. Israel is still naked at this point, but her nakedness is not that of an abandoned infant, but of an attractive, sexually mature young woman, of the kind that would make her the object of male advances. Just as the Lord addressed the nakedness of the infant Jerusalem, so he addresses her nakedness in her young womanhood, spreading his garment over her in a marital act, vowing to her, and entering into a covenant of marriage. The historical event behind all of this is almost certainly the covenant of Sinai. This represents a sort of double adoption. The abandoned infant is adopted as a child, and the young woman is taken as a wife. Verse 9 accentuates the symmetry between these two adoptions. It speaks of the Lord's bathing of Jerusalem with water, washing her blood from her and anointing her with oil, and this almost certainly does not refer to the actions that he performed for the abandoned infant, but to the actions of a loving husband towards his bride, especially after their first sexual union. We should beware of reading this imagery in a rigid fashion. Were we to do so, it would give a very strange and perhaps inappropriate impression. The

Lord seemingly rescues an infant girl, and has relatively little to do with her, before seeing her when she has grown to sexual maturity, still being naked, and decides to marry his adopted child.

The imagery is operating in a much more flexible fashion. It enables the reader to see both the consistency and development of the Lord's loving relationship to Israel through successive metaphorical frames. The consistency is found not on the level of the surface imagery, but in the reality to which the imagery refers. This is especially important to bear in mind as the language of the prophecy goes in even more shocking directions, as the unfaithful bride is stripped and subjected to violence. The imagery appalls our modern sensibilities, but we really should not assume that ancient Israelite sensibilities would have been untroubled by such images. Here it is important always to keep in mind the interplay of the concrete historical referent, the wicked, covenant-breaking, and adulterous house of Israel, and the adoptee and bride of the analogy. It is the cross-pollination of the concrete referent and the analogy that makes the oracle so rhetorically powerful and effective in giving us a sense of the depths of the house of Israel's sin and betrayal and the fierceness of the Lord's anger. The Lord dresses his new bride in the finest of attire and adorns her with precious ornaments. We might perhaps think of the tabernacle and its treasures. We should also see that the Lord made Israel a queen, establishing her as royalty within the land where he placed her, also giving her royal food, just as she had flourished as a young infant after the Lord's compassionate care for her.

[ 17 : 20 ] So the new bride flourishes. She gains renown and prominence among the surrounding nations. We might think of such things as the glories of the reign of Solomon, when people from various nations round about came to hear the wisdom of Solomon and to see the glories of his kingdom.

The once abandoned infant, wallowing in her blood, has been elevated to the status of a queen, whose glory is marvelled at on all sides. However, as Jerusalem becomes great, she also becomes proud in the glory that she had been given by the Lord, trusting in her own splendour and might over the Lord who had bestowed such riches and benefits upon her. As a result, Jerusalem abandoned the Lord and played the whore. Jerusalem is described as a nymphomaniac, wanting the attentions of everyone who passes by. Like an adulterous woman using the marriage bed as the place for her adultery, unfaithful Jerusalem takes all of the treasures that the Lord has given, the beautiful jewels of gold and silver, the precious garments that she had been given, and puts all of these things along with the bread that the Lord had granted her, at the service of her adulteries and idolatries.

Her adulteries are described in a way that plays off the two different levels of meaning. On one level we see the nation setting up shrines for its idolatries, and on the other level we see a prostitute at the street corner, having a pedestal from which she would appeal to customers.

Much as the children of Israel with the golden calf in the story of the Exodus, Jerusalem used the treasures that the Lord had given to fashion images with which she could perform her adulteries. Idols are here being described as if they were a sort of sex doll. On top of all of her other abominations, Jerusalem presents the children that she was supposed to have born to the Lord, to these idols and false gods. In all of this, she was completely forgetful of the way that the Lord had shown mercy and grace to her at the beginning of her story. The ingratitude compounds all of her other sins. Jerusalem performed her adulteries in every single part of the land and the city.

No part of the promised land was left undefiled by her. Indeed, her sin was so egregious that it stood out even among her neighbours. She played the hall with the Egyptians. Israel had been explicitly warned in the book of Deuteronomy not to return to the Egyptians, especially to gather up horses and chariots. Yet Solomon married the daughter of Pharaoh and became the main horse trader for the Egyptians within the region. In such a manner, he sought security for the nation in alliance with the Egyptians rather than in covenant faithfulness to the Lord. Later their eyes turned to Assyria for security and then later to Babylon. As Ezekiel argues, the analogy with the prostitute breaks down. A prostitute performs her favours for money, whereas Jerusalem paid others for her adulteries.

[ 20 : 09 ] Having presented the indictment against Jerusalem, the Lord now gives the sentence. The very lovers that she had paid her bribes to would turn against her and destroy her. We might think here of Jeremiah chapter 4, verses 30 to 31. There Judah is also spoken of as a whore and adulterous woman.

And you, O desolate one, what do you mean that you dress in scarlet, that you adorn yourself with ornaments of gold, that you enlarge your eyes with paint? In vain you beautify yourself. Your lovers despise you. They seek your life. For I heard a cry as of a woman in labour, anguish as of one giving birth to her first child. The cry of the daughter of Zion gasping for breath, stretching out her hands.

Woe is me! I am fainting before murderers. Jerusalem is guilty of adultery and of murder, having killed her children for the sake of her lovers. The Lord will uncover Jerusalem's nakedness, making her vulnerable to those who would want to assault her. They will strip Jerusalem, tear down her pedestals, gather a mob against her, stone her, cut her to pieces, and then burn all of her habitations.

On one level, this is an image of the brutal treatment received by a prostitute by a community. On another level, it's the description of what would happen to Jerusalem as its defences would be torn down, as it would be laid bare for attack, as its former lords and allies would be gathered together against her and destroy her. Her treasures would be stripped from her temple and treasuries, she would be put to the sword, her city burned, and then her children sent off into exile.

Through this devastating judgment, Jerusalem would no longer be able to play the harlot. Her adulteries would forcibly be put to an end. Earlier in the chapter, Jerusalem had been spoken of as having a mother who was a Hittite and a father who was an Amorite. Here, in verses 44 to 46, that connection is developed yet further. Not only does she have such parentage, she also has sisters in Sodom and Samaria. The image of the northern kingdom as an adulterer's sister to the adulterer's southern kingdom is one that we see in Jeremiah chapter 3, verses 6 to 10, for instance.

[ 22 : 22 ] The Lord said to me in the days of King Josiah, Have you seen what she did, that faithless one Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the whore? And I thought, after she has done all this, she will return to me. But she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it. She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce. Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore. Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree. Yet for all this, her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the Lord.

In that chapter of Jeremiah, the Lord declares that the southern kingdom of Judah is worse than her northern sister. Here, a similar point is made. Jerusalem shares her character with her Hittite mother, and with her sisters Samaria and Sodom. Sodom likely stands not just for that particular city, but for the cities of the plain and the Canaanite civilization that preceded the Israelites more broadly. Through intermarriage and unfaithfulness, the Israelites had significantly intermingled with the Sodomites and their heirs. Just as Lot and his daughters had taken on board the ways of the Sodomites, and had given rise to the nations of Moab and Ammon, so Israel also absorbed much of the character of the Sodomites. Indeed, it was not long before she outmatched them in wickedness.

Sodom was a city of inhospitality, of decadence, of pride, of sexual immorality, and all of this came to a head in its committing of abomination before the Lord, probably referring to the attempted homosexual rape in Genesis chapter 19. That sin was not a bolt from a clear blue sky, it was the culmination of a great series of sins and attitudes that had been festering in that culture for a long time.

