

# the Catholic Biblical Quarterly

Pornography or Theology? The Legal  
Background, Psychological Realism,  
and Theological Import of Ezekiel 16

---

AARON KOLLER  
Yeshiva University  
New York, NY 10033

*Reprinted from*

The Catholic Biblical Quarterly

Vol. 79, No. 3

402-421

July 2017

ISSN: 0008-7912

# Pornography or Theology? The Legal Background, Psychological Realism, and Theological Import of Ezekiel 16

---

AARON KOLLER

Yeshiva University

New York, NY 10033

*Abstract:* The description of the relationship between Yhwh and Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16 has troubled readers, ancient and modern. Here I argue that the problems are actually more severe than has been realized in recent scholarship. Against many readings, there is no “adoption” in this text, and Yhwh does nothing for Jerusalem’s benefit at all; instead, Yhwh is depicted as saving Baby Jerusalem for his own sexual and emotional benefit. The revulsion that readers feel is Ezekiel’s intention, and sensitivity to the rhetoric of the chapter shows that the (male) Israelite audience was meant to identify emotionally with the victim, Jerusalem, *against* Yhwh. The crucial interpretive question is why Ezekiel would describe the deity thus. I suggest that this is one part of Ezekiel’s radical exilic theology, in which the obligations Israel has toward Yhwh are due not to love and mutual admiration but to an emotionless but overwhelming debt.

*Keywords:* Ezekiel • theology • adoption • gender • feminist criticism

---

IN MUCH RECENT WORK, Ezekiel 16 and 23, along with certain other texts from the latter prophets, have been grouped together on the basis of their common depictions of sexuality, violence, and violent sexuality in describing the manner in which God will punish Jerusalem and other people. These texts have been labeled

An earlier version of this article was delivered at the SBL International Meeting in Tartu, Estonia, in July 2010. I am indebted to a number of people at the conference, especially Andrew Mein, for their comments and questions. Naomi Graetz, who was present at the lecture, later read an early draft the paper and commented on it in detail. My brother, Dr. Judah Koller, read a more developed version and helped me think through some of the issues regarding the psychological literature discussed below in section V, and later Shalom Holtz and Baruch Schwartz provided numerous helpful suggestions, all of which improved the paper. I am indebted to all for their help but hold none of them responsible for the remaining shortcomings.

“pornography” or “pornoprophetics,”<sup>1</sup> although these terms are presumably meant to be provocative rather than precise. “Pornography” as used in these contexts differs from its use in popular discourse or contemporary legal writings.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I concentrate on Ezekiel 16, one of the most frightening texts regarding God and God’s people in the Hebrew Bible. My contention is that Ezekiel purposely tells a terrible story and depicts God in a terrible light to further his theological agenda. The response on the part of the audience is not supposed to be to sympathize with the divine but to recoil from it. The prophet has constructed a narrative in which we cannot help but take the side of Jerusalem against the monstrous deity; the purpose of this narrative is to argue that, despite these appropriate sympathies, Jerusalem is obligated to be loyal to God, no matter how degrading the relationship becomes.

## I. The Problem

After introducing the character of Jerusalem and explaining that she was abandoned as an infant by her parents, an Amorite father and Hittite mother,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The use goes back to T. Drorah Setel, “Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 86-95. For the meaning of the word “pornoprophetics,” see, e.g., Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and ‘Sexuality’ in the Hebrew Bible* (BIS 26; Leiden: Brill, 1997) 158, 160, who explains why these texts are pornographic: “Pornography is the representation of sexual acts which arouses sexual excitement. . . . Pornography is not simply the representation of sexual fantasy but that of *violent* sexual fantasy.” For a longer discussion, see S. Tamar Kamionkowski, *Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos: A Study on the Book of Ezekiel* (JSOTSup 368; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003) 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> For an attempt at a definition, see Caroline West, who, after an extensive discussion with many references, offers the following: “sexually explicit material designed to produce sexual arousal in consumers that is bad in a certain way” (“Pornography and Censorship,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pornography-censorship>). Not differently, Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992) 108: “it always goes *too far*.” For a discussion of how the law can define pornography despite Justice Stewart’s famous avoidance of doing so, see John Copeland Nagle, “Pornography as Pollution,” *Notre Dame Law School Legal Studies Research Paper 10-01*, 5-9, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1553748>. For cultural studies, see esp. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (2nd ed.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), and the volume edited by Williams, *Porn Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). For other critical comments on the use of the term “pornography” in the context of biblical studies, and of these texts in particular, see Robert P. Carroll, “Desire under the Terebinths: On Pornographic Representation in the Prophets—A Response,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Feminist Commentaries on the Bible 8; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995) 275-307, and Tracy Lemos, “The Emasculation of Exile: Hypermasculinity and Feminization in the Book of Ezekiel,” in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts* (ed. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ritzel Ames, and Jacob L. Wright; AIL 10; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011) 377-93, here 379.

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of the purpose of this fictive genealogy and how medieval Jewish exegetes

Ezekiel—speaking in the name of Yhwh—reports that Jerusalem was left uncared for not only by her parents but by everyone else.<sup>4</sup> No one cut her umbilical cord, washed her, rubbed her with salt, or swaddled her.<sup>5</sup> Then Yhwh passed by her (ואעבר עליך, “I passed by you”) and saw Baby Jerusalem wallowing in her blood. He said, “Live,” while she was covered with blood (I will return to this below), and indeed, she survived and continued to develop until reaching maturity.

During the period of Yhwh’s absence from the story, the narrator reports that time passed and the girl reached sexual maturity (Ezek 16:7: ותגדלי ותבאי בעדי, “you grew up and reached puberty: breasts were upright and your hair was grown”), though she was still naked (ואת ערם ועריה), “you being naked and bare”). Yhwh then reappears, and, speaking in the first person, tells that he passed by again (ואעבר עליך, “I passed by you”), and he, too, saw that Jerusalem had reached sexual maturity (v. 8: והנה עתך עת דדים, “and behold, your age was a sexual age”). At that point Yhwh enters into a legal marriage relationship, and apparently a sexual relationship as well, with Jerusalem: (ואפרש כנפי עליך ואכסה ערותך ואשבע לך ואבוא בברית אתך . . . ותהיי־לי) “I spread my cloak over you; I covered your nakedness. I swore to you and came into a covenant with you . . . and you became mine”). Although the text is circumspect in not explicitly mentioning any sexual activity between God and Jerusalem, that there is a sexual relationship is clear from the later mention of the couple’s children in v. 20.<sup>6</sup> Yhwh then begins to lavish gifts of all sorts on Jerusalem.

understood it, see Dalit Rom-Shiloni, “Jerusalem and Israel, Synonyms or Antonyms? Jewish Exegesis of Ezekiel’s Prophecies against Jerusalem,” in *After Ezekiel: Essays on the Reception of a Difficult Prophet* (ed. Andrew Mein and Paul M. Joyce; LHBOTS 535; New York: T&T Clark 2011) 99-103.

<sup>4</sup> For a study of the chilling reality behind the metaphor of the abandonment of an unwanted baby girl, see Beth Albert Nakhai, “Female Infanticide in Iron II Israel and Judah,” in *Sacred History, Sacred Literature: Essays on Ancient Israel, the Bible, and Religion in Honor of R. E. Friedman on His Sixtieth Birthday* (ed. Shawna Dolansky; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008) 257-72. Hermann Gunkel tried to connect the narrative in Ezekiel 16 to the folkloric motif of the abandoned baby who grows to greatness (*The Folktale in the Old Testament* [trans. Michael D. Rutter; *Historic Texts and Interpreters in Biblical Scholarship* 6; Sheffield: Almond, 1987; German original, 1921] 128-31), but the differences are significant. If there is a connection, it is a complicated one; see the critique in Kamionkowski, *Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos*, 97-98 with n. 27. Jason Gile argues that Ezekiel borrows the motif of the foundling from Deut 32:10 (“Ezekiel 16 and the Song of Moses: A Prophetic Transformation?” *JBL* 130 [2011] 87-108, here 89-91, 97). There are no verbal connections, however, and I am inclined to see this as a coincidence of motifs rather than a literary dependence.

<sup>5</sup> For discussion of these practices, see Tarja S. Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible: Fertility and Impurity* (Studies in Biblical Literature 88; New York: P. Lang, 2006) 95; I owe this reference to Baruch Schwartz.

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough discussion of the ambiguities here, see Kamionkowski, *Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos*, 104-10. In my view, although the chapter as a whole is unambiguous (as mentioned above), v. 6 in particular does not say anything explicit, despite introducing the passage with “and

The bride immediately takes her newfound possessions and newfound confidence, and finds as many sex partners as she can, including the legendarily virile Egyptians, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians, but she is not yet satisfied. She is the anti-prostitute, paying others for sex. Her husband then undertakes to punish her, handing her over to her many lovers, who strip her naked, stone her, and cut her up with their swords.<sup>7</sup>

It is the imagery of the punishment that has most raised the indignation of contemporary scholars, who have analyzed the metaphor and searched for its sources and inspirations. Rachel Magdalene, for example, suggests that the images of rape in wartime (in Ezekiel as well as in other prophets) are drawn from ancient Near Eastern treaty curses.<sup>8</sup> Daniel Smith-Christopher argues strongly that Ezekiel's own traumatic experiences in war are to be seen as the most immediate and powerful source of his images.<sup>9</sup> It would be reductionist, however, to claim that, having identified the *sources* of Ezekiel's images, we have sufficiently explained his *use*

lo, you had reached the age of sexuality." I am not convinced that פֶּרֶשׁ כִּנְיָ means sex, contra S. Tamar Kamionkowski, "Gender Ambiguity and Subversive Metaphor in Ezekiel 16" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 2000) 137-50. See further Paul A. Kruger, "The Hem of the Garment in Marriage: The Meaning of the Symbolic Gesture in Ruth 3.9 and Ezek. 16.8," *JNSL* 12 (1984) 79-86. The use of the verb לְבֹרָא in the expression וְאִבְרָא בְּבֵרִית אֶתְךָ, however, is too deliciously tantalizing not to be intentional (and may even have something to do with the "wrong" form אֶתְךָ in place of אֶתְּךָ). This is about as close as a biblical writer can get to describing the sexuality of the male deity without crossing the line. From Baruch Schwartz I learned that Yochanan Muffs pointed to Jer 31:26 as a text that also challenged this line: וְזָרַעְתִּי אֶת בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת בֵּית יְהוּדָה, "I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with seed."

<sup>7</sup> On the punishments, see esp. Peggy L. Day, "Adulterous Jerusalem's Imagined Demise: Death of a Metaphor in Ezekiel XVI," *VT* 50 (2000) 285-309; eadem, "The Bitch Had It Coming to Her: Rhetoric and Interpretation in Ezekiel 16," *BibInt* 8 (2000) 231-54; and Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, "Ezekiel in Abu Ghraib," in *Ezekiel's Hierarchical World: Wrestling with Tiered Reality* (ed. Stephen L. Cook and Corrine L. Patton; SBLSymS 31; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004) 141-57. John Huehnergard argued, based on a text from Emar, that in its basic form the stripping naked of an adulteress was not meant to be shaming, but legal and symbolic: "the individual . . . is made to renounce, symbolically, any claim to the estate" (Huehnergard, "Biblical Notes on Some New Akkadian Texts from Emar (Syria)," *CBQ* 47 [1985] 428-34, here 432; see also Brian Neil Peterson, *Ezekiel in Context: Ezekiel's Message Understood in Its Historical Setting of Covenant Curses and Ancient Near Eastern Mythological Motifs* [Princeton Theological Monographs; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012] 217). It is not clear if the prophets can be used as evidence, though, as at a minimum they have thoroughly reinterpreted this action as deeply humiliating. See Brad E. Kelle, "Wartime Rhetoric: Prophetic Metaphorization of Cities as Female," in *Writing and Reading War: Rhetoric, Gender, and Ethics in Biblical and Modern Contexts* (ed. Brad E. Kelle and Frank Ritche Ames; SBLSymS 42; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008) 106. I am indebted to Shalom Holtz for the reference to Huehnergard's article.

<sup>8</sup> F. Rachel Magdalene, "Ancient Near Eastern Treaty-Curses and the Ultimate Texts of Terror: A Study of the Language of Divine Sexual Abuse in the Prophetic Corpus," in Brenner, *Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, 347-48.

<sup>9</sup> Smith-Christopher, "Ezekiel in Abu Ghraib."

of them. Even if these theories are correct, they only allow us to reframe the question; the real question must be, To what use does Ezekiel put this imagery in his text?

There are two specific issues that I will address in this: the deployment of the gendered images throughout the text, and the contours of Yhwh's relationship with the baby Jerusalem. I will argue that, in contrast to what is often asserted, Jerusalem is never adopted by the deity and that, in fact, the relationship is depicted as one that approaches abuse. On the other hand, I will argue that this is not a problem for modern readers only but that the prophet intended to shock his primarily male audience by leading them to *identify* with the abused female in the relationship. Finally, the theological implications of these claims will be explored and situated in the broader context of Ezekiel's thought and text.

## II. Whose Problem Is This?

The deeply troubling images in this chapter have provoked impassioned and thoughtful critiques and evaluations by a generation of feminist scholars, and these scholars have done well to identify the objectionable imagery and metaphors used by Ezekiel in this passage. Female sexuality is a problem to be controlled by the many men in the story, primarily the protector/husband but also the numerous lovers. The violence against the woman, out of any legal framework, is vindictive and shockingly violent. Further, the behavior of the husband seems to be inexcusably cruel, even sadistic, which makes the prophet's espousal of his perspective as the legally normative one very disturbing.

These criticisms are quite accurate—and quite damning. The failing of this body of scholarship, however, is that it does not go far enough in interrogating the text. Much of the recent relevant literature has portrayed the offending imagery as a problem for *us* rather than for Ezekiel and his original audience, as if they would have seen nothing objectionable about public humiliation and sexualization.<sup>10</sup> The assumption, sometimes made explicit, has apparently been that males will automatically sympathize with the male in the story, and thus that the narrative spun by Ezekiel is glorifying Yhwh's behavior and castigating everything done by female Jerusalem.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Magdalene, "Ancient Near Eastern Treaty-Curses," 347: "In spite of our modern disdain for such texts, the images contained within these texts were not only acceptable to the men of ancient Israel, they meaningfully conveyed the message to return to the fold of the Israelite covenantal relationship with God." (Compare, however, the quotation below at n. 41.) This also seems to be the implication of casting it as a hermeneutical problem, in that we have to grapple with these difficult texts or reject them (cf. Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, "Ezekiel's Justifications of God: Teaching Troubling Texts," *JSOT* 55 [1992] 97-117). This approach appears to assume that the problem is caused by the passage of time but that there was no problem within Ezekiel's own time and setting.

<sup>11</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*

In turn, this has led other scholars who are less inclined to pursue feminist agendas in philological scholarship to marginalize the entire body of feminist literature on the chapter. Moshe Greenberg, for example, accepts these scholars' own claim that their work is relevant to contemporary issues rather than to Ezekiel's original context. Greenberg therefore writes that feminist criticism "differs fundamentally from the (quixotic?) historical-philological search for the primary, context-bound sense of Scripture that is the project of this commentary." He concludes that, for this reason, he will not be interacting with this body of scholarship at all in his commentary.<sup>12</sup> In my view, this is a great loss for readers of the Bible. The interaction of historical-philological work with engaged political readings is what makes the Bible both grounded in its history and relevant for the present.

If the problems with Ezekiel are contemporary problems—namely, how can we live with this text, as modern people struggling with a disturbing ancient text?—then a philologically oriented scholar indeed has no need to deal with these issues. My argument here, on the other hand, is that the problem is not only a contemporary one; ancient readers, too, would have been disturbed by the text, because the text is meant to be disturbing.

### III. Yhwh's Character in the Story

Before we can address these issues in more detail, we must be specific about the problematic depictions in the text. Many of the recent studies referred to above have concentrated on the central part of the chapter, in which the cuckolded Yhwh punishes Jerusalem, who has cheated on him with many other lovers.<sup>13</sup> But the difficulties begin (and may be sharpest) in the beginning of the chapter, in particular vv. 3-7. Verses 3-5 describe the status of the girl Jerusalem after birth—

(JSOTSup 215; *Gender, Culture, Theory 3*; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 103; Kamionkowski, *Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos*, 19-20. Peggy L. Day argues that "the depiction of [God]'s actions in vv. 3-14, in terms of the cultural norms of those whom the text portrays as the intended (male) audience, is an extremely positive description," and that "the now cuckolded husband functions as a powerful tool for further solidifying a united male point of view, as it provides a morally unambiguous referent that transcends potentially divisive categories such as age and social class" ("Bitch Had It Coming," 234 n. 10, 235). With this I strongly disagree, as will become clear in the following. For a more nuanced claim, namely, that readers would be ambivalent about the character of God in the text, see Carol J. Dempsey, "The 'Whore' of Ezekiel 16: The Impact and Ramifications of Gender-Specific Metaphors in Light of Biblical Law and Divine Judgment," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky; JSOTSup 262; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 57-78, here 64-66.

<sup>12</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 22A; New York: Doubleday, 1997) 494. His views are seconded by Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007) 367.

<sup>13</sup> See the references in nn. 6-7 above.

abandoned and uncared for, she is barely alive, alone in a field. In vv. 6-7, Yhwh makes his first appearance:<sup>14</sup>

ואעבר עליך ואראך מתבוססת בדמִיךְ ואמר לך בדמִיךְ חַיִּי ואמר לך בדמִיךְ חַיִּי. רבבה כצמח  
השדה נתתיך ותרבי ותגדלי ותבאי בעדי עדיים שדים נכנו ושערך צמח ואת ערם ועריה.

I passed by you, and saw you wallowing in your blood. I said to you, while you were in your bloods: “Live”; I said to you, while you were in your bloods: “Live.”<sup>15</sup> I made you grown like a wild plant,<sup>16</sup> and you grew and got big, and reached puberty: your breasts were upright and your hair was grown, though you were still naked and bare.

Then in v. 8, Yhwh returns:

ואעבר עליך ואראך והנה עתך עת דדים ואפרש כנפי עליך ואכסה ערותך ואשבע לך ואבוא  
בברית אתך – נאם אדני יהוה – ותהי לי.

I passed by you and saw you, and saw that your age was a sexual age. I spread my cloak over you and covered your nakedness, and I swore to you and entered into a covenant with you—says the Lord God—and you became mine.

What was the status of the girl between these two divine appearances? Her survival was apparently assured by the magical pronouncement of the deity. Some

<sup>14</sup> In my retelling here, I am making no effort to separate the *mashal* (metaphorical narrative) from the *nimshal* (referent). Ezekiel himself blurs the lines in this chapter (see vv. 1-3), and it does not appear that there is meant to be any suspense regarding the “true” identities of the characters he is describing.

<sup>15</sup> The traditional Jewish interpretation of this line, reflected in the cantillation signs, the Midrash, the Targum, the medieval commentators, and modern translations and commentaries such as those of Greenberg (as well as Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel* [2 vols.; NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997–98] 1:478–79, 491), takes “in your bloods” to be part of the quotation, thus, “I said to you: ‘Live in your bloods.’” Baruch Schwartz pointed out that an alternative, at least as old as Jerome’s Vulgate, takes “in your bloods” to be modifying ואמר rather than חַיִּי. Thus, the *KJV* reads, “And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee [when thou wast] in thy blood, Live; yea, I said unto thee [when thou wast] in thy blood, Live.” Jerome himself seems to compromise, writing, *et dixi tibi cum esses in sanguine tuo vive dixi inquam tibi in sanguine tuo vive*, “I said to you while you were in your blood, ‘live’; I said to you, ‘live in your blood.’” The *KJV*’s understanding is reflected in a number of the modern (Christian) translations as well; see, e.g., Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel* (trans. Ronald E. Clements; 2 vols.; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979–83) 1:323. David Berger pointed out to me that the understanding of this verse was the subject of Jewish–Christian polemics in the Middle Ages; see Berger, *The Jewish–Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizṣaḥon Vetus, with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Judaica: Texts and Translations 4; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979) 49 (in the Hebrew section). In my view, the *KJV*’s rendering is contextually the less problematic one, since there is then no need to explain the connection between the bloods and the “living.”

<sup>16</sup> For notes on the translation of this phrase, see Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 22; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983) 276; and Block, *Book of Ezekiel*, 1:478.

commentators see Yhwh as going far beyond merely ensuring her survival and as actually nurturing the girl.<sup>17</sup> Walther Zimmerli waxes poetic, comparing Yhwh's behavior here to the actions of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 and contrasting it with that of the priest and Levite there.<sup>18</sup> Harold Fisch goes so far as to call this text a "romantic tale of the foundling girl who becomes the beautiful bride of her foster father."<sup>19</sup>

From a legal perspective, the most detailed claim for Yhwh's beneficence has come from Meir Malul, who argued that Yhwh had in fact legally adopted Baby Jerusalem. Malul compares the appearance of the word בְּדָמֶיךָ ("in your blood") in v. 7 to the Akkadian phrase *ina mēšu u dāmēšu* in a number of texts describing adoptions; there the phrase indicates that the adopted child was never cared for prior to the adoption and thus precludes any future challenges to the adoption. Thus "the declaration בְּדָמֶיךָ חַי can be interpreted as a formal declaration of adoption."<sup>20</sup> Further, Malul points to adoption texts in which the verb "to live" is given as a purpose clause of the adoption and compares this to the use of חַי. For example, in a Neo-Assyrian document from Nippur, a father offers his daughter to a certain man as follows: *PN šahirta 'a abu[k]ma bulliṣma lū šahirtaka šī*, "Take PN my daughter and 'keep her alive' and may she be your daughter." Malul comments:

It is quite possible then that the declaration בְּדָמֶיךָ חַי reflects a formal adoption formula used specifically in the case of foundlings, who were first saved from an emergency situation and then adopted. If the foregoing analysis is correct and the assumption of adoption is valid, then one cannot accept the view expressed by some scholars that the passer-by had left the baby girl in the field after passing over her the first time and saving her. . . . It must then be concluded that the passer-by not only saved the baby the first time he passed over it, but also took it into his possession and raised it as his daughter.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See the references in Mary Shields, "Multiple Exposures: Body Rhetoric and Gender Characterization in Ezekiel 16," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14 (1998) 8 with n. 14. Note in particular Block, *Book of Ezekiel*, 1:469: "Far from Yhwh acting as an oppressive and powerful male who takes advantage of a weak and vulnerable female, Ezek. 16 presents Yhwh as a gracious savior who lavishes his favors on this helpless infant/young woman. But she who tramples underfoot his grace may expect to experience his wrath."

<sup>18</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:339.

<sup>19</sup> Harold Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 44, quoted in David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 241. Blumenthal himself writes that in this "searing" passage, "God sexually abuses Israel, and then takes her back in love."

<sup>20</sup> Meir Malul, "Adoption of Foundlings in the Bible and Mesopotamian Documents: A Study of Some Legal Metaphors in Ezekiel 16:1-7," *JSOT* 46 (1990) 97-126, here 111. Note the assumption that בְּדָמֶיךָ is part of the quotation, and see n. 15 above.

<sup>21</sup> Malul, "Adoption of Foundlings," 111-12.

Building on Malul's claim, Daniel I. Block writes that the word יָחִי does not just mean "live" but "enjoy life in all its fullness, good fortune, and the joy of God's presence."<sup>22</sup>

Even if "in your blood" were a phrase modifying "live," however, it is clear in the text that for the decade intervening between their two meetings, Baby Jerusalem was *not* in Yhwh's presence, and Yhwh did *not* care for the child.<sup>23</sup> As already observed, Yhwh says that he passed by her *again* in v. 8, and, indeed, the reader knows before Yhwh that the baby has grown up to become a young woman (compare v. 7 with v. 8). The idea that Yhwh had adopted the baby or otherwise cared for her is indeed what we would want to find in the text; readers would presumably prefer to be able to identify Yhwh's behavior with that of the Good Samaritan rather than the derelict priest and Levite.<sup>24</sup> But Ezekiel foils our expectations.

Yhwh did not care for or nurture the foundling he came across. Instead, Baby Jerusalem remained in the field.<sup>25</sup> What Yhwh did was pronounce that the baby would survive.<sup>26</sup> He left her in the field, unclothed and unwashed, as was observed by Rashi and other medieval commentators on the text.<sup>27</sup> Only in v. 9 does Yhwh finally say that he washed off her blood (וָאֵרַחֵץ בְּמַיִם וְאֵשׁטַף דְּמִיךָ מֵעַלֶיךָ), "I washed

<sup>22</sup> Block, *Book of Ezekiel*, 1:481.

<sup>23</sup> See Julie Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh's Wife* (SBLDS 130; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992) 94-95 (although she still follows Malul's interpretation of 16:6 as a record of adoption). Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann lets God off the hook by presuming that there must have been more to the relationship, which the reader simply "did not have to know" and was therefore not told (*Das Buch des Propheten Hesekiel [Ezekiel]* [2 vols.; ATD 22; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996] 1:226).

<sup>24</sup> Cf., e.g., Eleonore Reuter, "Kein Bund für Frauen: Ehebund als eine sexistische Beschreibung der Gottesbeziehung," in *Für immer verbündet: Studien zur Bundestheologie der Bibel* (ed. Christoph Dohmen and Christian Frevel; SBS 211; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2007) 172: "he saves her with his 'creative word,' and thus assumes a paternal role."

<sup>25</sup> See also David J. Halperin, *Seeking Ezekiel: Text and Psychology* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993) 173: "So little 'nurturant' is Ezekiel's God that it does not occur to him so much as to bathe the girl until he is ready to take her to bed (verse 9)." Pohlmann notes that only the divine word is used here, but he sees this as God keeping a respectful distance (*Das Buch des Propheten Hesekiel*, 1:225).

<sup>26</sup> Gunkel claims that God is here playing the role written for a sorcerer in an earlier version of the hypothetical folktale he sees as lying behind the chapter, and that "Live!" is something like a magic formula (*Folktale in the Old Testament*, 130). For further development of this point, with references to magical incantations from Mesopotamia, see Kamionkowski, "Gender Ambiguity and Subversive Metaphor," 134-37. Baruch Schwartz pointed out that the character described here is presumed to be wealthy (note the lavish gifts he bestows on the girl when she grows up) and self-righteously magnanimous, which suggests a rich and powerful nobleman.

<sup>27</sup> See also R. Eliezer of Beaugency, and see the Targum, which identifies the period covered in vv. 6-7 as the time of the slavery in Egypt after God had promised (to himself) that he would redeem the Hebrews but before God actually delivered on the promise. That God did not actually do anything for Baby Jerusalem was also properly emphasized by Linda Day, "Rhetoric and Domestic Violence in Ezekiel 16," *BibInt* 8 (2000) 205-30, here 207.

you with water, and rinsed off your blood from upon you”).<sup>28</sup> At this point, there are probably three bloods mingled on the girl: the hymeneal blood of her first sexual encounter, the menstrual blood showing her new maturity, and the birth blood in which she has been wallowing for more than a decade.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, as a priest, Ezekiel may well have been thinking of the ritual impurity that accompanies some bloods, including birth blood and menstrual blood.<sup>30</sup>

The notion that adoption imagery is being evoked in the text is, therefore, not likely.<sup>31</sup> But the partial parallels adduced by Malul may be significant and may serve to call attention to the *absence* of an adoption. On the basis of the uses of *ina mēšu u dāmēšu* in adoption texts, the fact that the girl is left in her blood may lead the reader to expect an adoption, and the use of חיי may strengthen that expectation. But in the texts cited by Malul as parallels, the clause that says “in order to live” is always followed by an actual adoption formula (*lū šahirtaka šī* in the example above). The satisfaction that would result from hearing such a formula is denied to his audience by Ezekiel, however, who includes no happiness at all in his narrative.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps, in fact, the strange double language in the MT (ואמר לך בדמך חיי ואמר לך בדמך חיי, “I said to you while you were in your bloods, ‘Live’; I said to you while you were in your bloods, ‘Live’”), one of which is often deleted by modern scholars, is to be understood as the text’s way of indicating that there is nothing more coming.<sup>33</sup> “All I said while you were in your bloods,” Yhwh reports, “was that you would live.” This was Yhwh’s way of explicitly limiting what he was doing for the baby: “As you are now, filthy with your bloods, you shall live, for it is not yet time for me to wash you.”<sup>34</sup> Yhwh ensured her survival but provided

<sup>28</sup> For discussion of the motif, see John Muddiman, “The So-called Bridal Bath at Ezekiel 16:9 and Ephesians 5:26,” in *The Book of Ezekiel and Its Influence* (ed. Henk Jan de Jonge and Johannes Tromp; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) 137-45, esp. 138-39.

<sup>29</sup> Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel*, 94-95 n. 16. For a full discussion of the various bloods, see Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible*, 66-67.

<sup>30</sup> The priestly aspect was emphasized by Galambush (*Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel*, 147) and Kamionkowski (*Gender Ambiguity and Subversive Metaphor*, 130).

<sup>31</sup> For other reservations regarding Malul’s suggestion and the correct conclusion that “the statement of Ezekiel 16:6 does not signify adoption,” see Kamionkowski, *Gender Ambiguity and Subversive Metaphor*, 130-34 (and Kamionkowski, *Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos*, 103).

<sup>32</sup> Some scholars have worried about alleged incestuous overtones in the narrative; see Sharon Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 172 n. 74 for references and discussion. This problem disappears when the “adoption” is seen to be a chimera.

<sup>33</sup> Greenberg argues for preservation of the duplication in the MT as emphasizing the mercy of God (*Ezekiel 1–20*, 275-76). On my reading, it is precisely the opposite: emphasizing the limits to God’s mercy. See also Block, *Book of Ezekiel*, 1:477-78 with n. 82, and 481.

<sup>34</sup> Arnold B. Ehrlich, *הוא מקרא כפשוטו: והוא מקרא מפורש ושום שכל* [The Bible according to Its Literal Meaning] (3 vols.; Berlin: Poppeloyer, 1899–1901) 3:311.

nothing for her and created no relationship. Then Yhwh left, leaving it uncertain whether he would ever return.

In the following sections, I will explore the problematic of this text. It is clearly troubling. But whom is it meant to trouble? Is this a feminist issue, as some recent scholars have portrayed it? Or is the troubling nature central to the content of the text itself?

#### IV. Is This a Feminist Problem?

The idea that males would instinctively sympathize with Yhwh in this chapter just because he is male is a disturbing one. Mary Shields well argued that *no* listener would have sympathized with Yhwh as portrayed in this text, since Yhwh is not portrayed here positively at all.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the sharp gender divide posited by some scholars, who insist that males and females will inevitably read the text differently, is an ironic misstep of feminist scholarship, in that it overessentializes the male–female dichotomy at the expense of more nuanced readings of the text.<sup>36</sup> Some of these assumptions were sharply questioned by Smith-Christopher, who wrote:

The image of the stripped and humiliated Jerusalem may not have “titillated” the male hearers at all, but rather shocked them precisely because it reminded them of their own treatment as the hands of the Babylonian conquerors! Thus, they would have identified with the female Jerusalem, rather than the “male God.”<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, one must recall that, in the chapter’s rhetoric, the audience is meant to be *identified* with the female Jerusalem, *against* the male God.<sup>38</sup> The female baby, after all, is Jerusalem, and so according to the narrative itself the people are supposed to take the perspective of the girl. The audience—male or female—would be at best deeply ambivalent about the character of Yhwh upon hearing the narrative told in Ezekiel 16. They could not but criticize Yhwh’s actions and

<sup>35</sup> Shields, “Multiple Exposures,” 5-18; see also Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 108 with n. 18.

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., Kamionkowski, *Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos*, 7: “Ezekiel is about an exploration of gender ambiguities and reversals.” Exum argues that males and females inevitably read the chapter’s narrative differently (*Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 114-18).

<sup>37</sup> Smith-Christopher, “Ezekiel in Abu Ghraib,” 155-56. See also Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors*, 165: “many men may not be grateful for . . . the opportunity to identify with the powerful male god. . . . [I]t might also be disturbing (albeit in different ways) to be forced against one’s will to assume the role of aggressor and abuser of women.”

<sup>38</sup> See also Dale Launderville, “‘Misogyny’ in Service of Theocentricity: Legitimate or Not?” in *Prophets Male and Female: Gender and Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Ancient Near East* (ed. Jonathan Stökl and Corrine L. Carvalho; AIL 15; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013) 193-214, esp. 194-95.

behaviors; despite that, they may retain some sense of loyalty to him as Yhwh. In any event, it seems unlikely that there would be much difference between males and females in this regard.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, the primary argument here is precisely that the feminist critiques of this chapter do not go far enough. These critiques should not be restricted to questions about contemporary readings and meanings but must be a part of (to modify Greenberg's phrase somewhat) a nonquixotic historical-philological analysis of its meaning. Carol Dempsey poignantly asks, "Why did Yhwh not pick up baby Jerusalem who was flailing around in her birth blood? Why did Yhwh not bathe her, salt her, swaddle her, and hold her close to his cheek?"<sup>40</sup> This is the question ancient readers likely asked as well: how could Ezekiel's God be so cruel and thoughtless?

Once the problematic nature of some of Ezekiel's depictions of Yhwh is recognized, the question naturally arises: why would Ezekiel use such imagery? Magdalene suggests that it served a particular rhetorical purpose for the prophet: "[T]he religious metaphor, God the rapist, was effective because the language is highly provocative and thus draws our attention."<sup>41</sup> This view is seconded by Andrew Sloane in his thoughtful evangelical analysis of the so-called porno-prophecies: he writes that Ezekiel's purpose was "to shock his audience in an attempt to awaken them to their plight."<sup>42</sup>

In my view, however, this answer is still incomplete. Of course the images are shocking. But why does one author choose to use shocking images and another use gentler images for the same purpose? More importantly, why would the prophet choose to shock in this way rather than another? Is there any significance to the images chosen by the prophet in order to shock his audience, or is the visceral reaction his sole goal? I suggest that depicting Yhwh in this way allows Ezekiel to make a theological point about the relationship between Yhwh and Jerusalem: the relationship may be coercive or lopsided but it remains, and because of it Jerusalem is coerced to remain faithful to Yhwh. A nuanced and local approach is needed to

<sup>39</sup> It is impossible to know whether Ezekiel's audience would have included any females. There are indications elsewhere in prophetic literature of women being addressed (e.g., Amos 4:1), although it is always possible to argue that this is merely rhetorical. In Ezekiel, women are particularly absent as actual characters; see Corrine L. Carvalho, "Sex and the Single Prophet: Marital Status and Gender in Jeremiah and Ezekiel," in *Prophets Male and Female* (ed. Stökl and Carvalho), 237-68, here 242. Julie Galambush has argued well that the book, more than other biblical books, is interested in the world of landowning males ("God's Land and Mine: Creation as Property in the Book of Ezekiel," in *Ezekiel's Hierarchical World* (ed. Cook and Patton), 91-108.

<sup>40</sup> Dempsey, "'Whore' of Ezekiel 16," 65.

<sup>41</sup> Magdalene, "Ancient Near Eastern Treaty-Curses," 348.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Sloane, "Aberrant Textuality? The Case of Ezekiel the (Porno)Prophet," *TynBul* 59 (2008) 53-76, here 75.

appreciate the purpose of these texts in their literary and historical contexts in order to understand why Ezekiel described Yhwh this way.

## V. Jerusalem as a Victim of Sexual Abuse

Dempsey continues her questioning: “What kind of picture of Yhwh and Yhwh’s relationship with Jerusalem is being portrayed by the authorial voice that shaped the text?”<sup>43</sup> Marvin Pope suggests that a partial defense of Jerusalem’s behavior is in fact latent in the biblical text: “Modern alienists could find some rationale for Jerusalem’s strong antipathy to her husband. In some contemporary societies this marriage would be regarded as statutory rape.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, it would be child sexual abuse.<sup>45</sup> The effects of child sexual abuse closely resemble the descriptions of Jerusalem in our text. Child sexual abuse (CSA) “has been associated with a variety of risky sexual behaviors and indicators of sexual risk taking in adulthood, including multiple partners.”<sup>46</sup> “CSA was associated with . . . more aggressive and more sexually risky partners. . . . [A] consequence was lower relationship satisfaction, which prospectively predicted entering new sexual relationships.” In sum, “research has demonstrated a connection between CSA victimization and engaging in . . . sexual compulsivity, indiscriminate or impulsive sex, a high number of sexual partners, substance abuse, [and] prostitution.”<sup>47</sup> This appears to be an example of the well-studied correlation between a lack of emotional attachment early in life with emotionally troubled relationships later on.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Dempsey, “‘Whore’ of Ezekiel 16,” 65.

<sup>44</sup> Marvin H. Pope, “Mixed Marriage Metaphor in Ezekiel 16,” in *Fortunate the Eyes that See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 384-99, here 394-95.

<sup>45</sup> Though there is no official definition of CSA, the working definition is “any unwanted sexual contact during the period in which the victim is considered a child by legal definition and the perpetrator is in a position of power vis-à-vis the victim.” See Elizabet Oddone Paolucci, Mark L. Genuis, and Claudio Violato, “A Meta-Analysis of the Published Research on the Effects of Child Sexual Abuse,” *Journal of Psychology* 135 (2001) 17-36, here 21.

<sup>46</sup> Maria Testa, Carol VanZile-Tamsen, and Jennifer A. Livingston, “Childhood Sexual Abuse, Relationship Satisfaction, and Sexual Risk Taking in a Community Sample of Women,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 73 (2005) 1116-24, here 1116. See the discussion in Julia R. Heiman and Amy R. Heard-Davison, “Child Sexual Abuse and Adult Sexual Relationships: Review and Perspectives,” in *From Child Sexual Abuse to Adult Sexual Risk: Trauma, Revictimization, and Intervention* (ed. Linda J. Koenig, Lynda S. Doll, Ann O’Leary, and Willo Pequegnat; Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2004) 13-47.

<sup>47</sup> Eileen L. Zubriggen and Jennifer J. Freyd, “The Link between Child Sexual Abuse and Risky Sexual Behavior: The Role of Dissociative Tendencies, Information-processing Effects, and Consensual Sex Decision Mechanisms,” in *From Child Sexual Abuse to Adult Sexual Risk* (ed. Koenig et al.), 135-57, here 135.

<sup>48</sup> For a survey of the relevant data, see Donald G. Dutton, *Rethinking Domestic Violence* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006) 80-94.

Lest a critic contend that "things were different back then," it has been shown that these effects are not culturally specific.<sup>49</sup> Psychologists have come up with a number of good hypotheses to explain this phenomenon, but the phenomenon itself is quite clear and has to do with psychological realities rather than cultural expectations.<sup>50</sup> Even twenty-five hundred years ago in Iraq, therefore, the same reality should have applied.

When CSA victims reach adulthood, their sense of betrayal resulting from the abuse may lead to a series of shallow, unfulfilling short-lasting sexual relationships, as part of "a desperate search for a redeeming relationship."<sup>51</sup> It cannot be overemphasized that the girl Jerusalem in the story had her first sentient encounter with another human being at around age twelve, when an all-powerful male figure appeared, had sex with her, and entered into an eternal marital bond with her. Her later sex life was certainly unsatisfying, as she not only had many lovers, but actively solicited as many as possible. She took all she had and gave it to potential lovers, enjoying the trysts but never feeling satisfied. Is this not clearly an example of a CSA victim in "a desperate search for a redeeming relationship"?

Obviously, the claim being made is not that Ezekiel knew of statistical links between the age of first sexual encounter and later sexuality. But he is psychologically acute, has lived through horrific traumas of war and exile, and depicts his characters with pathos and verisimilitude. The same is true later in the chapter. Linda Day has pointed out that the image of Yhwh in Ezekiel 16, almost point for point, is that of a textbook abusive husband. He beats his wife because he suspects her of infidelity and blames the abuse on the battered wife; he claims that these actions will bring his wife in line and expresses satisfaction when she is cowed into submission. He even blames her behavior on the fact that she was abandoned, crediting himself with giving her a reasonable chance at redemption (v. 22). Jerusalem, in turn, is depicted as a battered woman, in a state of learned helplessness, hoping against hope that if she does not raise her husband's ire, he will not beat her again.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Cindy M. Meston, Julia R. Heiman, and Paul D. Trapnell, "The Relation between Early Abuse and Adult Sexuality," *Journal of Sex Research* 36 (1999) 385-95, who find comparable effects in adults of Southeast Asian and European ancestry.

<sup>50</sup> For a review, see J. H. Beitchman, K. J. Zucker, J. E. Hood, G. A. DaCosta, and D. Akman, "A Review of the Short-term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse," *Abuse & Neglect* 15 (1991) 537-56. For different theories regarding how CSA has these effects, see Zubriggen and Freyd, "Link between Child Sexual Abuse," 135-57; Testa, VanZile-Tamsen, and Livingston, "Childhood Sexual Abuse," 1116-24; and S. E. Romans, J. L. Martin, J. C. Anderson, M. L. O'Shea, and P. E. Mullen, "Factors That Mediate between Child Sexual Abuse and Adult Psychological Outcome," *Psychological Medicine* 25 (1995) 127-42.

<sup>51</sup> J. Briere, "Integrating HIV/AIDS Prevention Activities into Psychotherapy for Child Sexual Abuse Survivors," in *From Child Sexual Abuse to Adult Sexual Risk* (ed. Koenig et al.), 219-32; see also Testa et al., "Childhood Sexual Abuse," 1116.

<sup>52</sup> L. Day, "Rhetoric and Domestic Violence in Ezekiel 16," 205-30. Elke Seifert (*Tochter und*

Before turning to the final section of this article, on the significance of this analysis for a broader interpretation of Ezekiel's theology, I would like to emphasize an aspect of the history of interpretation of this chapter: the reification of the gender roles in this chapter that is the foundation of much of the modern criticism is largely absent from premodern interpretations of the chapter. That is, ancient and medieval readers of Ezekiel 16 did *not* see this as a commentary on gender roles in society, or a castigation of females in particular.<sup>53</sup> On the contrary, interpreters largely (and, I have argued here, properly) understood that the criticisms were leveled against Judean society as a whole, and that the female Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16 stands in for all of the Jews.

Origen, preaching in third-century Caesarea, and Jerome, writing in early fifth-century Bethlehem, take the image of sexual promiscuity to be a metaphor for heresy,<sup>54</sup> and of course, this is very much within the range of what Ezekiel himself may have meant by the image.<sup>55</sup> Jerome, unlike Origen, does use the text as a source for sexual ethics, but the audience of his ethical teachings comprises both *men* and women; he preaches abstinence for all true Christians. Although there is, in early Christian literature, an image of the promiscuous female as the prototypical heretic, this is not mobilized in these Church Fathers' discussions of Ezekiel 16.<sup>56</sup>

In rabbinic literature, too, there is a lot of attention paid to the chapter, but it is not focused on the gender of the characters in the story. A very common interpretive key to the chapter is the historicization of the stages in the story. The infancy was in Egypt; the "nakedness" is the absence of commandments; the "bloods" alluded to are the blood of the paschal lamb and the blood of circumcision; the

*Vater im Alten Testament: Eine Ideologiekritische Untersuchung zur Verfügungsgewalt von Vätern über ihre Töchter* [Neukirchener Theologische Dissertationen und Habilitationen 9; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997] 262, cited in Reuter, "Kein Bund für Frauen," 172) refers to the opening scene in Ezekiel 16 as sexual abuse.

<sup>53</sup> They also did not see it as a criticism of God, but that, I submit, has to do with the transition by the Roman period to a hermeneutics in which God's righteousness is axiomatic in the literature that had become "biblical."

<sup>54</sup> Andrew Mein argued that this was the case for ancient and early modern Christian interpreters, with the exception of John Calvin (who had his own gender-oriented agenda regarding sixteenth-century Genevan society) ("Ezekiel's Women in Christian Interpretation: The Case of Ezekiel 16," in *After Ezekiel* [ed. Mein and Joyce], 159-84, esp. 163-65). See also Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Can These Bones Live? The Problem of the Moral Self in the Book of Ezekiel* (BZAW 301; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000) 17-18; and Marcel Borret, *Origène: Homélie sur Ézéchiél, Texte Latin, Introduction, Traduction, et Notes* (SC 352; Paris: Cerf, 1989) esp. 229-47.

<sup>55</sup> On the use of sexual imagery as a metaphor for idolatry, see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (trans. Naomi Goldblum; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) 9-36.

<sup>56</sup> For the motif, see Virginia Burrus, "The Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Ephiphanius, and Jerome," *HTR* 84 (1991) 229-48; and see Mein, "Ezekiel's Women in Christian Interpretation," 167-69.

marriage is the covenant at Sinai or at the Sea; the "bread" of 16:19 is the manna. There is very little that is gendered here at all.<sup>57</sup>

A modern reader might claim that the *lack* of attention to gender politics among the ancient readers betrays an insensitivity to the abusive ways in which gender roles can be deployed. It is likely, however, that if our goal is an understanding of the text in its ancient context, this insensitivity is very much to the point. The author of the text, it may be argued, was *also* not sensitive to the ways in which the gender roles could have been deployed. In fact, the author intended for his entire audience, consisting primarily of adult males, to identify with the emotional and sexual victim of the chapter, the female Jerusalem.<sup>58</sup> That the audience would thus be feminized in the prophetic rhetoric is in line with a major current of contemporary scholarship on the exilic literature and on Ezekiel in particular, which emphasizes the emasculation and concomitant feminization of the conquered Israelites: "To be conquered, then, was to be vulnerable and weak, and to be weak was to become a 'woman.'"<sup>59</sup>

The foregoing analysis, then, far from solving an interpretive problem, makes Ezekiel 16 deeply problematic not (only) for modern readers but also for exegetes interested in the meaning of the texts in their original contexts.<sup>60</sup> Why would Ezekiel portray Yhwh in such an unflattering, even damning, light?

<sup>57</sup> See Gerhard Bodendorfer, *Das Drama des Bundes: Ezechiel 16 in rabbinischer Perspektive* (Herders Biblische Studien 11; Freiburg: Herder, 1997) 123-285. One somewhat gendered comment emerges in a statement made about the use of this chapter as a *haftara*. The rabbis were reluctant to read this chapter in public because of the imagery and because of the harshness with which Jerusalem is here criticized. The Tosefta (*Meg.* 3:19) tells a brief story: "Once a person read 'Tell Jerusalem' [= Ezekiel 16] in front of R. Eliezer, and translated it. R. Eliezer said to him, 'Why don't you go out and tell everyone about the disgusting things your mother did?'" See Bodendorfer, *Das Drama des Bundes*, 82-91 for the issue as a whole, and p. 83 for this text.

<sup>58</sup> This is parallel to the argument by Corrine L. Patton regarding the scholarship on Ezekiel 23, which, she avers, ignores historical context in its understanding of the prophet's deployment of gendered images ("Should Our Sister Be Treated like a Whore? A Response to Feminist Critiques of Ezekiel 23," in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives* [ed. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong; SBLSymS 9; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000] 221-38).

<sup>59</sup> Lemos, "Emasculation of Exile," 389. See also Cynthia R. Chapman, *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter* (HSM 62; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004); and Kelle, "Wartime Rhetoric," 108-9, and, for a broader perspective on the feminization of cities, 99-115 *passim*.

<sup>60</sup> One may raise the possibility that the rabbinic view (R. Eliezer, *m. Meg.* 4:10) forbidding the liturgical use of Ezekiel 16, may reflect discomfort with the image of God in this text. From the Tosefta cited above, however (*t. Meg.* 3:19), it appears that what troubles R. Eliezer is not what is said about God but what is said about Jerusalem. For a related discussion, see Naomi Graetz, "The Haftarah Tradition and the Metaphoric Battering of Hosea's Wife," *Conservative Judaism* 45 (1992) 29-42.

## VI. Ezekiel's Consistent Historiosophy

The picture drawn in Ezekiel 16 is consistent with his depictions of the relationships of Jerusalem elsewhere. In Ezekiel 23, a chapter that bears great similarities to chap. 16 (but also differs in important ways),<sup>61</sup> there seems to be another Ezekielian description of Jerusalem's early life as one filled with unwanted sexual experiences: in 23:3, regarding Jerusalem's childhood in Egypt, Ezekiel says, שמהן בתוליהן מעכו שדיהן ושם עשו דדי בתוליהן, "there their breasts were squeezed, and there they pressed their virgin nipples."<sup>62</sup> Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes writes, "It would have been more adequate to describe the events during the sisters' youth as: 'They were sexually abused in Egypt, in their youth they were sexually abused.'" She points out that the rest of the chapter essentially blames the victims.<sup>63</sup> The core argument of this article is that van Dijk-Hemmes's observation is not only a comment but also an important question: why would Ezekiel tell a story that leaves the audience no choice but to sympathize with the victim, and to utilize images that cause the listeners and readers to look askance—or worse—at Yhwh?

The answer to the question of why Ezekiel would use such imagery cannot be generally literary-historical, or merely personal.<sup>64</sup> Instead, an answer must be sought in the realm of the literary-theological, since Ezekiel is fundamentally a book of literary theology.<sup>65</sup> The theological claim being made here may be expressed in this way: Jerusalem does not owe fealty to Yhwh in exchange for what Yhwh does or will do for her. There is no active reciprocity in this relationship. If loyalty to Yhwh were based on reciprocal beneficence, then legitimate

<sup>61</sup> For a recent discussion of the motif of the sisters, which is present in chap. 16 but dominant in chap. 23, see Amy Kalmanofsky, "The Dangerous Sisters of Jeremiah and Ezekiel," *JBL* 130 (2011) 299-312.

<sup>62</sup> For philological comments, see Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37*, 474.

<sup>63</sup> Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, "The Metaphorization of Woman in Prophetic Speech: An Analysis of Ezekiel XXIII," *VT* 43 (1993) 162-70, here 166, reprinted in *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes; BIS 1; Leiden: Brill, 1993) 172-73.

<sup>64</sup> Halperin sought the explanation for Ezekiel's use of the motif of the abandoned baby in some trauma experienced by the prophet himself as an infant (*Seeking Ezekiel*, 141-83, esp. 172-76). This may or may not be true (I hope not) but is still insufficient, since the Book of Ezekiel is not just a forum in which the person Ezekiel worked through his issues but is—first and foremost—a theological response to the communal issues of his day.

<sup>65</sup> David S. Vanderhooft notes that the book reflects "the thought of an intellectual" ("Ezekiel in and on Babylon," in *Bible et Proche-Orient: Mélanges André Lemaire III* [ed. Josette Elayi and Jean-Marie Durand; Transeuphratène 46; Paris: Gabalda, 2014] 99-119, here 100). John F. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel* (Biblical and Judaic Studies from the University of California, San Diego 7; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000) is a good study of the theology of the book as a whole.

questions may arise about how long this loyalty must continue if Yhwh fails to nurture, defend, and protect Jerusalem. After all, divine assistance has apparently ceased: the people are in exile and, to all appearances, divorced from Yhwh. As they are quoted later by Ezekiel, “Our bones are dried up, our hope has been lost, we are cut off!” (Ezek 37:11).

This lack of divine assistance, or of involvement of any kind, would be a powerful argument for Jerusalem’s release from their obligations to Yhwh, if those obligations were dependent on an ongoing and reciprocal relationship. This, though, is precisely what Ezekiel denies. Instead, Ezekiel insists, loyalty to Yhwh is required because of the all-encompassing debt owed by Jerusalem from her childhood. Therefore, how Yhwh treats Jerusalem presently is irrelevant.

This leads Ezekiel to a radical conclusion: Jerusalem is bound by loyalty to Yhwh *even if Yhwh does nothing for them*. It may well be that Yhwh was not justified in initiating the bond; it may well be that Jerusalem’s chafing at the bond is understandable and almost predictable. But, Ezekiel says, there is no escaping this bond. To make this point, Ezekiel depicts Yhwh as performing only the bare minimum for the abandoned baby. He appears indifferent toward her emotional needs and lavishes attention on her only later, when it is to his benefit that she appear attractive, so he can sleep with her. But he does the one thing that will put her in his debt forever: he ensures her survival.

That this is a component of Ezekiel’s consistent historiosophy is supported by his other retellings of Israelite history. In chap. 20, too (which has garnered far less recent attention, perhaps because it does not utilize sexual imagery), Ezekiel describes early Israelite history this way:

ביום בחרי בישראל ואשא ידי לזרע בית יעקב ואודע להם בארץ מצרים . . . ביום  
ההוא נשאתי ידי להם להוציאם מארץ מצרים . . . ואמר אלהם איש שקוצי עיניו  
השליכו ובגלולי מצרים אל תטמאו אני ה' א-להיכם. וימרו בי ולא אבו לשמע אלי . . .  
(Ezek 20:5-8) ואמר לשפך חמתי עליהם לכלות אפי בהם בתוך ארץ מצרים.

On the day I chose Israel, and I swore to the seed of the house of Jacob, and made myself known to them in the land of Egypt . . . that day, I swore to them to take them out of the land of Egypt . . . and I said, “Each man, cast out the disgusting things of his eyes, and do not defile yourselves by the idols of Egypt—I am the Lord your God! But they rebelled against me and did not wish to obey me . . . so I thought to pour out my wrath upon them, to exhaust my fury on them, within the land of Egypt.

One might claim that, from Israel’s perspective, this does not sound like they have “rebelled” at all. Instead, it sounds like an unknown god appeared one day and insisted that Israel cast away its traditional religious practices and devote itself entirely to this new god. And when Israel politely refused, this was declared to be rebellion deserving of destruction. For Ezekiel, the relationship between Yhwh and Jerusalem is never allowed to become bilateral; Jerusalem is not allowed any voice

at all.<sup>66</sup> In all these chapters, one might plausibly turn an angry gaze back on Yhwh. Regarding chap. 16, how dare he punish his wife for her infidelity, when the marriage began as coercion which she had no ability to comprehend? When her first human contact is sex, is it really fair to blame her for lavishing sex on every male she meets?<sup>67</sup>

Yet this is precisely the conclusion that Ezekiel draws from his telling of the past. Despite the one-sidedness of the relationship from the beginning, Jerusalem has no recourse to escape from this covenant nor any reason to expect beneficence from Yhwh because of the covenant.<sup>68</sup> The fact that the relationship between Yhwh and Jerusalem is not depicted in the early stages of chap. 16 as a loving one should not be surprising; in light of Ezekiel's theological work elsewhere (including later in this same chapter), it could not be otherwise. Baruch Schwartz has documented the absolute absence of "love" as a factor motivating Yhwh in the Book of Ezekiel.<sup>69</sup> More specifically, Schwartz observes that nowhere in Ezekiel is there any indication of an emotional bond at the root of the Yhwh-Israel relationship. The relationship was not founded on love and remains loveless throughout.<sup>70</sup>

This relates to a major interpretive question regarding the theological agenda of the Book of Ezekiel as a whole. Scholars have perceived a tension between the chapters that emphasize repentance and presuppose the moral agency of Ezekiel's audience and chapters that are more deterministic and preclude the possibility of repentance on the part of the people.<sup>71</sup> Chapter 16, along with chapters 20, 23, and 24, are said to be deterministic, and "reconciling" the theology in these chapters with that of the chapters on repentance—especially 14, 18, and 33—has been a

<sup>66</sup> See Istvan Haag, Stephen Llewelyn, and Jack Tsonis, "Ezekiel 16 and Its Use of Allegory and the Disclosure-of-Abomination Formula," *VT* 62 (2012) 198-210, esp. 204.

<sup>67</sup> This is sharper, I think, than the question asked regarding our chapter by L. Day: "Ironically, YHWH later accuses Jerusalem of breaking the oath and the covenant, neglecting the fact that she never made one; she was just taken" ("Rhetoric and Domestic Violence," 208).

<sup>68</sup> See Ilona Zsolnay, "The Inadequacies of Yhwh: A Re-examination of Jerusalem's Portrayal in Ezekiel 16," in *Bodies, Embodiment, and Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (ed. S. Tamar Kamionkowski and Wonil Kim; LHBOTS 465; New York: T&T Clark, 2010) 57-74.

<sup>69</sup> Baruch J. Schwartz, "Ezekiel's Dim View of Israel's Restoration," in *Book of Ezekiel* (ed. Odell and Strong), 43-67, here 53.

<sup>70</sup> See *ibid.*, 66, for a brief comment on the foundling story in chap. 16, and see pp. 43-67 *passim* for the lovelessness of the relationship as conceived by Ezekiel. Contrast, for instance, Reuter, who concludes, "Thus, the text is still a text of hope, even if it remains rooted in the patriarchal gender structure" ("Kein Bund für Frauen," 177). Hope, on the reading proposed here, is an emotion quite distant from Ezekiel's horizons. Contrast, too, Martin Mark, who speaks repeatedly of the covenant as comprising "the loving relationship between the woman and God" ("Ewiger Bund als radikalisierte Treue: Zur rhetorischen Strategie von Ezechiel 16," in *Gottes Wege suchend: Beiträge zum Verständnis der Bibel und ihrer Botschaft. Festschrift für Rudolph Mosis zum 70. Geburtstag* [ed. Franz Sedlmeier; Würzburg: Echter, 2003] 203-51, esp., e.g., 213).

<sup>71</sup> See the analysis of these chapters in Paul Joyce, *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel* (JSOTSup 59; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989) 33-77.

preoccupation of some of the modern scholarship on Ezekiel.<sup>72</sup> There is no logical problem but very different standards that Ezekiel employs in considering the people's obligations vis-à-vis Yhwh and their standing before him. In chaps. 16, 20, and 23, the historiosophical argument is that, when it comes to the people's obligations to Yhwh, the present reality does not matter, but only the past. In chaps. 14 and 18, on the other hand, the ethical-religious argument is that, for the question of the people's standing in front of Yhwh, the past does not matter, but only the present. In other words, Yhwh demands unilateral fealty in the present, based on the past, but is gracious enough to allow repentance and to overlook the past if the people are loyal in the present.

## VII. Conclusion: Reading in Context and Out of Context

In sum, Ezekiel's radical conclusion is that Jerusalem is bound inescapably to Yhwh. My central assumption in this article is that a metaphor cannot be reduced to just a metaphor. The questions asked of a text cannot be limited to where an image came from or why a culture would use it. Especially in a deeply theological text such as Ezekiel, the significance of the imagery was part of the point, and so the questions must be literary-theological. How does a particular image contribute to the author's goals and ideas? The use of the offensive images in Ezekiel is not just to shock in the immediate sense but to force a theological reevaluation of claims Jerusalem may make against Yhwh. By denying that Yhwh *needs* ever to be good to Israel, Ezekiel undercuts any defense based on the claim that Yhwh has stopped being good to Israel.

<sup>72</sup> See, e.g., Michael Fishbane, "Sin and Judgment in the Prophecies of Ezekiel," *Int* 38 (1984) 131-50; Baruch J. Schwartz, "Repentance and Determinism in Ezekiel" (in Hebrew), in *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies* (1993), Division A, *The Bible and Its World* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1994) 123-30; Joyce, *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel*; Gordon Matties, *Ezekiel 18 and the Rhetoric of Moral Discourse* (SBLDS 126; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990); and with many references, Lapsley, *Can These Bones Live?*