Ezekiel 23

Two Sisters:
The Cost of Spiritual Adultery

OBSERVATION · INTERPRETATION · APPLICATION

"These were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so."

Acts 17:11

CHAPTER THEME

God took Israel as His own, and she went looking for other lovers — first Egypt, then Assyria, then Babylon — trusting armies and idols instead of Him. Jerusalem watched her sister destroyed for it and did worse. The lovers she chased became the men who stripped her. Sin always promises a lover and ends as a tyrant, and the root of it all is forgetting God and throwing Him behind our back.

Ed Smith · Started 20 October 2026

Scripture in the text and key-verse cards: King James Version (public domain). Quotations in the notes: New American Standard Bible® (NASB 1995), © The Lockman Foundation; used by permission. Commentary sources: David Guzik, Enduring Word.

00 The Text

EZEKIEL 23 (KJV), MARKED

▲ Gold God — His character & actions | Green Command / instruction | ⇄ Sky Key repeated word
⚠ Rose Sin / warning | ★ Violet Promise / blessing | ◷ Amber Time / place / contrast

[1]The word of the LORD came again unto me, saying,

[2]Son of man, there were ◷ two women, the daughters of one mother:

[3]And they committed ⇄ whoredoms in Egypt; they committed ⇄ whoredoms in their youth: there were their breasts pressed, and there they bruised the teats of their virginity.

[4]And the names of them were Aholah the elder, and Aholibah her sister: and ▲ they were mine, and they bare sons and daughters. Thus were their names; ◷ Samaria is Aholah, and Jerusalem Aholibah.

[5]And Aholah played the harlot when she was mine; and she ⇄ doted on her lovers, on the Assyrians her neighbours,

[6]Which were clothed with blue, captains and rulers, all of them desirable young men, horsemen riding upon horses.

[7]Thus she committed her ⇄ whoredoms with them, with all them that were the chosen men of Assyria, and with all on whom she ⇄ doted: with all their idols she defiled herself.

[8]Neither left she her ⇄ whoredoms brought from Egypt: for in her youth they lay with her, and they bruised the breasts of her virginity, and poured their whoredom upon her.

[9]Wherefore ▲ I have delivered her into the hand of her lovers, into the hand of the Assyrians , upon whom she ⇄ doted.

[10]These discovered her nakedness: they took her sons and her daughters, and slew her with the sword: and she became famous among women; for they had executed judgment upon her.

[11]And when her sister Aholibah saw this, ⚠ she was more corrupt in her inordinate love than she, and in her ⇄ whoredoms more than her sister in her ⇄ whoredoms.

[12]She ⇄ doted upon the Assyrians her neighbours, captains and rulers clothed most gorgeously, horsemen riding upon horses, all of them desirable young men.

[13]Then I saw that she was defiled, that they took both one way,

[14]And that she increased her ⇄ whoredoms: for ⚠ when she saw men pourtrayed upon the wall, the images of the Chaldeans pourtrayed with vermilion,

[15]Girded with girdles upon their loins, exceeding in dyed attire upon their heads, all of them princes to look to, after the manner of the Babylonians of Chaldea, the land of their nativity:

[16]And ⚠ as soon as she saw them with her eyes, she ⇄ doted upon them, and sent messengers unto them into Chaldea.

[17]And the Babylonians came to her into the bed of love, and they defiled her with their whoredom, and she was polluted with them, and her mind was alienated from them.

[18]So she discovered her ⇄ whoredoms, and discovered her nakedness: then ▲ my mind was alienated from her, like as my mind was alienated from her sister.

19 Yet she multiplied her whoredoms, in calling to remembrance the days of her youth, wherein she had played the harlot in the land of Egypt.

20 For she doted upon their paramours, whose flesh is as the flesh of asses, and whose issue is like the issue of horses.

21 Thus thou calledst to remembrance the lewdness of thy youth, in bruising thy teats by the Egyptians for the paps of thy youth.

22 Therefore, O Aholibah, thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I will raise up thy lovers against thee, from whom thy mind is alienated, and I will bring them against thee on every side;

23 The Babylonians , and all the Chaldeans, Pekod, and Shoa, and Koa, and all the Assyrians with them: all of them desirable young men, captains and rulers, great lords and renowned, all of them riding upon horses.

24 And they shall come against thee with chariots, wagons, and wheels, and with an assembly of people, which shall set against thee buckler and shield and helmet round about: and I will set judgment before them, and they shall judge thee according to their judgments.

25 And I will set my jealousy against thee, and they shall deal furiously with thee: they shall take away thy nose and thine ears; and thy remnant shall fall by the sword: they shall take thy sons and thy daughters; and thy residue shall be devoured by the fire.

26 They shall also strip thee out of thy clothes, and take away thy fair jewels.

27 Thus will I make thy lewdness to cease from thee, and thy whoredom brought from the land of Egypt: so that thou shalt not lift up thine eyes unto them, nor remember Egypt any more.

28 For thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I will deliver thee into the hand of them whom thou hatest, into the hand of them from whom thy mind is alienated:

29 And they shall deal with thee hatefully, and shall take away all thy labour, and shall leave thee naked and bare: and the nakedness of thy whoredoms shall be discovered, both thy lewdness and thy whoredoms.

30 I will do these things unto thee, because thou hast gone a whoring after the heathen, and because thou art polluted with their idols.

31 Thou hast walked in the way of thy sister; therefore will I give her cup into thine hand.

32 Thus saith the Lord GOD; Thou shalt drink of thy sister's cup deep and large: thou shalt be laughed to scorn and had in derision; it containeth much.

33 Thou shalt be filled with drunkenness and sorrow, with the cup of astonishment and desolation, with the cup of thy sister Samaria.

34 Thou shalt even drink it and suck it out, and thou shalt break the sherds thereof, and pluck off thine own breasts: for I have spoken it, saith the Lord GOD.

35 Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD; Because thou hast forgotten me, and cast me behind thy back, therefore bear thou also thy lewdness and thy whoredoms.

36 The LORD said moreover unto me; Son of man, wilt thou judge Aholah and Aholibah? yea, declare unto them their abominations;

37 That they have committed adultery, and blood is in their hands, and with their idols have they committed adultery, and have also caused their sons, whom they bare unto me, to pass for them through the fire, to devour them.

38 Moreover this they have done unto me: they have defiled my sanctuary in the same day, and have profaned my sabbaths.

39 For when they had slain their children to their idols, then they came the same day into my sanctuary to profane it; and, lo, thus have they done in the midst of mine house.

40 And furthermore, that ye have sent for men to come from far, unto whom a messenger was sent; and, lo, they came: for whom thou didst wash thyself, paintedst thy eyes, and deckedst thyself with ornaments,

41 And satest upon a stately bed, and a table prepared before it, whereupon thou hast set mine incense and mine oil.

42 And a voice of a multitude being at ease was with her: and with the men of the common sort were brought Sabeans from the wilderness, which put bracelets upon their hands, and beautiful crowns upon their heads.

43 Then said I unto her that was old in adulteries, Will they now commit ⇄ whoredoms with her, and she with them?

44 Yet they went in unto her, as they go in unto a woman that playeth the harlot: so went they in unto Aholah and unto Aholibah, the lewd women.

45 And the righteous men, they shall judge them after the manner of adulteresses, and after the manner of women that shed blood; because they are adulteresses, and blood is in their hands.

46 For thus saith the Lord GOD; I will bring up a company upon them, and will give them to be removed and spoiled.

47 And the company shall stone them with stones, and dispatch them with their swords; they shall slay their sons and their daughters, and burn up their houses with fire.

48 Thus will I cause lewdness to cease out of the land, ▮▮ that all women may be taught not to do after your lewdness.

49 And they shall recompense your lewdness upon you, and ye shall bear the sins of your idols: and ▲ ye shall know that I am the Lord GOD.

Marked in the text

- **v2** ◷ two women, the daughters of one mother
- **v3** ⇄ whoredoms *(every occurrence)*
- **v4** ▲ they were mine
- **v4** ◷ Samaria is Aholah, and Jerusalem Aholibah
- **v5** ⇄ doted *(every occurrence)*
- **v9** ▲ I have delivered her into the hand of her lovers
- **v11** ⚠ she was more corrupt in her inordinate love than she
- **v14** ⚠ when she saw men pourtrayed upon the wall
- **v16** ⚠ as soon as she saw them with her eyes
- **v18** ▲ my mind was alienated from her
- **v19** ⚠ calling to remembrance the days of her youth
- **v22** ▲ I will raise up thy lovers against thee
- **v25** ▲ I will set my jealousy against thee
- **v27** ★ Thus will I make thy lewdness to cease from thee
- **v31** ⚠ Thou hast walked in the way of thy sister
- **v31** ⇄ cup *(every occurrence)*
- **v35** ⚠ thou hast forgotten me, and cast me behind thy back
- **v36** ▮▮ declare unto them their abominations
- **v37** ⚠ blood is in their hands
- **v38** ⚠ they have defiled my sanctuary in the same day
- **v39** ◷ in the midst of mine house
- **v48** ▮▮ that all women may be taught not to do after your lewdness
- **v49** ▲ ye shall know that I am the Lord GOD

Marks are drawn on the KJV text. Quotations in the notes are from the NASB95, so their wording may differ from the KJV above.

01 Observation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

KEY VERSE · EZEKIEL 23:4 (KJV)

4 And the names of them were Aholah the elder, and Aholibah her sister: and ▲ they were mine, and they bare sons and daughters. Thus were their names; ◷ Samaria is Aholah, and Jerusalem Aholibah.

Setting

Like chapter 22, this message has no date of its own; it closes the series that began "in the seventh year" (20:1), about 591 B.C., while Zedekiah ruled in Jerusalem. Ezekiel tells an allegory of two sisters — Samaria (the northern kingdom, already destroyed by Assyria in 722 B.C.) and Jerusalem (Judah, still standing). The language is blunt and sexual on purpose. God uses the shame of adultery to show how He feels about His people chasing other gods and other powers.

Structure

- vv1–4 — **two sisters:** "there were two women, the daughters of one mother" (v2). "They played the harlot in their youth" in Egypt (v3). "Their names were Oholah the elder and Oholibah her sister. And they became Mine" (v4). "Samaria is Oholah and Jerusalem is Oholibah" (v4).
- vv5–10 — **Oholah and Assyria:** "Oholah played the harlot while she was Mine; and she lusted after her lovers, after the Assyrians" (v5) — "all of them desirable young men, horsemen riding on horses" (v6). She defiled herself with their idols (v7) and never left the ways of Egypt (v8). So "I gave her into the hand of her lovers" (v9), and they killed her (v10).
- vv11–21 — **Oholibah does worse:** her sister saw it all, "yet she was more corrupt in her lust than she" (v11). First Assyria (v12); then "she saw men portrayed on the wall," images of the Chaldeans (v14), and "When she saw them she lusted after them" and sent messengers to Babylon (v16). Defiled, she turned from them (v17), "then I became disgusted with her, as I had become disgusted with her sister" (v18). "Yet she multiplied her harlotries, remembering the days of her youth" in Egypt (vv19–21).
- vv22–35 — **the lovers turned enemies:** "I will arouse your lovers against you" (v22) — Babylon and her allies from every side (vv23–24). "I will set My jealousy against you" (v25). They will strip her (vv26, 29), and God will end "your harlotry brought from the land of Egypt" (v27). "You have walked in the way of your sister; therefore I will give her cup into your hand" (v31) — the cup of horror and desolation, "the cup of your sister Samaria" (v33). The root: "Because you have forgotten Me and cast Me behind your back" (v35).
- vv36–49 — **the verdict in plain words:** "Will you judge Oholah and Oholibah?" (v36). "They have committed adultery, and blood is on their hands" — idols and child sacrifice (v37). "They have defiled My sanctuary on the same day and have profaned My sabbaths" (v38); after killing their children for idols, "they entered My sanctuary on the same day to profane it" (v39). They dressed up for their lovers and set God's own incense and oil on the table (vv40–44). Righteous men will judge

them as adulteresses (v45); stoning, sword and fire follow (vv46–47). "Thus I will make lewdness cease from the land" (v48), and "you will know that I am the Lord GOD" (v49).

Repeated words

harlot / harlotry / harlotries (vv3, 5, 7, 8, 11, 14, 17, 18, 19, 27, 29, 30, 35, 44); lusted (vv5, 7, 9, 12, 16, 20); lovers (vv5, 9, 22); Egypt / Egyptians (vv3, 8, 19, 21, 27); youth (vv3, 8, 19, 21); disgusted / alienated (vv17, 18, 22, 28); lewdness / lewd (vv21, 27, 29, 35, 44, 48, 49); cup (vv31, 32, 33).

Contrasts

"they became Mine" (v4) ⟷ "she lusted after her lovers" (v5). Lovers ⟷ the same men as attackers (vv9, 22). Oholibah saw her sister's ruin (v11) ⟷ she did worse anyway. Dressed up and painted for lovers (v40) ⟷ stripped and left naked (vv26, 29). Children killed for idols ⟷ the same day in God's sanctuary (v39). Desire through the eyes (vv14, 16) ⟷ disgust afterward (v17).

Chapter theme (my words)

God took Israel as His own, and she went looking for other lovers — first Egypt, then Assyria, then Babylon — trusting armies and idols instead of Him. Jerusalem watched her sister destroyed for it and did worse. The lovers she chased became the men who stripped her. Sin always promises a lover and ends as a tyrant, and the root of it all is forgetting God and throwing Him behind our back.

02 Interpretation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN?

KEY VERSE · EZEKIEL 23:9 (KJV)

9 Wherefore ▲ I have delivered her into the hand of her lovers, into the hand of the Assyrians , upon whom she ⇄ doted.

Why this language? (vv1–4)

This is one of the most graphic chapters in the Bible, and it is meant to be. Guzik calls the language "admittedly coarse" — meant to shock and to show God's disgust, never for entertainment. He warns that its rare use here "should never be used to justify any kind of regular use in the pulpit or even everyday conversation." Like chapter 16, it pictures the covenant as a marriage and idolatry as adultery (Jer 3:6–11; Hos 1–3). Guzik admits it "is not a perfect illustration," since God did not have two wives; the point is two halves of one people, both unfaithful. The names come from *ʾohel*, "tent": Block, in Guzik, gives "Oholah suggesting 'her own tent,' and Oholibah 'my tent in her.'" Samaria set up her own shrines (1 Kgs 12:28–33); Jerusalem had God's own temple in her midst — and was still unfaithful. Their unfaithfulness reached back to Egypt (20:7–8; Josh 24:14).

Oholah and Assyria (vv5–10)

The "lovers" are foreign powers and their gods. Israel's kings paid Assyria for protection — Jehu to Shalmaneser III, Menahem and Hoshea later (2 Kgs 15:19–20; 17:3–4). Wiersbe, in Guzik: "Samaria had no true faith in the living God, so she looked to the Assyrians to help her." Taylor, in Guzik, notes the

pull of "the dashing gallants of the Assyrian cavalry regiments." Guzik says there was nothing spiritual in the attraction — it was "purely on a fleshly, materialistic basis." Then God handed her over to her lovers (v9). Guzik, following Feinberg: "the source of sinful pleasure becomes the source of punishment." Assyria destroyed Samaria in 722 B.C. (2 Kgs 17:5–18).

Oholibah does worse (vv11–21)

Judah had a front-row seat to Samaria's fall and copied it. Ahaz bought Assyria's help and even copied an altar from Damascus (2 Kgs 16:7–16), against Isaiah's warning (Isa 7). Then came Babylon: Hezekiah showed his treasures to Babylonian envoys (2 Kgs 20:12–19), and Judah's later kings bounced between Babylon and Egypt (2 Kgs 24:1, 20; Jer 37:5–7; Ezek 17:15). Trapp, in Guzik, on the men portrayed on the wall: "Here began the mischief" — it started with the eyes. Guzik notes the sexual images are "accurate as a spiritual illustration" and may also reflect actual sexual rites in Babylonian worship. Feinberg, in Guzik, explains the crude picture in v20: "In Egyptian hieroglyphics the horse represents a lustful person" — it stands for Egypt's military power.

The lovers become the enemy (vv22–35)

Block, in Guzik: "Those who had previously come to her to make love, now come from all sides to make war." Pekod, Shoa and Koa were peoples from the east within Babylon's empire. Cutting off nose and ears (v25) was a known punishment among ancient armies. Guzik's point is that these nations never loved Judah; they wanted what they could take. Wright, in Guzik: "Sex without love only too often ends in frustration and hatred." The "cup" is God's wrath (Ps 75:8; Isa 51:17; Jer 25:15–17) — Judah would drink the same cup as Samaria. And v35 names the root: they forgot God and threw Him behind their back (compare 1 Kgs 14:9).

The verdict in plain words (vv36–49)

Now God drops the picture and names the real sins: idolatry, bloodshed, and children "passed through the fire" to Molech (2 Kgs 21:6; Jer 7:31) — and then, the same day, worship at the temple. Feinberg, in Guzik, stresses the audacity of it. They set God's own incense and oil before their idols (v41). Poole, in Guzik: "Like a decayed harlot, madest up thy defects with paint." The sentence for adultery and murder under the Law — stoning and fire — will fall through Babylon's siege (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22). The goal is that lewdness will cease and they will "know that I am the Lord GOD" (v49).

Spiritual adultery today

The New Testament keeps the picture: friendship with the world is adultery against God (Jas 4:4), and the church is a bride being kept pure for Christ (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:25–27). Most read this chapter first as history — Israel and Judah's alliances and idols — and then as a warning to every believer whose heart wanders.

Word study (Hebrew)

- **Oholah — *ʾOholah* (H170):** "her tent" — Samaria.
- **Oholibah — *ʾOholibah* (H172):** "my tent is in her" — Jerusalem.
- **tent — *ʾohel* (H168):** a tent, dwelling; used of the tabernacle.
- **played the harlot — *zanah* (H2181):** to commit fornication; to be unfaithful to God.
- **harlotries — *taznuth* (H8457):** acts of prostitution, unfaithfulness.

- **lusted — *ʿagab* (H5689):** to have inordinate desire, to dote on.
- **lovers — *ʾahab* (H157):** to love; as a participle, lovers.
- **disgusted / alienated — *yaqaʿ* (H3363):** to be torn away, wrenched apart.
- **lewdness — *zimmah* (H2154):** a wicked plan, shameful conduct.
- **jealousy — *qinʾah* (H7068):** zeal, jealousy — God's burning claim on what is His.
- **cup — *kos* (H3563):** a cup; often the cup of judgment.
- **forgotten — *shakach* (H7911):** to forget, ignore.
- **sanctuary — *miqdash* (H4720):** the holy place, God's temple.
- **defiled — *tameʾ* (H2930):** to be or make unclean.

Cross-references

Exod 20:3–5; Exod 34:14–16; Lev 20:10; Josh 24:14; 1 Kgs 12:28–33; 2 Kgs 16:7–16; 2 Kgs 17:5–18; 2 Kgs 20:12–19; 2 Kgs 21:6; Ps 75:8; Isa 7:1–9; Isa 30:1–3; Isa 51:17; Jer 3:6–11; Jer 25:15–17; Ezek 16:1–63; Hos 2:5–7; Matt 5:28; 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:25–27; Jas 4:4; 1 John 2:15–17.

03 Application

HOW DOES IT CHANGE ME?

KEY VERSE · EZEKIEL 23:27 (KJV)

27 ★ Thus will I make thy lewdness to cease from thee, and thy whoredom brought from the land of Egypt: so that thou shalt not lift up thine eyes unto them, nor remember Egypt any more.

Command to obey — "you will know that I am the Lord GOD."

The whole chapter aims at one thing: that God's people would know Him as their only Lord (v49). I'm called to be faithful to Him alone — no other lovers, no other savior. For me that means one heart, one Master, and a daily turning back to Him before anything else gets my trust.

Sin to confess — forgetting God and throwing Him behind my back

Verse 35 is the root of everything in this chapter. I confess the times I've trusted money, people, my own plans or my own strength instead of the Lord — and the times I've treated Him as something to put behind me while I did what I wanted.

Warning to heed — it starts with the eyes

"When she saw them she lusted after them" (v16). Trapp was right: "Here began the mischief." The men I disciple know this battle — pornography, the old crowd, the bottle on the shelf. What we look at, we start to want, and what we want, we send messengers to. Matt 5:28 is not overkill; it is mercy. The lovers we chase will turn on us (v22). Addiction always promises love and ends as a master.

Promise to trust — God's jealousy is for me

"I will set My jealousy against you" (v25) sounds only like a threat, but God's jealousy means He will not share me with anything that is destroying me. He is a jealous God because He is a faithful Husband (Exod 34:14). For the man who has wandered far, that same jealous love is what brings him home — Christ is keeping a bride, not discarding one (Eph 5:25–27).

Example to follow — learn from your sister

Oholibah watched her sister fall and did worse (v11). I've watched men fall — friends, leaders, men in the program. God means their ruin as a warning (1 Cor 10:11–12). I want to learn from another man's cup without having to drink it myself.

Worship

The Lord GOD is holy and jealous for His people. He sees what we do in the dark and what we bring into His house in the daylight. He is faithful when we are faithless, and His goal even in judgment is that we would know Him.

Prayer

Lord GOD, forgive me for forgetting You and putting You behind my back. Guard my eyes and my heart from other lovers. Break the pull of the things that promise love and end in chains — for me and for the men I walk with. Keep me faithful to You alone, and make me a man who knows that You are the Lord. Amen.