

Jerusalem — An Unfaithful Wife

After God Loved Her, part 1

Our study is a parable from Ezekiel 16. It is about a wife who became unfaithful to her husband after he loved her, provided for her, and made her his queen. The wife in the parable is Jerusalem and the husband is Yahweh. It is a sordid chapter since it contains some very explicit sexual descriptions. Due to the imagery in the chapter, Rabbi Eliezer of ancient times ruled that it should not be read on Sabbaths; but Rabbi Maimonides read it after Exodus 1:1-6:1 was read in the annual Jewish cycle of Torah readings.¹ So, some ancient rabbis permitted it to be read and others did not. Today the Jewish rabbis do not allow Ezekiel 16 to be read on the Sabbath² because of the very sexually descriptive chapter and what it reveals about ancient Jerusalem. However, I do not plan to avoid the sexually descriptive verses since it is the Word of God. Yahweh wants us to understand what He wrote. I do not believe we should edit what Yahweh has written because we are uncomfortable with it. I believe that Yahweh used these descriptions so that we would feel uncomfortable and capture the seriousness of Jerusalem's offense. It is supposed to motivate us to examine ourselves, and I hope we will do that. It teaches us a valuable lesson. Also, we will understand how Yahweh would feel



about us if we did the same thing that Jerusalem did.

This chapter is the longest chapter in the book of Ezekiel. It is similar to chapter 23. Dr. Charles Feinberg states,

No passage in Ezekiel is more forceful or vivid than this chapter which is a remarkable and unparalleled setting forth of God's dealings with Israel from the beginning and their response to His ways with them. It also is a beautiful illustration of what God does in grace for any believing sinner. The chapter is reminiscent of truths found in the prophecies of Isaiah (1:21) and Hosea (1:2). Ezekiel, too, saw Israel's sin as one of unfaithfulness to the boundless love of God.³

The chapter can be divided into two parts. Verses 1-34 is the parable. Then in the rest of the chapter, Yahweh described the punishment that occurred to Jerusalem because she was unfaithful. Verses 1-34 can be divided into six sections. The first section is verses 1-5. The parable begins by presenting Jerusalem as an unwanted infant abandoned in the field to die.

ORIGIN OF JERUSALEM — LAND AND PEOPLE. The opening two verses of Ezekiel 16 gives us the purpose of this new prophecy from Yahweh. He told the prophet Ezekiel that he was to describe Jerusalem's abominations. Verses 1 and 2

1. Berlin and Brettler. The Jewish Study Bible Oxford University Press. 2004. p. 1067.

2 Ibid.

3 Charles Feinberg. The Prophecy of Ezekiel. Moody Press. 1969. p. 85.

tell us,

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations . . . Ezekiel 16:1-2 (NASB)

The theme of chapters 13, 14 and 15 describes the faithfulness of the people and the leaders to Yahweh. Chapter 13 revealed the false prophets and false prophetesses of Israel were unfaithful because they called Yahweh’s prophets liars and promised peace from a Babylonian invasion.

In chapter 14:1-11 Yahweh revealed to the elders of the exiles were unfaithful because they had idols in their hearts. So, He called them to repent and to abandon their abominations. In Ezekiel 14:12-23, Yahweh said that because Israel was so wicked and unrepentant that even Noah, Daniel, and Job could not rescue Jerusalem and Judah had they been living there. As a result, in chapter 15 Yahweh said the people in Jerusalem and Judah were useless and worthless to Him. They were only good for the fire. The fire represented the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army. Yahweh summarized the condition of their hearts with one word—unfaithfulness, except for the righteous remnant. Now Ezekiel 16 continues the theme of unfaithfulness. But this time it is directed right at the city of Jerusalem.

Verses 3-5 begins the parable with a description of the origin of Jerusalem. But there is a surprise in the description. Here is verse 3,

“ . . . and say, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD to Jerusalem, “Your origin and your birth are from the land of the Canaanite, your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite.”’” Ezekiel 16:3 (NASB)

Immediately, Yahweh told Jerusalem that its origin was from the land of the Canaanite. That was true for Genesis 14:17-24 tells us that after Abraham left the Ur of the Chaldeans and arrived in Canaan, he met Melchizedek, the king of Salem. The point is the city of Salem already existed when Abraham arrived. It was in Canaanite territory. Later, David conquered the city of Salem and renamed it as Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:6-9;

Psalms 76:2; Zechariah 8:3). That was Jerusalem’s origin and birth. The people who lived in Canaan were the Amorites and Hittites and they had originally built the city.

Now this is a significant description of Jerusalem’s origin as a city. Nowhere else in Scripture can we find such a description of Jerusalem’s origin. This reveals that Yahweh is emphasizing the sordid background of the city itself, since the Amorites and Hittites were wicked nations. Yahweh was hinting that Jerusalem’s wickedness started at its very beginning!

JERUSALEM WAS UNWANTED AT BIRTH. We should not be surprised at what follows, in verses 4-5,

“As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water for cleansing; you were not rubbed with salt or even wrapped in cloths. No eye looked with pity on you to do any of these things for you, to have compassion on you. Rather you were thrown out into the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born.” Ezekiel 16:4-5 (NASB)

Now Yahweh moves deeper into the parable. The city of Jerusalem is pictured as a newborn child when it was first established. Initially the city had a bad beginning according to verse 4. No one cared for it. Its navel cord was not removed. It was not cleansed with water, rubbed with salt, or wrapped in cloths. Worst of all, it was thrown into the field to die. This was a common practice in ancient times when a child was not wanted or deformed. We call it infanticide. In ancient times they did not have the medical knowledge to perform abortions, so they performed infanticide by leaving the child to wild beasts. Abortion is just one form of infanticide. This is another passage that reveals Yahweh hates abortion or infanticide.

Now verse 6 pictures Yahweh as the one who rescued her.

“When I passed by you and saw you squirming in your blood, I said to you while you were in your blood, ‘Live!’ Yes, I said to you while you were in your blood, ‘Live!’” Ezekiel 16:6 (NASB)

Yahweh saw the abandoned child and with divine authority, He commanded the child to “Live!” The point is that Yahweh

Himself and no one else is responsible for Jerusalem coming to life. It occurred by divine decree!

GROWTH OF JERUSALEM FROM INFANCY TO PUBERTY.

Next verses 7-14 describe Jerusalem's growth symbolically as if the city was a human who grew up from a newborn to puberty and then into adulthood. Bible commentators are not completely agreed as to where in Israel's timeline these descriptions apply. So, what follows is the best guess of many conservative Bible commentators. In verse 7 Yahweh said,

“I made you numerous like plants of the field. Then you grew up, became tall and reached the age for fine ornaments; your breasts were formed and your hair had grown. Yet you were naked and bare.” Ezekiel 16:7 (NASB)

This symbolic description appears to correspond to the 430 years the Israelites were in captivity in Egypt. Exodus 12:40-41 states that the Israelites were in Egypt for 430 years. During those years their population increased dramatically. Exodus 1:7 says,

But the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them. Exodus 1:7 (NASB)

So, Israel grew up to the age of puberty and symbolically, she was as numerous as the plants, and she was naked and bare in her slavery in Egypt.

GROWTH OF JERUSALEM TO ADULTHOOD. Verses 8-14 appear to cover the time from the Exodus through the reigns of King David, and King Solomon.

Then I passed by you and saw you, and behold, you were at the time for love; so I spread My skirt over you and covered your nakedness. I also swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became Mine,” declares the Lord GOD. Then I bathed you with water, washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil. I also clothed you with embroidered cloth and put sandals of porpoise skin on your feet; and I wrapped you with fine linen and covered you with silk. I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets on your hands and a necklace around

your neck. I also put a ring in your nostril, earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your dress was of fine linen, silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour, honey and oil; so you were exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. Then your fame went forth among the nations on account of your beauty, for it was perfect because of My splendor which I bestowed on you,” declares the Lord GOD. Ezekiel 16:8-14 (NASB)

When we are told in verse 8 that Israel was at the “time for love,” we understand it to mean Israel and Jerusalem had reached puberty. This seems to correspond to the time Yahweh contacted Moses and asked Him to deliver Israel out of Egypt. In Deuteronomy 7:5-8, we are given a description of Yahweh's love for Israel and His covenant or commitment to her. Symbolically, we could say that statement as a formal marriage proposal. The statement “so I spread My skirt over you” refers to the ancient custom of how a husband made a proposal of marriage. Ruth 3:9 is a good example. The act of spreading a skirt did not involve sexual activity nor nudity. Dr. Charles Feinberg says, “The washing and anointing were ceremonies preparatory to marriage.”⁴ The gifts were given at a wedding to a queen. Then the exodus from Egypt occurred under Moses and Joshua.

The city of Jerusalem was established during the reign of King David and the temple was built during the reign of King Solomon. The city was at its pinnacle under King Solomon (1 Kings 10). 1 Kings 10:1 says the fame of Solomon reached the queen of Sheba. That agrees with verse 13 which says Jerusalem had beauty among the nations. Verse 14 says that Yahweh made this happen. Yahweh had rescued Jerusalem from death and granted her fame. She was beautiful to the surrounding world because of Yahweh. Jerusalem was at its zenith, and she represented the entire nation of Israel.

UNFAITHFUL JERUSALEM PLAYED THE HARLOT. Verses 15-17 describe what happened next.

“But you trusted in your beauty and played the harlot because of your fame, and you poured out your harlotries on every passer-by who might be willing. You took some of your clothes, made for

⁴ Ibid. p. 87.

yourself high places of various colors and played the harlot on them, which should never come about nor happen. You also took your beautiful jewels made of My gold and of My silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself male images that you might play the harlot with them. Ezekiel 16:15-17 (NASB)

Now we are told that Jerusalem trusted in her beauty. The Hebrew grammar and words indicated that Jerusalem is pictured as a woman. The phrase “poured out your harlotries” refers to spiritual adultery with idols. This appears to correspond to 1 Kings 11:1-13 which tells us King Solomon sinned in his old age by worshiping other gods and goddesses. Consequently, Yahweh rebuked him for not keeping the covenant with Yahweh (1 Kings 11:11). That is, the King of Israel in Jerusalem, was unfaithful to Yahweh. That means Jerusalem was unfaithful.

Notice that verse 16 describes what happened next in Israel. They made high places that were colorful to the eye (2 Kings 23:7) and became a spiritual prostitute committing acts that never should have occurred. Verse 17 is the most difficult verse in the chapter. Most commentators are not sure what “male idols” means. It may refer to idols of male gods, but it may also refer to idols of male genitals. Archaeology has found proof that idols of male genitals were widespread, and some still exist today. If true, that was truly a disgusting and abominable sin.

We have already discovered that the worship at the high places included ritual sexual activities with human female and male temple prostitutes (Genesis 38:21; Deuteronomy 23:17; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7). This would mean that adulterous heterosexual and homosexual acts occurred as part of the worship. So, not only did Israel worship the idols of false gods and goddesses, which Yahweh called harlotry, they also committed horrible sexual sins. So, harlotry had a double meaning. At the same time that Jerusalem violated its covenant relationship with Yahweh, it also committed wicked, ritual, pagan sex acts. Harlotry can have a dual meaning.

UNFAITHFUL JERUSALEM WAS UTTERLY EVIL. Now verses 18-21 reveal that Israel treated their idols as if they were real. The verses say,

“Then you took your embroidered cloth and covered them, and

offered My oil and My incense before them. Also My bread which I gave you, fine flour, oil and honey with which I fed you, you would offer before them for a soothing aroma; so it happened,” declares the Lord GOD. Moreover, you took your sons and daughters whom you had borne to Me and sacrificed them to idols to be devoured. Were your harlotries so small a matter? You slaughtered My children and offered them up to idols by causing them to pass through the fire. Ezekiel 16:18-21 (NASB)

The first thing we are told is that Israel protected their idols by clothing them with embroidered cloth (Jeremiah 10:9). Also, they offered oil, incense, and some kind of special bread to these idols. Even worse, they sacrificed their sons and daughters to these idols that could not breathe, could not speak, could not move, and could not answer their prayers (Isaiah 57:5). Then they ate what they had sacrificed. In addition, they made their children walk through the fire of Moloch (2 Kings 16:3; 23:10; Jeremiah 32:35). That sounds like conditions of today. Sex is the major idol of our nation. It is the root cause of abortion, the sexual revolution, sex changes, homosexuality, personal pronouns, transsexual use of female bathrooms, and sex education in the schools. It affects our advertising, and motivates attacks on Christians and their faith. Our children are being sacrificed in abortion clinics and in classrooms to the idols of sexual freedom and lives of pleasure and ease. This is the major modern day idol. The message of Scripture strongly suggests that a person will either worship God or sex.

UNFAITHFUL JERUSALEM DID NOT REMEMBER. Then Yahweh said,

“Besides all your abominations and harlotries you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare and squirming in your blood.” Ezekiel 16:22 (NASB)

Now Yahweh adds they did not remember what He had done for them. The same is true of us at times. We sin by complaining too! Sadly, we as believers fail to remember the greatest gift He could have given to us.

UNFAITHFUL JERUSALEM CRAVED MORE IDOLS. Verses 23-25 describe more serious sins of the nation.

“Then it came about after all your wickedness (‘Woe, woe to you!’ declares the Lord GOD), that you built yourself a shrine and made yourself a high place in every square. You built yourself a high place at the top of every street and made your beauty abominable, and you spread your legs to every passer-by to multiply your harlotry.” You also played the harlot with the Egyptians, your lustful neighbors, and multiplied your harlotry to make Me angry. Behold now, I have stretched out My hand against you and diminished your rations. And I delivered you up to the desire of those who hate you, the daughters of the Philistines, who are ashamed of your lewd conduct. Moreover, you played the harlot with the Assyrians because you were not satisfied; you played the harlot with them and still were not satisfied. You also multiplied your harlotry with the land of merchants, Chaldea, yet even with this you were not satisfied.”” Ezekiel 16:23-29 (NASB)

Next, Yahweh added that they built shrines in every square, and high places at the beginning of every street. Jerusalem had literally and figuratively spread her legs in worship to the idols of Egypt, the Philistines, the Assyrians, and the Chaldeans. Notice that Yahweh said they played the harlot with the idols of the Assyrians because they were not satisfied with the previous idols. That describes uncontrolled lust. Notice in verse 27 that they were so wicked we are told the Philistines were “ashamed of your lewd conduct.” As a result, Yahweh was angry and diminished their rations—their food. Therefore, He delivered Jerusalem to nations that loved her and to those nations that hated her.

UNFAITHFUL JERUSALEM WAS A NYMPHOMANIAC. Then Yahweh condemned Jerusalem and its inhabitants. He said, “How languishing is your heart?”

“How languishing is your heart,” declares the Lord GOD, “while you do all these things, the actions of a bold-faced harlot. When you built your shrine at the beginning of every street and made your high place in every square, in disdain of money, you were not like a harlot. Ezekiel 16:30-31 (NASB)

The Hebrew word for “languishing,” *alma*, has the sense of weak or exhausted. Jerusalem is pictured as a nymphomaniac or a woman who craved for more sex. Jerusalem was like a bold

prostitute who exhausted herself lusting for having sex. So in addition to building shrines for customers at the beginning of each street, Jerusalem is pictured as chasing her lovers and not chasing after Yahweh. She did not even care if she received money in exchange. Jerusalem was worse than prostitutes. She did her sex acts for free.

UNFAITHFUL JERUSALEM WAS AN ADULTEROUS WIFE. Now Yahweh crystallizes the true character of Jerusalem.

“You adulteress wife, who takes strangers instead of her husband! Men give gifts to all harlots, but you give your gifts to all your lovers to bribe them to come to you from every direction for your harlotries. Thus you are different from those women in your harlotries, in that no one plays the harlot as you do, because you give money and no money is given you; thus you are different.” Ezekiel 16:32-34 (NASB)

Jerusalem would rather have strangers than Yahweh Himself. So, she gave her money away in order to receive more! Verses 33-34 may refer to the costly tribute to these nations as a result of Jerusalem’s close relationship with them. Whatever the correct interpretation may be, it is clear Jerusalem had abandoned Yahweh for the idols of the surrounding nations. Why? Those false religions offered more pleasure.

CONCLUSION. That is the end of our study of the the first half of Ezekiel 16. In our next study, we will discover how Yahweh ended the prophecy. But before we end, I would like to add that archaeologists have discovered a very large number of idols in Israel. They have also found a large Canaanite temple near Jerusalem. This is very sad because the archaeological evidence increases our understanding that people in Jerusalem itself had eagerly abandoned Yahweh for other gods and goddesses just like an unfaithful wife.

Now we need to think about ourselves if you have not already. Let me ask you a question. Have you been faithful to God? Are you like a faithful wife or an unfaithful wife to our God? Do you have idols in heart? Do you cheat on God? Do you think about Him through the day? Do you want to please Him? Those who love our God will desire to please by fulfilling His every command. Jesus told the twelve disciples in John 14:31,

So that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as
the Father commanded Me. John 14:31 (NASB)

He is our example.