

Parable of Oholah and Oholibah— Prosecutor’s Closing Argument

The first part of the book of Ezekiel is like a courtroom trial. God is the prosecutor and the prophet Ezekiel is the judge. Chapters 4-22 describe the evidence presented by Yahweh against the nation of Judah. Our study is from chapter 23 which is like a prosecutor’s closing argument of the evidence against the defendant, the nation of Judah. Yahweh will summarize the evidence against the defendant, who is rebellious and unrepentant. She has a hard heart and has forgotten her God. So, chapter 23 is the prosecutor’s closing argument. The next study will be from Ezekiel 24. It describes the sentencing or the final judgment.

Due to the length of chapter 23, I will spend time on the first part of the chapter in order to help everyone understand

what the chapter is about. Then I will summarize remaining passages. However, I will explain the problem passages. I will also provide enough explanation so that everyone understands the message. It is important to understand that Yahweh frequently

refers to sexual sins and uses some explicit words in this chapter. As I did in chapter 16, I will not avoid the words Yahweh used since He did not avoid them. The words God used will surprise us. The words He used were designed to teach the citizens of Judah that they were like an unfaithful wife in the most intimate way. He wants us to remember the

message and take the message to heart.

ALLEGORY OF TWO SISTERS (v 1-4). When we study the Bible, we should understand the words literally as we read them. We should understand the words to mean exactly what the words mean. But some people read the Bible and then look for some hidden spiritual or “deeper” meaning. So, they spiritualize the words or treat them allegorically. They ignore the plain meaning of the words. But sometimes it is obvious the words should not be understood literally such as when we are reading a parable or an allegory. Then we should understand that the words have a symbolic meaning. The reason that I am talking about literal and symbolic meanings is that chapter 23 of Ezekiel is an example of an allegory. It is an allegory about

two women. Here are verses 1-4,

The word of the LORD came to me again, saying, “Son of man, there were two women, the daughters of one mother; and they played the harlot in Egypt. They played the harlot in their youth;

there their breasts were pressed and there their virgin bosom was handled. Their names were Oholah the elder and Oholibah her sister. And they became Mine, and they bore sons and daughters. And as for their names, Samaria is Oholah and Jerusalem is Oholibah.” Ezekiel 23:1-4 (NASB)



Prosecutor and Jury

Immediately in verse 2 we read that Yahweh tells the prophet Ezekiel “there were two women, the daughters of one mother.” Then in verse 4 we are given the names of these two sisters. The oldest is Oholah and the youngest is Oholibah. Now that sounds literal, but in verse 4 it becomes clear the names of the two sisters have symbolic meanings. Oholah symbolizes the city of Samaria, the center of idol worship. It was the capitol city of the northern kingdom of Israel. Oholibah symbolizes the city of Jerusalem, the center of the worship of Yahweh. It was the capitol city of the southern kingdom of Judah. That helps us understand that the mother of Oholah and Oholibah was the combined kingdom of Israel under the reigns of king Saul, David, and Solomon before it was divided. Finally, in verse 3 we are told these two women played the harlot with Egypt. Since Egypt was a nation, it is again clear that there is a lot of symbolism in this chapter. We are going to find that both Oholah and Oholibah were not very holy!

Now it is important to notice that the two capitol cities are referred to as women and not men. The same was true in the book of Jeremiah. For example, in Jeremiah 3:6-9 Yahweh says this to Judah,

Then the LORD said to me in the days of Josiah the king, “Have you seen what faithless Israel did? She went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and she was a harlot there. I thought, ‘After she has done all these things she will return to Me’; but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it. And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah

did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also. Because of the lightness of her harlotry, she polluted the land and committed adultery with stones and trees. Jeremiah 3:6-9 (NASB)

In this passage we learn that the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were called sisters here too! Notice that Judah is described as committing adultery with stones and trees or idols. This is another allegorical statement. Why? Because it is obvious people cannot literally commit adultery with stones and trees! Also notice that Judah is viewed as Yahweh’s wife since He

divorced her. Now we must remember this important point. Earlier we also discovered that horrible sexual sins usually occurred as part of idol worship. So, this helps us understand the allegory in Ezekiel 23.

THE HARLOT OHOlah (v 5-10). Verses 5-10 are now about Oholah. The Hebrew word for Oholah literally means “her tent.” This is an allusion to the fact the northern kingdom had built a temple for the worship of idols and not Yahweh. Verses 5-10 say.

“Oholah played the harlot while she was Mine; and she lusted after her lovers, after the Assyrians, her neighbors, who were clothed in purple, governors and officials, all of them desirable young men, horsemen riding on horses. She bestowed her harlotries on them, all of whom were the choicest men of Assyria; and with all whom she lusted after, with all their idols she defiled herself. She did not forsake her harlotries from the time in Egypt; for in her youth men had lain with her, and they handled her virgin bosom and poured out their lust on her. Therefore, I gave her into the hand of her lovers, into the hand of the Assyrians, after whom



she lusted. They uncovered her nakedness; they took her sons and her daughters, but they slew her with the sword. Thus she became a byword among women, and they executed judgments on her.”

Ezekiel 23:5-10 (NASB)

First, we are told in verse 5, “Oholah played the harlot while she was Mine.” That is allegorically speaking, Oholah was Yahweh’s wife. Then we are told Oholah lusted after the young, wealthy, and attractive male leaders of the Assyrian Empire. The message is she seduced them and established a relationship with the empire in 841 B.C. Sadly, she lusted after their idols too! The sexual references to “lust” allegorically refer to alliances described in 2 Kings 15:13-20. The passage tells us that Jehu made an alliance with the Assyrian king in order to strengthen his rule over Israel.

Archaeologists have found what is called the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III which shows Jehu, the king of Israel, bowing down in submission to the Assyrian king.

Later in 2 Kings 16:7-9 we are told that Israel made another alliance with Assyria for protection. Also, the prophet Hosea says that Israel was depending upon the empire for protection (Hosea 5:13-14; 7:11-13). So Israel sought protection from Assyria and ignored Yahweh’s promise to faithfully protect Israel (Deuteronomy 7:7-8:20). So, Israel is described as a wife who did not trust Yahweh. That is why she sought protection from Assyria.

Ezekiel 23:7 tells us that eventually Israel began worshipping the Assyrian idols as a result of the alliance between the two nations. Consequently, Israel defiled herself by worshipping these foreign idols and committing a wide range of sexual sins. So Israel was a seducer, committing both spiritual and physical adultery.

Verse 8 reveals that Israel had a history of this type of behavior with the Egyptians. The point is that Israel had a pattern of not being faithful to Yahweh. Her adulterous relationships revealed she was like an unfaithful wife to her husband, Yahweh. The sexual foreplay described in these verses is designed to reveal the very intense craving of Israel for human protection, but not protection from Yahweh Himself. She forgot Yahweh, for she craved human protection. Verses 9-10 reveal that since she had a pattern of unfaithfulness, Yahweh

gave Israel to the Assyrian Empire and the nation was destroyed (2 Kings 17:1-6). The very nation that Israel thought would protect her destroyed her. That occurred in 722 B.C.

THE HARLOT OHOLIBAH (v 11-21). Verses 11-21 are now about Oholibah.

“Now her sister Oholibah saw this, yet she was more corrupt in her lust than she, and her harlotries were more than the harlotries of her sister. She lusted after the Assyrians, governors and officials, the ones near, magnificently dressed, horsemen riding on horses, all of them desirable young men. I saw that she had defiled herself; they both took the same way. So she increased her harlotries. And she saw men portrayed on the wall, images of the Chaldeans portrayed with vermilion, girded with belts on their loins, with flowing turbans on their heads, all of them looking like officers, like the Babylonians in Chaldea, the land of their birth. When she saw them she lusted after them and sent messengers to them in Chaldea. The Babylonians came to her to the bed of love and defiled her with their harlotry. And when she had been defiled by them, she became disgusted with them. She uncovered her harlotries and uncovered her nakedness; then I became disgusted with her, as I had become disgusted with her sister. Yet she multiplied her harlotries, remembering the days of her youth, when she played the harlot in the land of Egypt. She lusted after their paramours, whose flesh is like the flesh of donkeys and whose issue is like the issue of horses. Thus you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when the Egyptians handled your bosom because of the breasts of your youth. Ezekiel 23:11-21 (NASB)

Immediately we are told that even though Oholibah or Judah saw this occur, it did not stop her from being unfaithful too! In fact, she was “more corrupt in her lust than her sister” Oholah. Judah did not learn from her sister Oholah. She trusted protection from other nations more so than Oholah. She also practiced more idol worship. That is the message.

The first nation that she lusted after was Assyria because of the dignity, honor, and youthfulness of the Assyrian leaders. When verses 14-16 refer to “men portrayed on the wall, it appears to refer to the many bas-relief images carved on the walls of the Chaldeans. Vermilion refers to a bright red color. That means the bas-relief images were very colorful.

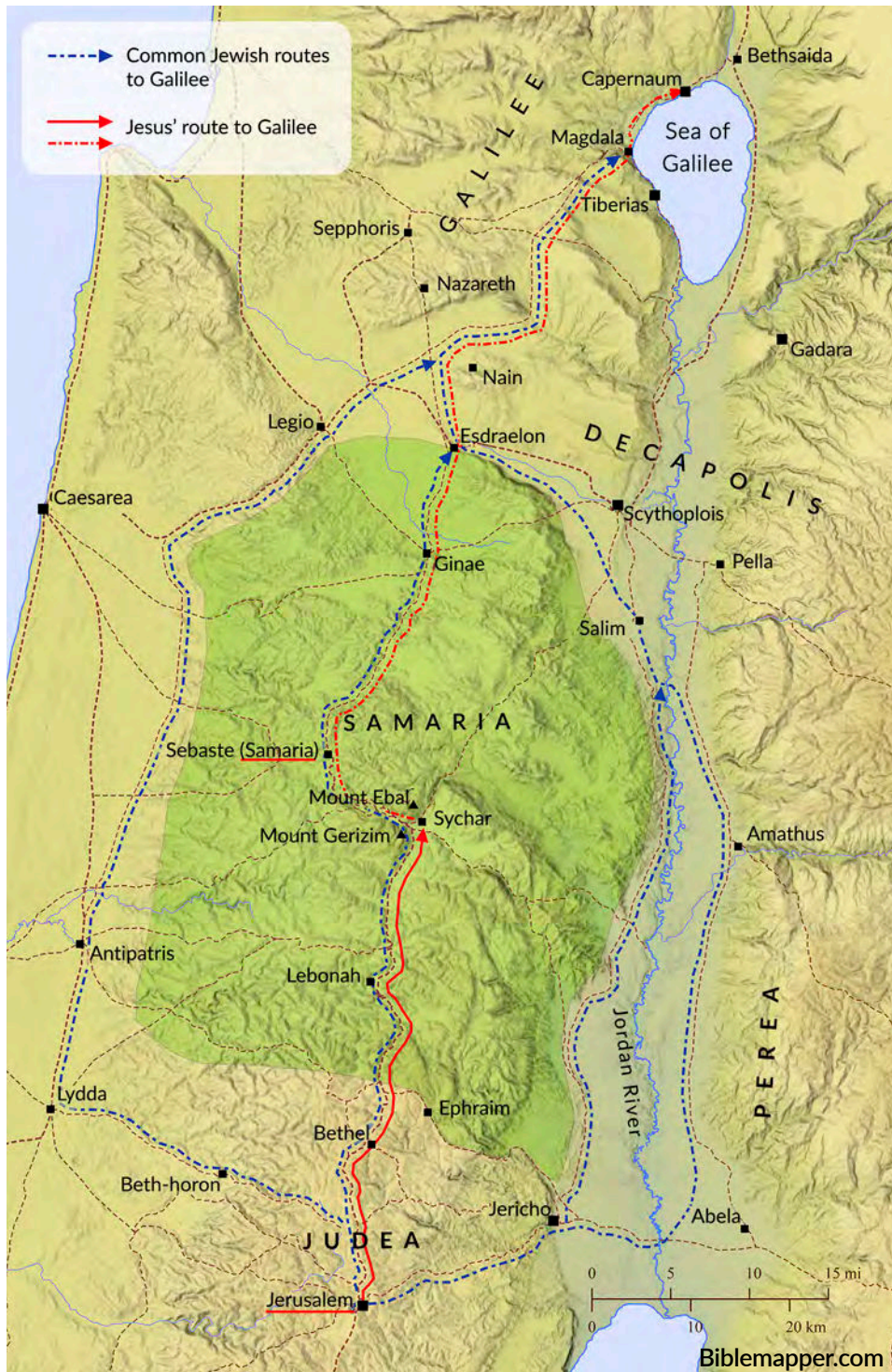
Verse 16 says Oholibah lusted after Assyria and sent messengers. Judah seduced the Assyrian empire into making an alliance with her as described in 2 Kings 16:5-9; 17:4 and Isaiah 7:1. Verses 17-18 reveal that Judah desired an alliance with the Babylonian Empire also. We should note that the term Chaldea or Chaldeans refers to a much wider territory than just the territory controlled by the Babylonian Empire. So, Judah seduced the Babylonians also (2 Kings 16:5-10; Isaiah 7:7-9)! That occurred in 753 B.C. Verse 17 reveals that Judah became disgusted with the Babylonians and tried to pull away.

Verses 20-21 emphasize Judah's very deep desire for human protection and support by using incredibly graphic descriptions of sexual foreplay. Notice that Yahweh used a Hebrew word that is trans-

lated as "flesh." It refers to male genitals. He also used a Hebrew word that is translated as "issue." It is usually translated as

semen. Apparently, Yahweh used these graphic descriptions to reveal the intensity of her craving for protection.

Yahweh also called the Egyptians "paramours," which refers to a lover who does not have the legal right to be a lover of the person. So, the message of verses 11-21 is that Judah passionately longed for political alliances because she did not trust nor believe that Yahweh would protect and care for her. Even though Yahweh had promised to be faithful as a husband is to his wife, but Judah still was unfaithful. Allegorically, she abandoned her



husband Yahweh.

Dr. Charles Feinberg quotes Hegel as saying, "We ask men

to study history. The only thing that man learns from the study of history is that men have learned nothing from the study of history.” That describes Oholibah. So she was unfaithful to Yahweh just as Oholah was. Now, before we move to verse 22 there are two important biblical principles for us to notice.

The first principle this allegory teaches us is that when we are unfaithful to God, it will lead to punishment. God has promised to be faithful to believers and so we should be faithful to Him. He has promised to forgive our sins if we believe in Jesus Christ (John 3:16). He has promised to never leave us nor forsake us (Matthew 28:20). He urges us to cast all our care upon Him because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). So, we should be faithful to Him.

The second principle this allegory teaches us is that unbelievers cause believers to drift away from God. 1 Corinthians 15:33 says,

Do not be deceived: “Bad company corrupts good morals. 1 Corinthians 15:33 (NASB)

That describes what happened with Oholah and Oholibah. They made alliances with nations that did not believe in God. As a result, both Israel and Judah drifted away from God. That describes what is occurring today in our nation.

2 Corinthians 6:14-15 adds this,

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? 2 Corinthians 6:14-15 (NASB)

That is, believers must never be bound with unbelievers in any way. Believers should never marry an unbeliever, engage in business with an unbeliever, or be part of a strictly social group involving unbelievers. Initially such relationships appear to be okay, but as we saw in this allegory they will eventually turn into trouble.

PROSECUTOR’S CALL FOR PUNISHMENT (v 22-35). Since Yahweh is functioning as a prosecutor in a criminal trial,

He now begins His summary of the evidence. Initially, Yahweh calls for four types of punishment upon Judah. After that, Yahweh will summarize the seven most detestable practices of Judah as He concludes His summary of all the evidence against Judah. Now I will not read most of the verses here, but will just give you summaries. I encourage you to read them in full as we proceed.

The first punishment that Judah deserves is given in verses 22-27. In verse 22, Yahweh says that Judah deserves to be punished by the nations with whom she made alliances. So the Chaldeans, and the Babylonians will destroy her. The very nations she trusted would destroy her in 586 B.C. The result would be that Judah would no longer be faithful.

The second punishment that Judah deserved is given in verses 28-31. Here Yahweh says that Judah would be punished by those she hated and who hate her (v. 29). It would also occur because she had defiled herself with idols (v. 30).

The third punishment Judah deserved is given in verses 32-34. This punishment is described in a song about a cup. The punishment is that she would be ridiculed and mocked.

The fourth punishment upon Judah is given in verse 35. It says,

“Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, ‘Because you have forgotten Me and cast Me behind your back, bear now the punishment of your lewdness and your harlotries.’” Ezekiel 23:35 (NASB)

Notice that Judah would be punished because she had forgotten Yahweh. Her punishment would be given in proportion to all of her sins.

PROSECUTOR’S DETAILED INDICTMENT (v 36-45). Yahweh, as a prosecutor, now gives a detailed indictment against Israel and Judah. He lists five detestable practices of Israel and Judah.

The first detestable practice is given in verses 36-38. It was that both Israel and Judah had worshiped idols, and offered their sons as food to the idols. The second detestable practice is in verse 39. Yahweh said they had defiled Yahweh’s temple by entering the temple after they had slaughtered their children. Imagine killing your children and then going to church to worship God! This principle is echoed in Jeremiah 7:8-11.

This gives us a third principle to remember. The worship of wicked people is unacceptable to God. Proverbs 15:8 says,

**The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,
But the prayer of the upright is His delight. Proverbs 15:8 (NASB)**

That is the worship of unbelievers is an abomination to the Lord.

Verses 40-42 give us the third detestable practice. The two sisters used some of the sacred things in Yahweh's temple for their own wicked pleasure. All they cared about was their wicked desires. So, they polluted the temple with their evil. The fourth detestable practice is given in verses 43-44. It was that the two sisters were worn out or tired by their sins. They already had a long history of committing these sins, and were now weary. Verse 45 gives us the fifth detestable practice. That is, righteous men would judge Israel and Judah and call them adulteresses and murderers. This probably refers to the righteous remnant who would serve like a jury. The point is this jury would agree with Yahweh.

PROSECUTOR'S FINAL STATEMENT (v 46-49). Now Yahweh makes His final statement. He calls for someone to terrorize, plunder, and stone the two sisters to death. Since adulteresses were stoned according to Deuteronomy 21:21; 22:23-24, the two sisters were to be stoned. Yahweh also added that their children would be killed and their houses would be burned to the ground. We have read that prophecy several times before. Jerusalem would be burned to the ground. Then in verse 49, Yahweh said,

"Your lewdness will be requited upon you, and you will bear the penalty of worshiping your idols; thus you will know that I am the Lord GOD." Ezekiel 23:49 (NASB)

The word "requited" in the NASB has the sense of payment. That is, they earned the punishment they received for their worship of idols. This gives us a fourth principle from this study. When God punishes a person or a nation, He always makes the punishment match the sin because he is just.

CONCLUSION. In conclusion, we must remember that God intentionally filled this chapter with very graphic sexual

terminology in order to teach us that He considers the sin of unfaithfulness to be very disgusting. Israel and Judah were like unfaithful wives. Our God wants us to think about our own unfaithfulness to Him. Since He has promised to forgive our sins, the next time we sincerely confess our sins we should rejoice that He is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins. The next time we worry about our health or finances, we should rejoice that He cares about us and will do according to His will. The next time we confess our sins, we should rejoice that He has told us in 1 John 1:9 He will forgive us because He is faithful and righteous.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9 (NASB)

We should also remember His final ten words, "thus you will know that I am the Lord GOD." He wants us to remember who He is and that He has spoken! We should never forget that God wrote this chapter. Romans 15:4 says,

For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Romans 15:4(NASB)

That is, Ezekiel 23 and the rest of the Old Testament was written so that we would learn from it and then lead a holy life.

This chapter should cause every unbeliever to repent of his or her sins and seek God's forgiveness for their sins through Jesus Christ. This chapter should also motivate every believer to walk holy, confess our sins when we fail to be holy, and desire to be faithful to our God.