

Judah and Jerusalem, the Harlot Sisters

Ezekiel 23

Ezekiel 23:1-22 – *“The word of the Lord came again to me, saying: ²“Son of man, there were two women, the daughters of one mother. ³They committed harlotry in Egypt, they committed harlotry in their youth; their breasts were there embraced, their virgin bosom was there pressed. ⁴Their names: Oholah the elder and Oholibah her sister; they were Mine, and they bore sons and daughters. As for their names, Samaria is Oholah, and Jerusalem is Oholibah. ⁵“Oholah played the harlot even though she was Mine; and she lusted for her lovers, the neighboring Assyrians, ⁶ who were clothed in purple, captains and rulers, all of them desirable young men, horsemen riding on horses. ⁷ Thus she committed her harlotry with them, all of them choice men of Assyria; and with all for whom she lusted, with all their idols, she defiled herself. ⁸ She has never given up her harlotry brought from Egypt, for in her youth they had lain with her, pressed her virgin bosom, and poured out their immorality upon her. ⁹“Therefore I have delivered her into the hand of her lovers, into the hand of the Assyrians, for whom she lusted. ¹⁰ They uncovered her nakedness, took away her sons and daughters, and slew her with the sword; she became a byword among women, for they had executed judgment on her. ¹¹“Now although her sister Oholibah saw this, she became more corrupt in her lust than she, and in her harlotry more corrupt than her sister’s harlotry. ¹²“She lusted for the neighboring Assyrians, captains and rulers, clothed most gorgeously, horsemen riding on horses, all of them desirable young men. ¹³ Then I saw that she was defiled; both took the same way. ¹⁴ But she increased her harlotry; she looked at men portrayed on the wall, images of Chaldeans portrayed in vermilion, ¹⁵ girded with belts around their waists, flowing turbans on their heads. All of them looking like captains in the manner of the Babylonians of Chaldea, the land of their nativity. ¹⁶ As soon as her eyes saw them, she lusted for them and sent messengers to them in Chaldea. ¹⁷“Then the Babylonians came to her, into the bed of love, and they defiled her with their immorality. So she was defiled by them, and alienated herself from them. ¹⁸ She revealed her harlotry and uncovered her nakedness. Then I alienated Myself from her as I had alienated Myself from her sister. ¹⁹“Yet she multiplied her harlotry in calling to remembrance the days of her youth when she had played the harlot in the land of Egypt. ²⁰ For she lusted for her paramours, whose flesh is like the flesh of donkeys, and whose issue is like the issue of horses. ²¹ Thus you called to remembrance the lewdness of your youth, when the Egyptians pressed your bosom because of your youthful breasts.”*

Background Notes

Ezekiel 22 emphasized that God’s coming judgment of Jerusalem and Judah was well deserved and necessary, because every class of society was committing sin, and every category of sin was being committed.

In chapter 23 these facts were vividly portrayed in a parable of two sisters. The parable used sexual imagery and extremely graphic language. In the parable, one sister was named Oholah, and she represented the northern kingdom of

Israel, or Samaria. The other sister was named Oholibah, and she represented Jerusalem and the southern kingdom of Judah. In the parable, both sisters were daughters of one mother (Israel), who was “married” to the Lord. They had turned to spiritual prostitution - idolatry - and they had turned away from the Lord and made alliances with the foreign nations.

Doctrinal Points

1. The parable of the two sisters was scathing.

God didn't use the vivid sexual imagery and graphic language in this chapter to make the Bible more interesting or exciting. No. There were at least two reasons why God used this extreme imagery and language to communicate to His people.

a. Humanly speaking, there is no better illustration of love and fellowship and close relationship than marriage and family life. Thus, there is no sadder situation than a broken marriage and severed love relationship to illustrate heartache and grief.

b. The pagan religions in which Israel and Judah were involved all included (to one degree or another) literal sexual perversion and prostitution in their pagan rituals and rites.

In these verses God gave a scathing denunciation of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah for their idolatry, and for turning away from the Lord to foreign nations. They turned to the attractions and promises and gods of the foreign nations, just as a prostitute turns in lust to her abusive lovers. Notice that Israel's idolatry started in Egypt (v3, 8, 19, 21&27). Worship of the golden calf in the wilderness was not the beginning of spiritual idolatry and prostitution in the nation of Israel.

When Ezekiel gave this parable, “Oholah” (Samaria and the northern kingdom of Israel) had already reaped what she had sown (v9-10). The northern kingdom fell to the Assyrian Empire in 722 BC. The cruel Assyrians killed the people, or took them away into captivity, or forced them into intermarriage. Thus the ten tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel were lost to secular history, and “Samaria” became a byword.

Instead of taking all this as a warning, “Oholibah” (Jerusalem and the southern kingdom of Judah) became even more corrupt in spiritual prostitution than the northern kingdom had been. Jerusalem made unholy alliances with Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt (v11), and God said that He was as disgusted with Jerusalem as He was with Samaria (v18).

It's a terrible indictment, when God says that He is disgusted with a nation's behavior. What would God's comment be about the behavior of our own nation? In order to be true to His own character God must judge a nation that is involved in disgusting behavior.

2. The punishment of the two sisters was sure.

Ezekiel 23:22-49 - *“Therefore, Oholibah, thus says the Lord God:*

‘Behold, I will stir up your lovers against you, from whom you have alienated yourself, and I will bring them against you from every side: ²³ The Babylonians, all the Chaldeans, Pekod, Shoa, Koa, all the Assyrians with them, all of them desirable young men, governors and rulers, captains and men of renown, all of them riding on horses.

²⁴ And they shall come against you with chariots, wagons, and war-horses, with a horde of people. They shall array against you buckler, shield, and helmet all around. ‘I will delegate judgment to them, and they shall judge you according to their judgments.

²⁵ I will set My jealousy against you, and they shall deal furiously with you; they shall remove your nose and your ears, and your remnant shall fall by the sword. They shall take your sons and your daughters, and your remnant shall be devoured by fire. ²⁶ They shall also strip you of your clothes and take away your beautiful jewelry. ²⁷ ‘Thus I will make you cease your lewdness and your harlotry brought from the land of Egypt so that you will not lift your eyes to them, nor remember Egypt anymore.’

²⁸ “For thus says the Lord God: ‘Surely I will deliver you into the hand of those you hate, into the hand of those from whom you alienated yourself. ²⁹ They will deal hatefully with you, take away all you have worked for, and leave you naked and bare. The nakedness of your harlotry shall be uncovered, both your lewdness and your harlotry. ³⁰ I will do these things to you because you have gone as a harlot after the Gentiles, because you have become defiled by their idols. ³¹ You have walked in the way of your sister; therefore I will put her cup in your hand.’

³² “Thus says the Lord God: ‘You shall drink of your sister’s cup, the deep and wide one.

You shall be laughed to scorn and held in derision. It contains much. ³³ You will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow, the cup of horror and desolation, the cup of your sister Samaria. ³⁴ You shall drink and drain it, you shall break its shards, and tear at your own breasts. For I have spoken,’ says the Lord God.

³⁵ “Therefore thus says the Lord God: ‘Because you have forgotten Me and cast Me behind your back, therefore you shall bear the penalty of your lewdness and your harlotry.’”

³⁶ The Lord also said to me: “Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Then declare to them their abominations. ³⁷ For they have committed adultery, and blood is on their hands. They have committed adultery with their idols, and even sacrificed their sons whom they bore to Me, passing them through the fire, to devour them. ³⁸ Moreover they have done this to Me: They have defiled My sanctuary on the same day and profaned My Sabbaths. ³⁹ For after they had slain their children for their idols, on the same day they came into My sanctuary to profane it; and thus they have done in the midst of My house.

⁴⁰ “Furthermore you sent for men to come from afar, to whom a messenger was sent; and there they came. And you washed yourself for them, painted your eyes, and adorned yourself with ornaments. ⁴¹ You sat on a stately couch, with a table prepared before it, on which you had set My incense and My oil. ⁴² The sound of a carefree multitude was with her, and Sabeans were brought from the wilderness with men of the common sort, who put bracelets on their wrists and beautiful crowns on their heads. ⁴³ Then I said concerning her who had grown old in adulteries, ‘Will they commit harlotry with her now, and she with them?’ ⁴⁴ Yet they went in to her, as men go in to a woman who plays the harlot; thus they went in to Oholah and Oholibah, the lewd women. ⁴⁵ But righteous men will judge them after the manner of adulteresses, and after the manner of women who shed blood, because they are adulteresses, and blood is on their hands.

⁴⁶ “For thus says the Lord God: ‘Bring up an assembly against them, give them up to trouble and plunder. ⁴⁷ The assembly shall stone them with stones and execute them with their swords; they shall slay their sons and their daughters, and burn their houses with fire. ⁴⁸ Thus I will cause lewdness to cease from the land, that all women may be taught not to practice your lewdness. ⁴⁹ They shall repay you for your lewdness, and you shall pay for your idolatrous sins. Then you shall know that I am the Lord God.’”

As God punished Oholah and the northern kingdom of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians, so God was about to punish Oholibah and the kingdom of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. The Babylonian armies were large and organized, and they included the military might of many nations to the east (v24). In ancient Mesopotamia, cutting off the nose and/or ears (v25) were the punishments for a woman who was guilty of sexual unfaithfulness. Thus she would no longer be able to use the beauty of her face or adornments of earrings and nose rings to attract her lovers. The harlot would be stripped and robbed, abused and mocked, until she despised herself (v27-34). So it would be done to Jerusalem and Judah.

Both sisters had blood on their hands (v37-44). In their idolatry they stooped to the lowest level - sacrificing their children to the foreign pagan gods! How heartless and cruel and sinful - slaughtering your own child in a pagan sacrifice! And then, on the same day, they went into the Temple of the Lord and profaned it (v39).

Jerusalem and Judah were committing spiritual fornication with any and all of the surrounding pagan religions, including all of their base practices. Judah was worn out by her spiritual prostitution (v43).

The judgments pronounced by the righteous men (the prophets), were about to come true. The Babylonians would plunder them and kill their sons and daughters and burn their houses (v45-47). Their spiritual and literal adultery and prostitution would come to an end. All this prophesied judgment did take place, of course, because the punishment of the two sisters was sure.

Practical Application

Let God’s word determine your boundaries.

You may think that there’s not much practical application in this chapter - but believe it or not, this chapter is very practical! I’ve been involved with teaching college students over the years, and the question invariably comes up as to exactly what’s “off limits” sexually before marriage. Obviously intercourse is, but what about kissing - and everything else in between? What’s the biblical answer here? What are the biblical boundaries?

Well, it’s quite obvious from this chapter that sexual touching and fondling outside of marriage are included in what God views as fornication. It’s hard to miss that point in this chapter! Read verses 3, 8, and 21 again if there is any question in your mind.

So - let God’s Word determine your boundaries!