

## **Ezekiel: Architect of Urban Renovation for a Jerusalem in Ruins.**

Ezekiel (“God strengthens”, Hebrew), the last of the three major prophets, is the only one who was also a priest (son of the priest, Buzi, 1:3; → Isaiah; → Jeremiah). A contemporary of Jeremiah, who prophesied in Jerusalem, Ezekiel was taken captive in the first deportation to Babylon (3:15), along with king Jehoiakim and other nobles in 598/97 B.C. (2 Kings 24:8/14-17). Neither of these two purportedly contemporary prophets alludes to the ministry of the other (→ Daniel). Ezekiel probably grew up hoping to continue his father’s priestly office in the Jerusalem temple. However, the youth’s brutal experience of exile to Babylon, the tragic death of his beloved spouse (with the divine prohibition against mourning, 24:15-27) and the tension between his priestly education and his prophetic vocation, probably all contributed to the development of his highly dialectic theology. The book opens with the vision of God transcendent (but enthroned in a chariot, Ez 1:4-28) and ends with a vision of Jerusalem with its temple restored (Ez 40-48) God again immanent and eternally present with his people: “The Lord is there” (48:35b; cf. “Emmanuel”, God is with us, Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23).

The prophet, who always wanted to officiate in the temple cult, learned to adore God without temple and without animal sacrifices (43:13-27; 44:9-16; 45:13-25; 46:11-15,19-24; cp. → Isaiah 11:1-9). Ezekiel’s ministry thus contributed in grand measure to the fact that the exile was one of the most fecund epochs in Israel’s history. Together with → Ezra, Ezekiel became the father of post-exile Judaism (with its emphasis on the written Torah, Sabbath and circumcision). His book demonstrates close stylistic and theological ties with the Priestly source (P) of the Pentateuch, especially in the Holiness Code (→ Leviticus 17–26), which also received its principal formulation in the Exile (cf. the relationship between → Jeremiah and → Deuteronomy; see Ez 16:49-50, under 3. Sexual Minorities). As pointed out by David Pleins, while the works of the three major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) each seeks to develop a theological interpretation of the Exile, in Ezekiel’s case, his “vision of divine power, apportionment of political authority, sense of social justice, commitment to the poor, and understanding of the nations offers a stunning alternative to the views cultivated elsewhere in the prophetic tradition”<sup>1</sup>

Ezekiel’s prophetic calling came in 594/93 B.C. (Ez 1:2) and his last oracle is dated more than 20 years later in 571 B.C. (29:17-21).<sup>2</sup> The reference to the “thirtieth year” in Ez 1:1-3 still has no consensual explanation (see notes in NISB, JSB, NOAB, HCSB, and JB). Some 25 years after Ezekiel, another exilic voice emerged in the desert, that of → Second Isaiah (ca. 550 B.C.), who also prophesied of the coming revelation of God’s glory (manifested presence; Is 40:5). The challenge of Ezekiel’s prophecies has always been too much for commentators, mere “sons of Adam” who soon return to dust (Psalm 90). After writing classic commentaries on the entire Bible, except Revelation, John Calvin died while finishing chapter 20 of his commentary on Ezekiel; and in modern times, William Brownlee died in 1983 after finishing his draft on Ezekiel 1-19 (published for the World Biblical Commentary series, 1986). Ezekiel, more than any other biblical book, emphasizes the fundamental concept of reformed theology: that the principal purpose of human life consists in glorifying God with all our being and rejoicing in the goodness of his presence.

## Outline

### I. 1-24 **Judgment against Judah and Jerusalem for their oppression, violence and idolatry.**

#### **1 – 3** *The Prophet's calling*

- 1:1-28 Vision of Yahweh's "throne-chariot"
- 2:1-3:15 The commission: God commands Ezekiel to eat a scroll
- 3:16-21 The prophet as sentinel
- 3:22-27 Ezekiel deprived of speech

#### **4 – 24** **Before the siege of Jerusalem**

- 4:1-17 Symbolic acts announce the siege of Jerusalem (inclusion: 24:1 - 14)
- 5:1-17 A sword against Jerusalem: as a razor to shave off hair and beards (symbols of mourning)
- 6:1-14 Against the mountains of Israel (idolatrous practices)
- 7:1-14 The end is near
- 15-27 The violence of powerful Israelites
- 8:1-18 Jerusalem's abominations: idolatry in the temple, violence on earth
- 9:1-10:17 Jerusalem's punishment
- 10:18-22 Yahweh's glory departs from the temple
- 11:1-13 Judgment against a violent oligarchy
- 14-21 A new alliance promised to the exiled
- 22-25 Yahweh's glory departs from the temple
- 12:1-16 Dramatization of exile
- 17-20 Punishment announced
- 21-28 Popular proverbs
- 13:1-16 Against the false prophets
- 17-23 and the false prophetesses
- 14:1-11 Against the idolatrous cult
- 12-23 Personal responsibility and four punishments
- 15:1-8 Parable: Israel compared to a useless vine
- 16:1-63 History of Yahweh's marriage with Jerusalem (the prostitute)
- 17:1-24 Allegory: two eagles (Nebuchadnezzar, Pharaoh) and the vine Jehoiachin and Zedekiah)
- 18:1-32 Individual responsibility, imminent retribution
- 19:1-14 Two mothers (lioness, vine): lament for two princes (kings) of Israel: Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin
- 20:1-44 Marriage history between Yahweh (faithful) and Israel (rebellious)  
[20:45-49 = 21:1-5 TM]
- 21:1-22 Yahweh's sword
- 23-32 The king of Babylon at the crossroad
- 22:1-31 The crimes of Jerusalem: violence, oppression, idolatry
- 23:1-49 Yahweh's marriage to two whores: Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem)



**1 The poor and the rich, oppression.** The denunciations in Ezekiel 1-24 are directed against Jerusalem's sins and the announcement of the city's imminent destruction. In this context, the prophet explicitly refers to the poor in only three texts (Ez. 16:48-50; 18:10-13; 22:29), but in each case makes clear that the fundamental cause of poverty is oppression.<sup>3</sup>

**1.1.** In the case of Ezekiel 16, David Pleins points out that the prophet denounces Jerusalem as sinful *since its birth*, without perpetuating any Israelite myth of invasion and conquest (→ Joshua):

To Ezekiel, the Jerusalemite exiles could not be accorded this mythological luxury because their origins as native Canaanites were betrayed by the very mode of operation adopted by their temple and bureaucratic establishment. Jerusalem's politics and religion were obviously pagan in origin and direction. No myth of national origins and heroic invasion by the ancient tribes as perpetuated by Ezekiel's opponents could veil this reality.<sup>4</sup>

The famous allegory in Ezekiel 16 of Jerusalem as adulterous whore has become important, as much for the poor as for women and sexual minorities (see sections 2 and 3 below). However, the prostitution and adultery of Jerusalem, Yahweh's wife, are symbolic expressions of the people's idolatry. Thus, even when comparing Jerusalem to Sodom, Ezekiel refers to no sexual sin but rather dwells on the oppression suffered by the poor.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>48</sup>As I live, says the Lord God, you sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. <sup>49</sup>This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her sisters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor (*ani*) and needy (*ebyon*). <sup>50</sup>They were haughty and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it. <sup>51</sup>Samaria has not committed half your sins; you have committed more abominations (*toeba, plural*) than they, and have made your sisters appear righteous by all the abominations (*toebal, plural*) you have committed (Ez. 16:48-51).

Some have tried to insist that the references to the "abomination" in Sodom refer to "homosexual practices".<sup>6</sup> However,

- (a) In Ezekiel 16:48-51 the prophet explicitly points out the lack of solidarity with the poor and oppressed, but does not explicitly refer to any sexual sin. As David Block, a conservative evangelical commentator, points out, "From Gen. 19 we have come to associate Sodom with homosexual gang rape, but Ezekiel does not even hint at this crime."<sup>7</sup>
- (b) In Ezekiel, following Deuteronomy, "abomination" mainly refers to *idolatry*.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, "YHWH makes clear why he hates idols and calls them 'abominations.' From YHWH's perspective, an idol is a visible representation of another god's land claim."<sup>9</sup>
- (c) If "abomination" in v.50 refers to Sodom's "homosexual practices", then v. 51 affirms that Jerusalem was guiltier than Sodom of such practices – a ridiculous conclusion, since in Genesis "*all*" the men of Sodom (19:4) attempted to rape the two angels.

- (d) Even had the prophet sought to allude to Sodom's sexual sins (attempted rape instead of appropriate hospitality), it would be but another example of oppression and violence. As David Block points out, if Ezekiel does not follow the alternative tradition about Sodom, his interpretation in 16:49-50 takes off from the meaning of the cry (*tse' aqah*) of the oppressed in Genesis 18:20-21. Nothing in the book of Ezekiel suggests as offense against some concept that the sexes mutually "complement" each other (details below, "3. Sexual Minorities").

Instead of accusing Ezekiel of homophobia, it is better to recognize that the prophet transcends such prejudices and "actually transforms the story of the destruction of Sodom by applying an economic interpretation: Sodom was destroyed because it withheld food from the poor (Ezek 16:49)."<sup>10</sup> Even though Ezekiel 16:49-50 has been the principal focus of controversy about sexual minorities in the book, that which the prophet himself made very clear was the sin of Sodom against the poor (see also Ezekiel 16 and 23 as the focus of controversy about women under "2" below).

**1.2.** The second explicit reference to the poor/oppressed in Ezekiel occurs in the famous chapter that insists in the responsibility of each person and divine judgment without delay:

<sup>10</sup>If he has a son who is violent, a shedder of blood, <sup>11</sup>who does any of these things (though his father does none of them), who eats upon the mountains, defiles his neighbor's wife, <sup>12</sup>oppresses the poor and the needy, commits robbery, does not restore the pledge [of the poor], lifts up his eyes to the idols, commits abomination, <sup>13</sup>takes advance or accrued interest; shall he then live? He shall not. He has done all these abominable things; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon himself (18:10-13).

As concrete synonyms for the poor, Ezekiel 18 also inculcates solidarity with the debtors, the famished and the naked (verses 7, 12-13, 16-17).<sup>11</sup> In addition to the references to the poor, vocabulary for the oppression abounds in the chapter: *yana*, 18:7, *ani*, v. 17; *ashaq*, verses 17-18; cf. the oppressor (*asha*), verses 20-21, 27.<sup>12</sup> A comparison of 18:13-16 (which explicitly refers to the poor) with 18:5-9 and 14-18 (which speaks of oppression and solidarity with the starving and naked (18:7, 16) shows that the presence of the poor is often explicit in the vocabulary for oppression and in concrete expressions of necessity (see Matthew 25:31-46, which also speaks of the poor only in concrete terms).

The "just" is characterized in Ezekiel 18 as a person who avoids oppression and demonstrates solidarity with the weak and the poor, the hungry and the naked. Traditionally, Ezekiel has been interpreted as the classic text about individual responsibility and, as a counterpoint to other texts where the Hebrew Bible teaches corporate responsibility, see the punishment of the sons up to the fourth generation in the Ten Commandments; Ex. 20:4-6; Deut 5:8-10; the punishment of the whole house of Achan in Joshua 7, etc.). David Pleins, on the other hand, insists that Ezekiel 18 teaches punishment and pardon that is immediate and not postponed for future generations; he concludes that in this way the prophet permitted that all the exiled have hope, could participate in the process of renovation and not feel they were still under a curse<sup>13</sup> (cf. S. Kaminsky, *Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible*; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995). Interpreted in

this way, the texts reflect different historical experiences and do not contradict like timeless theological dogmas.

**1.3** The third reference to the poor in Ezekiel occurs in the context (chapter 22) of denunciations of the four principle elements of the oligarchy in Jerusalem: false prophets (22:5, 28), priests (26), the ruling class (27) and land owners (29, literally, “the people of the land):<sup>14</sup>

The people of the land (*am haaretz*) have practiced extortion and committed robbery (*gazal*); they have oppressed (*yanah*) the poor (*ani*) and needy (*ebyon*), and have extorted from the alien (*ger*) without redress.

(For other references to the land owners as “the people of the land”, see 7:27; 12:19; 31:12; 33:2; 39:13; 45:16, 22; 46:3,9; 10 times in total).<sup>15</sup> As David Pleins points out, in spite of the few explicit references to the poor, the forcefulness of the texts in Ezekiel demonstrate that the prophet continues in the tradition of Amos and Micah.<sup>16</sup> The denunciation of oppression and the providing for the poor in their priestly utopia shows that the priests could be as militant as the prophets in their option for the poor and oppressed.<sup>17</sup> Thus, although only three texts explicitly denounce the oppression suffered by the poor, many more of the texts denounce the oppression and violence suffered by the people.

For example, quite unexpectedly, amongst all the detailed descriptions of the Temple and Jerusalem in Ezekiel 40-48 we find one of the severest denunciations against oppression and violence on the part of the ruling class:

8 It is to be his property in Israel. And my princes shall no longer oppress (*yanah*) my people; but they shall let the house of Israel have the land according to their tribes. 9 Thus says the Lord God: Enough, O princes of Israel! Put away violence (*khamas*) and oppression (*shod*), and do what is just (*tsedeqah*) and fair (*mishpat*). Cease your evictions of my people, says the Lord God (45:8-9; see also the rules for justice in the market place in 45:10-12).

This strong denunciation of oppression and violence does not explicitly refer to the poor, because *the people* in general are the victims of the oppression and violence perpetrated by the princes. The text is not an isolated phenomenon in the vision of the future in Ezekiel 40-48 – it finds its positive and radical counterpoint in the reference to the Year of Jubilee in the following chapters:

16 Thus says the Lord: If the prince makes a gift to any of his sons out of his inheritance, it shall belong to his sons. It is their holding by inheritance. 17 But if he makes a gift out of his inheritance to one of his servants, it shall be his to the year of liberty; then it shall revert to the prince; only his sons may keep a gift from his inheritance. 18 The prince shall not take any of the inheritance of the people, thrusting them out of their holding; he shall his sons their inheritance out of his own holding, so that none of my people shall be dispossessed of their holding (46:16-18).

As Walter Zimmerly points out the reference to the year of liberty (*deror*) refers specifically to the year of jubilee (→ Leviticus 25:8-13; Leslie Allen 1990:268).<sup>18</sup> The word *deror* also has this meaning in Lev 25:10, but in Jeremiah (34:8, 15, 17) it is used in reference to the liberation of the slaves. While Lev 25:13b speaks of the individual who returns to his ancestral property, Ezek 46:17 speaks of the property that returns to the prince. “The year of the Lord’s favor” in Isaiah 61:1-2, cited in Lucas 4:18-19 in reference to Jesus’ ministry of liberation also refers to the year of jubilee.<sup>19</sup> Ezekiel 48 appears to refer to the just and egalitarian distribution of the land after the conquest (Hosea 13-21) that the year of jubilee tried to preserve. The fact that Ezekiel 47, the miraculous river that flows forth from the Temple (the place of sacrifice) to bathe and heal the nations links the themes of liberation and justice with the ecology and the healing of the land. As Norman Habel points out, the land that suffers because of the sins of the people (especially of the violence of spilled blood), is redeemed, cleansed and blessed by the river of Ezekiel 47<sup>19a</sup> (2001:305-320).

Although only those three texts in Ezekiel speak explicitly of the poor as oppressed, in addition to the year of jubilee in 46:16-18, Ezekiel contains abundant denunciations of oppression and violence. Probably no other book contains so much vocabulary for oppression and its extreme expression in violence, and yet so few references to the poor. But Ezekiel denounces the elite class, because, in a society composed of basically two classes, the people in general suffer from the oppression and violence done by the rich and powerful.

In Ezekiel 1-24 especially common are condemnations of Jerusalem and the land because of their *violence* (*khamas*; 7:11,23; 8:17; 12:19; 22:26; 5 times total), which is to say, the spilling of innocent blood (7:23; 9:19; 22:2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 12, 13, 27; 23:45 [women, 2x]; 24:6, 6, 7, 9; 16 times total; see Jacques Pons 1981:27-52). Also in this section, the condemnation of oppression abound (*yanah*; 18:7, 12, 16; 3x; *ashaq*; 18:18, 18; 22:7, 12, 29, 29; 6x); *anah*, 22:10, 11; 2x). Another basic term for the oppressors in the “wicked” (*resh'im*; 3:18-19; 5:6; 7:21; 18:20-21, 24,27; 21:3-4, 25, 29; Hanks 1983:31; see the contrast with the righteous in 3:20-21). Also especially common in Ezekiel are the references to robbery (*gzl/gazel/ gezelah* 18:7, 7, 12, 12, 16, 16, 18, 18; 22:29, 29).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Walter Zimmerly shows that the term for the siege of Jerusalem (*matsor*; 4:2, 3, 7-8; 5:2) implies oppression. And the two kings of Judah, condemned in 9:1-14, are guilty of oppression and violence (like two lions).

The oracles against the nations (Ezek 25-32) do not explicitly refer to the poor, but denounce Tyre (28:3-6) and Egypt (30:4; 31:12; 32:12) for their wealth and arrogance. Furthermore, they condemn the violence of Tyre (*khamas*, 28:15) as well as that of Edom (35:6). For their cruelty (*aritz*), both Tyre (28:7) and Egypt (31:11; 32:12) were denounced. Also, for having taken vengeance against Israel, the prophet denounces Edom (25:12-14) and the Philistines (25:15-17) and points out the lack of solidarity with Israel on the part of Ammon (25:3; → Matthew 25:31-46).

In the oracles of hope (33-39) Ezekiel repeats his condemnation of violence (“blood that they shed” 33:25-26; 36:18) and denounces the violent shepherd-kings as “brutal” (*perek*, 34:4).<sup>21</sup> The prophet also introduces the “yoke” as a metaphor of the foreign oppression that

enslaves and produces hunger (34:27-29). For other expressions of oppression, see 33:15 (robbery, *gezelah*);<sup>22</sup> 33:31 (unjust gains); 34:8, 22 and 38:10-13 (plunder) and enemies-oppressors (*tsar II*, 39:23); wickedness (*resha'im*; 31:11; 33:8, 11-12).

Confronted with such oppression and violence, God does not remain indifferent, but reacts with an anger that is especially expressed against Judah and Jerusalem in the judgment of exile (Ezek 4-24), but also against oppressor nations (25-32; see 25:14, 17; 30:15). Ezekiel contains 79 explicit references to God's wrath and vengeance, mainly provoked by idolatry 17x (+ = prostitution 11 times and abomination 21 times), but 19x refers to oppression (6x) and violence (14x) as the principal cause.

**Liberating Justice (see Appendix IV).** As is common in the books of the Bible, the concept of divine and human justice reflects the paradigm of Exodus, where Yahweh punishes the oppressors (the Pharaoh and his Egyptian followers – see the plagues of de → Ex 1-12) in order to liberate the oppressed (the Israelite slaves [Ex 12-40]). Because of the historical context (the exiles of 598/7 and 587/86, with the fall of Jerusalem), Ezekiel spoke more of the divine justice that punishes, especially Jerusalem and Judah (Ezek 1-24), but also the oppressor nations (Ezek 25-32 y 35; see 28:26; 30:14, 19). In the final section (Ezek 40-48), in the vision of the future Temple, Ezekiel gives priority to the priestly order of Zadoq (“justice”; 44:15 and 48:11) over the Levites (44:9-14), probably an indication that Ezekiel himself belonged to this order of “just” priests. In the new promised order, the prophet shows that the distribution of land will be just and equitable, but without using the technical vocabulary for justice (47:13-48:29; → Joshua 13-21). Observing the measures of the year of jubilee guarantee that the land will continue to be fairly distributed among all forever (46:16-18). Despite such texts that speak of divine punitive justice, Ezekiel makes clear God's goodness and compassion and the fact that Yahweh does not desire to punish, but to pardon and liberate: “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they turn from their ways and live?” (18:23; see → Lam 3:22-24; 2 Peter 3:9). Not only Samaria and Jerusalem, but even Sodom will be pardoned and restored (Ez 16:53-63; → Rom 9:29; 11:32).

**They will know that I am Yahweh, (the Liberating God of the Exodus).** The fundamental element of Ezekiel's theology, which is expressed 80 times (counting all its variants), is the book's epistemological theme: they will know that I am Yahweh.<sup>23</sup> Yahweh's name, whose meaning was revealed to Moses in the Exodus (Ex 3:13-15 [E]; 6:1-9 [P]; see notes JB 3:13 and 6:2; NISB 3:13, 14, 15; 6:2, 6) insists on his character and presence as liberator of all oppression, injustice and violence. Another note (HCSB, Ex. 3:14) points out the relationship with Ex 33:19, with similar Hebrew syntax: “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy,” which emphasizes God's sovereign freedom. That is to say, to reveal and offer himself to Israelite slaves as the liberator from all oppression, God invites the people to experience liberty, to share and to manifest in love the same freedom that is central to God's manner and character (see also the preface to the Ten Commandments, Ex 20:1-2 // Deut 5:6).<sup>24</sup> Traditionally, many theological explanations of the name Yahweh begin with abstract and static concepts of Greek philosophy (of the “being” or “existence” of God), instead of faithfully reflecting the Hebrew sense of “Liberator”. Speaking of King Josiah, → Jeremiah made it clear the relationship between the meaning of Yahweh's name (Liberator of

oppression) and liberating justice: “He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? Says Yahweh”<sup>25</sup> (Jer 22:16→ 2 Peter).

In Ezekiel, as in the case of justice (punishing or liberating), the meaning of the name of Yahweh reveals more of its preliminary negative side in Ezekiel 1-24 and 25-32: judging and punishing the oppressor, God reveals his name. However, although the texts in Ezekiel are less, Yahweh’s ultimate purpose is always a universal liberation, and especially in Ezekiel 33-39 the prophet focuses on the liberator’s positive side (34:27, 30; 36:22-28; 37:13-14; see Appendix V). The epistemological theme does not occur in the final section (Ez 40-48), but Yahweh’s glory returns to the Temple (43:1-9) and the conclusion of the book again emphasizes the permanent presence of God the Liberator with his people: “And the name of the city from that time on shall be, The Lord is There (48:35; John 17:3; 1 John 5:13).

**2 Women.** According to Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, in elaborating on some of the feminine images of the previous prophets (→ Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah; cf. Lamentations) Ezekiel produced “some of the most misogynous texts in the Bible”.<sup>26</sup> She refers especially to Ezekiel 16 and 23, which describe Yahweh as a jealous husband (furious with the prostituted city/wife), the true agent behind the sexual violation that the city (feminine) of Jerusalem suffered during the conquest by the Babylonian troops.

According to the images in Ezekiel 16:1-63, Jerusalem was abandoned as an infant (1-5), but rescued and raised by Yahweh (6-7), who then took her as a wife as she matured and beautifully adorned her (8-14); Jerusalem then gave herself to prostitution (15-19a) and even sacrificed her children (19b-22); engaged in prostitution with Egyptian males (famous for having enormous penises, 23-26), then with the Assyrians (28), and finally with the Babylonians (29); worse than a prostitute, Jerusalem constructed a brothel where she paid her lovers instead of being paid (30-34); as just punishment, Yahweh says:

37 therefore, I will gather all your lovers, with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you hated; I will gather them against you from all around and will uncover your nakedness to them, so that they may see all your nakedness. 38 I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring blood upon you in wrath and jealousy. 39 I will deliver you into their hands, and they shall throw down your platform and break down your lofty places; they shall strip you of your clothes and take your beautiful objects and leave you naked and bare. 40 They shall bring up a mob against you, and they shall stone you and cut you to pieces with their swords. 41 They shall burn your houses and execute judgments on you in the sight of many women; I will stop you from playing the whore, and you shall also make no more payments. 42 So I will satisfy my fury on you, and my jealousy will turn away from you; I will be calm and will be angry no longer. 43 Because you have not remembered the days of your youth, but have enraged me with these things; therefore, I have returned your deeds upon your head, says the Lord God.

Ezekiel, then, compares Jerusalem with her older sister (Samaria) and her younger sister (Sodom) to conclude that Jerusalem was the most corrupt of the three (44-52) – and even

analyses Sodom's sin as a lack of solidarity with the poor and oppressed (not of "homosexuality" or another sexual sin; see 48-50 under **3 Sexual Minorities**); Yahweh promises the restoration of Sodom and Samaria together with Jerusalem (55-58); and finally Yahweh promises to establish a pact with Jerusalem and pardon all her sins (59-63).

With a certain variation of images Ezekiel 23:1-49 describes Jerusalem and Samaria as prostitutes that Yahweh took as wives (23:1-4; see → Hosea). Ezekiel creates the image to develop the role of Samaria (Ohola) as Jerusalem's (Oholibah) sister. According to these images, Yahweh is not only a bigamist husband, but also an incestuous one (prohibited in Lev 18:18; cf. Jacob married to the sisters Rachel and Leah, Gen 29:15-30).

First, the prophet describes the prostitution and the destruction of Samaria by the Assyrians in 722/21 B.C. (Ezek 23:5-10). Instead of learning from her sister's experience, Jerusalem (Oholibah) repeats the same error, but prostituting herself with the Babylonians (23:11-21), of whose penises the prophet says: "whose members were like those of donkeys, and whose emission was like that of stallions" (23:20) – a description so vivid that many commentators accuse Ezekiel of writing "pornography" (literally: "writings about prostitutes", a precise description of the contents of Ezekiel 16 and 23). Furthermore, Van Dijk-Memmes accuses Ezekiel of distorting the feminine experience: "Instead of reflecting female desire, this depiction betrays male obsession" (cited in Shields 141, note 54). As a consequence of Jerusalem's prostitution with the Babylonians, Yahweh will deliver the city into their hands to be destroyed (23:22-25) and "They shall...leave you naked and bare, and the nakedness of your whorings shall be exposed" (29b). The last verses elaborate on the accusations of sin and the details of the coming judgment (36-49).

Prompted by the brief piece by Gracia Fay Ellwood (1985:9-113), many articles and books have criticized the metaphors where Ezekiel presents Yahweh as an agent of sexual violation. Without doubt the most important is that of Mary Shields (2001:129-151) and Corrine Patton's (2000:221-239) response, where she attempts to defend the prophet. Shields points out the repetition in Ezek 23 of the Hebrew root for prostitute/prostitution (*znh*; with Egypt in 3, 8, 19-21, 27; with Assyria in 5, 7, 9, 12; with Chaldea/Babylonia in 14-27; a total of 20 times): "the narrator appears to be literally obsessed with prostitution".<sup>27</sup> In addition, the text continually refers to feminine breasts (23:8, 21, 34). In speaking of causing the cities/sisters to be naked, the prophet uses "language of sexual violation", which is the "normal" result of war<sup>28</sup> (also in Ezek 16:39). Shields concludes that of the divine punishment which the cities suffer: 'Placing the blame for sexual abuse on the victim is a classic tactic of abusers....In essence, YHWH blames the women for what Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon did, much like those who says that the Holocaust was caused by the Jews.'<sup>29</sup>

Although in Hebrew "Jerusalem" is feminine, the metaphor describes a city dominated by males and those males are also the prophet's audience (or readers; see the references to males who commit adultery with another's wife and who get close to a menstruating woman, Ezek 18:5-6, 15). However, Ezekiel 23 does not offer a lesson to the adulterous males, but instead concludes: "thus I will put an end to lewdness in the land, so that all *women* may take warning and not commit lewdness as you have done" (23:48)

Katheryn Pfisterer Darr concludes: “The original imagery’s inclusiveness has collapsed into a threat intended for women alone” (1998:198). Mary Shields is even more explicit:

The message for women is clear: Sexual politics allow women only the positive roles of wife and mother, stepping beyond those roles sexually will result in the terrifying violence, anger, and vengeance that this text exhibits. If a woman is not subordinate in some way, the biblical text itself in the form of Ezekiel 23 gives the warrant for a very violent response. Moreover, that response is conveyed in the voice of God (the “I” of the passage). Here is not only biblical, but *divine* justification for domestic violence

Robert Carroll agrees with Shields: The YHWH of these narratives [Ezek. 16 and 23] is a tyrant and a bully—an abusive husband of a kind utterly unacceptable to modern readers. This YHWH is a monster, guilty of bouts of pornographic violence” (cited in Shields 150, and note 52). According to Shields, then, the Yahweh of Ezekiel 16 and 23 is a type of sexual minority criminal, bigamist, sodomite and guilty of sexual violence against women. However, another feminist author, Corrine Patton, a Catholic who accepts the divine inspiration and authority of the text, attempts to refute the negative interpretations.

#### **Excursus: Corrine L. Patton on Ezekiel 23**

Lately, many authors have criticized the prophets, especially Ezekiel 23 and Jeremiah 13:22, 26 (see also Lamentations), for their use of sexual metaphors that represent God as sexually violating a woman. They have denounced the texts with this metaphor as “utmost texts of terror” for women and warn that they lend themselves to the encouragement and justification of abuse and violence against women on the part of men today (Gracia Fay Ellwood 1985; Julie Galambush 1992; Kathleen O’Connor 1992/98; Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes 1993; Renita Weems 1995; Cheryl Exum 1996; Mary Shields 1998). Writing about Ezekiel 23, Mary Shields even affirms that according to this text: “Esencialmente, YHWH culpa a las mujeres por los actos de Egipto, Asiria y Babilonia, que es muy parecido a los que culpan a los judíos por el Holocausto”.<sup>30</sup>

In answering the arguments of the feminist critic, Corrine Patton<sup>31</sup> recognizes that texts such as Ezekiel 23 describe God as the subject behind the act of sexual abuse, and that the metaphor poses a theological and anthropological question: if God is permitted to abuse his wives (Samaria and Jerusalem), then human husbands will view it as permissible to physically abuse their own wives. She recognizes the danger that the male reader may identify with the deity who abuses instead of the city which is abused.<sup>32</sup> However, she rejects the previous reactions that “declare this god no god, or this text not revelatory”.<sup>33</sup> As a Roman Catholic, she reads Ezekiel as part of the canon, inspired by God, with authority for today’s Church.<sup>34</sup>

As a feminist critic, Patton sees through the lense of gender to interpret the texts, but she interprets them as a subversion of the traditional dominant patriarchal concepts in Israel and antiquity. In the highly erotic language of texts like Ezekiel 23:

When the male audience recognized that the erotic female object represents male Israel, “a homoerotic dilemma was thus generated” [citing Howard Eilberg-Schwartz 1994:99]. The sexual attraction that fueled the marriage metaphor actually bound together two male subjects, an idea usually repugnant in Israelite society (Patton 227)

Patton insists that the point of Ezekiel 23 is precisely to insist that the guilt for the horrible destruction of Jerusalem is the city’s itself and not God’s.

The excessive violence does not arise from the pen of a male author sitting safely in his office and affected only intellectually by the fall of t his city. It is told from the perspective of a once-elite member of society who has been dragged off in chains to an unclean land, who sits powerless, “dumb,” as his nation is destroyed and hjis world turned upside down. His concern is not with how husbands will use the text to reinforce cultural presumptions of gender; especially from the perspective of the final form of the book, there is no native Judahite culture left.<sup>35</sup>

She insists that the feminist critics have not sufficiently focused on the author’s tragic historical context that uses the metaphor and thus they misinterpret it.

Patton also emphasizes the metaphors’ limitations and dangers and insists: “at some point the metaphor fails”.<sup>36</sup> When the authors of the New Testament want to stress that the second coming of the Lord will be sudden, they resort to a metaphor and assert that Jesus will come “like a thief in the night” ” (Matthew 24:43; Luke2:39; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Peter 4:15; Rev. 3:3; 16:15). But the reader would be guilty of a ridiculous distortion if he used the metaphor to justify robbing of bank.

Likewise, the metaphor that describes Yahweh as sexually violating Jerusalem and Samaria (his wives) in no way justifies violence against women. In the destruction of Samaria (722/721 B.C.) by the Assyrians and Jerusalem (587/86 B.C.) by the Babylonians, not only the women, but also the men literally suffered sexual violation, and in addition, many of the men were castrated (see the eunuchs in Isaiah 56:3-5).<sup>37</sup> In addressing a mainly male audience and readers, the prophets first:

- subverted the rules of gender in speaking to them as “wives”, then
- insisting that they weren’t innocent victims but rather guilty for the destruction of the city, and
- ending by emphasizing that Yahweh, not the pagan gods, was always the agent in control of the judgment.

In this way, the prophets attempted to defend Yahweh’s honor against the pagan gods of the imperial conquerors that many supposed to have demonstrated that they were more powerful than the God of a conquered Israel. Without doubt, in speaking of Yahweh as someone who violated his own wives, the prophets used a very daring and shocking metaphor, but the times and the circumstances did not permit timidity. However, such a

metaphor does not justify bigamy (Yahweh with two wives), nor the sexual violation of women by the male readers:

[Ezequiel 23] no es un texto que presenta la violencia sexual contra mujeres como algo bueno. La metáfora no funcionaría si la audiencia de varones no fuesen chocados.... Ezequiel funciona bien [retóricamente] precisamente porque varones como Ezequiel comprendieron perfectamente la imagen de violencia sexual.... El texto no significa que los autores masculinos fueron insensibles al abuso sexual, sino que lo habían sufrido personalmente.<sup>38</sup>

And in addition to being scandalized by the metaphor, the male audience would be insulted, since God, through the prophet, addressed them as if they were women. Patton<sup>39</sup> recognized that such an insult only functioned well rhetorically in a patriarchal and machistic culture where it would be an insult to speak of men (supposedly superior) as if they were women (supposedly inferior). However, such texts present us with a God for whom not even sexual violation, mutilation nor castration in wartime is left without hope of healing and redemption: "The raped, the mutilated, the ashamed: all are in God's hand"<sup>40</sup> (cf. Ezek 22:1-16, where the prophet denounces, without feminine metaphors, Jerusalem as a city dominated by violent and idolatrous males.

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In addition to the controversies about Ezekiel 16 and 23, the feminist studies have focused on two other oracles where the prophet criticizes the religious activities of Israelite women as idolatrous (Ezek 8:14-15; 13:17-23).<sup>41</sup> In his vision of the four abominations in Jerusalem, in the third Ezekiel describes certain women thus:

14 Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the Lord: women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz. 15 The he said to me, "Have you seen this, O mortal? You will see still greater abominations than these" (Ezek 8:14-15).

Tammuz was a god of vegetation in ancient Mesopotamia, venerated especially by women (RV95EE, DHHBE, BJ, notes). As is common in Ezekiel, the "abomination" refers to idolatry, not "homosexuality" (see below). Thorkild Jacobsen points out Tammuz' lack of tradition virtues interpreted as manly: courage, creativity, perseverance; the women adored Tammuz (married to the goddess Inana) rather for his youthful character, lack of responsibility, dependence and vulnerability (Jacobsen, cited by Katheryn Pfisterer Darr<sup>42</sup>). Tammuz would be an example of a "gentle" but heterosexual male (→ 1 Cor 6:9-10).

Ezekiel's concluding Utopia (40-48), describes the new Jerusalem as a theocracy governed by priests (males, supposedly heterosexual), strictly limited regarding the matrimonies that they could contract: "They shall not marry a widow, or a divorced woman, but only a virgin of the stock of the house of Israel, or a widow who is the widow of a priest" (44:22). The dialectic contrast with → Jeremiah's hope for a new covenant characterized by women – "amazons" – that break with the traditional gender schemes is striking.

Another dialectic contrast is the vision in Ezekiel 47:1-12 of the river that springs from the Temple (the place of sacrifice) to irrigate and fructify all the land – an image of pure grace and life in a context in which all is structured by laws. Water that surges from the earth is a common image in feminine fertility (Songs 4:15; Psalms 87; Jer 13:12; Isa 51:3) and three ancestors of Israel (Isaac, Gen 24:11-49; Jacob, Gen 29:1-14; and Moses, Ex 2:15-22) found their wives by a well, a symbol of the a virgin's fertility.<sup>43</sup> Jesus, on the other hand, finds the Samaritan (representing sexual minorities) by a well in → John 4, not to procreate, but to evangelize the city (see 7:37-39; 3:5; → Rev 22:1-2).

David Pleins<sup>44</sup> points out that the story about the marriage of Yahweh to Jerusalem in Ezek 16:6-9 considers matrimony as a pact with vows (see also the new eternal covenant in 16:59-63). The covenant between God and Israel is established between a superior and an inferior, a sovereign and subject. The application of matrimony reaffirms the patriarchal concept of the institution as a reflection of the ideology of the superiority and authority of the man over the woman (inferior and submissive). However, by not treating matrimony as a pact between two men (the husband with the father of the woman), and interpreting it as a covenant between husband and wife (Yahweh with his people), the prophetic image prepares us for the concept of marriage as a covenant (with vows) between husband and wife as equal beings (→ Gal 3:28; cf. Guy Hugenberger<sup>45</sup>, who overlooks the Bible's patriarchal context and ignores the texts that treat matrimony as a pact between men, where women are treated as property that passes from father to spouse; see Countryman<sup>46</sup>).

**3 Sexual Minorities: Violence, Pornography and Utopia.** Ezekiel demonstrates how a person can well be “queer” (eccentric, subversive, with strange behavior, contradicting and twisting the rules of society) without being Gay. Of the story of the death of his beloved wife (“the delight of your eyes”, 24:15-27), we can conclude that the prophet was heterosexual, but left a widower, without children, and never again married – making him, in effect, a “eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (→ Matthew 19:12; see “bizarre” person (Galambush DBI I 375; cf. the commandment to procreate in Gen 1:28 and the levirate marriage in Deut 25:5-10). The prophet Isaiah was also married (to a prophetess) and even had children (→ Is 8), and God commanded → Hosea to marry a whore and have children with her. But Jeremiah and eleven of the twelve Minor Prophets apparently did not take wives (nor did → Daniel), since to be a prophet in Israel was comparable to being a shaman in other cultures (usually not married, often Gay → Nahum). Thus, although Ezekiel began as a priest (married), he ended as a prophet/shaman (widower/bachelor). Thus, since by God’s providence he was firmly allied to other sexual minorities, Ezekiel may be said to manifest the splendor of the rainbow which he envisioned appropriately at the heart of “the appearance of the likeness of Yahweh’s glory” (1:27-29)--since throughout the Bible God loves the colorful diversity of her creation (Psalm 104:24; → Genesis 9:8-17; Revelations 4:3; 10:1).

Ezekiel denounces many sins. but seldom focuses on sexual sins, and in those cases always refers to heterosexual sins (adultery, incest, rape, sex with a menstruating woman). Although his references to prostitution are common, the prophet employs this language as a metaphor for Israelite idolatry and collusion with oppressive empires. Of the many sins denounced by Ezekiel, no text explicitly condemns homoerotic sexual relations. However, the comparison of Jerusalem with Sodom has provoked diverse interpretations. Although the story of Genesis 19 concerning Sodom does not describe the city’s sin as an “abomination”, the two prohibitions of anal sex between men in Leviticus (18:22; 20:13) employs this term (but without naming Sodom). Thus, some authors conclude that Sodom’s “abomination” (*to’eba*) in Ezekiel 16:50 refers to the condemnation in Leviticus of anal sexual relations between men.<sup>47</sup>

The great majority of Biblicists, however, now recognize that the story in Genesis 19 does not condemn “homosexuality” (which describes the sexual orientation of certain persons and includes lesbians), but rather the endeavor to sexually violate the two visiting angels (instead of offering them hospitality, as did Abraham in Genesis 18, according to the fundamental customs of the Ancient Orient).<sup>48</sup> Thus even Richard Hays, who tries to establish a Biblical argument against homosexuality, admits: “The notorious story of Sodom and Gomorrah—often cited in connection with homosexuality—is actually irrelevant to the topic” (cited in Gagnon 2001:71, note 74).

Robert Gagnon, with enormous effort, attempts to compel the “fructification and multiplication” of those very few texts still cited as supposed condemnations of “homosexuality” in the Bible. In this struggle to prove that the reference to Sodom’s “abomination” (Ezek 16:49-51) refers to homoerotic relations (79-87), Gagnon at least has a more solid basis than his fundamentalist predecessors, since he accepts the common conclusion that the Holiness Code (Lev 17-26) does not come directly from Moses (in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.) but priestly circles, perhaps as late as the Exile (586-539), the same

epoch when Ezekiel also prophesied)<sup>49</sup> (Gagnon also accepts the assigning of the “cycle of Sodom” [Genesis 18-19] to the Yahwist source of the Pentateuch.<sup>50</sup> However, the golden rule of hermeneutics (the context) demands that we first keep in mind the significance of “abomination” in *Ezekiel itself* (43 times plus two of the verb), before resorting to another contemporary source such as the Holiness Code (Ezek 17-26, with its references to anal sex between men as an “abomination” (Lev 18:22; 20:13). And as George Edwards has shown (1984:53), “abomination” (*ʾoʿeba*) in Ezekiel mainly refers to idolatry and twice to the heterosexual sin of adultery (Ezeq 22:11; 33:26; see AB 450, 683), but never to anal sex between men (see chart below). The immediate context in Ezekiel 16 confirms this conclusion, since it says of Jerusalem:

49 This was the guilt of your sister Sodom:

(1) *arrogance*

(2) gluttony [excess of food]

(3) she and her sisters [other villages in the region] had prosperous ease and were apathetic

(4) but did not aid the poor and the needy

50 (5) but were haughty

(6) and did abominable [*ʾoʿeba*, singular] things before me, therefore I removed them when I saw it

51 Samaria has not committed half your sins: you have committed more abominations than they, and have made your sisters appear righteous by all the abominations that you have committed.

In spite of the abundant evidence that he cites against it, Robert Gagnon admits that it is conceivable that the reference in Ezekiel 16:50 to Sodom’s “abomination” does not refer to idolatry, but to the attempt to sexually violate the two visiting angels (which Gagnon refers to as “homosexual relations”, but not including lesbians).<sup>51</sup> In order to cast doubt that “abomination” in Ezekiel 16:50 has a common meaning of idolatry, Gagnon gives six arguments and Donald Wold adds a seventh:

1 the reference to Sodom in 16:50 speaks of its “abomination” in the singular (like the singular in Lev 18:22 and 20:13), while the other uses that speak of Jerusalem’s abominations employ the plural.<sup>52</sup>

- The plural is more appropriate with reference to Jerusalem in 16:49-50, because the prophet insists that Jerusalem is more sinful than Sodom. Or the singular could be generic, an insignificant stylistic variation (see the plural in 18:13). Of the other three singular uses in Ezekiel, one refers to idolatry (18:12) and two to adultery. Since Ezekiel 16:49-50 stresses the oppression of the poor and defenseless, the final reference (abomination) probably refers to idolatry, which in other texts commonly refers to the ideology of the oppressors (see the above texts under 1 The Poor).

2. Two other uses “abomination” (in the singular) in Ezekiel also refer to sexual sins (22:11; 33:26).<sup>53</sup>

- The other two uses of abomination (singular; Ezek 22:11; 33:26) refer to heterosexual sins (adultery, incest, sexual violation) – not to homoerotic relations.
3. The use of the singular “abomination” in Ezekiel 18:12 with the plural “abominations” in 18:13 are similar to the use in Leviticus 18:22 (singular) and 18:24-30 (plural) and thus supports the interpretation of the singular in Ezekiel 16:50 (followed by two plurals in 16:51) as a reference to homosexual intercourse, the one specific act that “deserves the label above all others.”<sup>54</sup>
- The use of “abomination” (singular) in Ezekiel 18:12 refers to idolatry in the previous sentence, since such is the common meaning in Ezekiel; obviously, in Ezekiel it is idolatry that most deserves the qualification of “abomination”, as Gagnon himself has admitted.<sup>55</sup>
4. 16:43 refers to Jerusalem’s sins as *zimma* (plot, intrigue, infamy),<sup>57</sup> which denotes premeditated sexual sins (Judges 20:6; Ezek 16:27, 58; 22:9; 23:27, 29, 35, 44, 48; 24:13):
- all the sexual sins denoted by *zimma* are also heterosexual sins, no homoerotic;
5. Ezekiel 16:49-50, then, presents a four-step progression (not three) which culminates with a reference to homosexual relations.<sup>58</sup>
- The progression in Ezekiel is of six steps (not four) and the focus in steps 1-5 on arrogance and the oppression of the poor and weak shows that Sodom’s abomination is also a sin of this type (as in Isaiah 1 and Amos 4:11).
6. Gagnon also cites Ezekiel 22:11 as another reference where “abomination” refers to “sexual immorality”: “A male commits abomination (*to’eba*) with his neighbor’s wife; another lewdly defiles (*zimmah*) his daughter-in-law; another in you defiles his sister, his father’s daughter.”<sup>59</sup>
- Ezekiel 22:11 does not speak of “sexual immorality” (a wide, vague category) but very specifically of adultery and incest (heterosexual sins). Gagnon, thus, first places the specific heterosexual sins in his general category (“sexual immorality”), then equates this general category with the prohibitions of anal sex between men in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. The Biblical texts, however, speak of specific sins, not with the vague general category which Gagnon imposes – thus, there is no exegetic basis for treating them as equivalents.
7. Gagnon seeks support in Jeremiah, where the prophet condemns Jerusalem’s “adultery” as something comparable to the sin of Sodom: “But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a more shocking thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from wickedness; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah (Jer 23:14).

- Gagnon can only violate the text of Jeremiah – inserting his concept of homosexuality – by (1) changing the category of (adultery) in Jeremiah to “sexual immorality” (in its general meaning), and then (2) “interpreting” sexual immorality according to his prejudices by referring to homosexuality (should it be masturbation or inter-racial marriage, according to the common prejudices of another epoch). However, the “adultery” condemned in Jeremiah 23:14 is a metaphor for idolatry (“and walk in lies”, as the following phrase explains <sup>60</sup>), related to the abuses of power (“strengthen the hands of evildoers”) – precisely the type of sin the men of Sodom were committing.

Normally, when speaking of “abomination(s)”, Ezekiel refers to the idolatrous practices that provided the common religious justification for oppression and violence. Thus, when the prophet culminates his series of denunciations against the arrogance and oppression of Sodom with a reference to its “abomination”, he is probably referring to the city’s idolatry. It is highly improbable that the prophet would have hoped that his hearers/readers to have recognized Lev 18 and 20 in order to have grasped an allusion to the prohibition of anal sex between males as an “abomination” in these texts. But even if such were his expectation, by placing the reference to Sodom’s “abomination” at the end of a list of denunciations of arrogance and lack of solidarity with the poor and the weak, it would be nothing more than a correct interpretation of Genesis 19 as a description of the effort to sexually violate the two angels and a reading of Lev 18 and 20 also as prohibitions of sexual violation. At any rate, nothing in the book of Ezekiel supports Gagnon’s idea that Ezekiel condemns Sodom for lack of respect of the principal that the two sexes mutually complement each other. And by shaving (Ezek 5), the prophet even breaks with such schemes to make oneself more “effeminate”, according to the cultural norms of the epoch; also for not having married again and procreated children after the death of his wife (Ezek 24), and for not participating in the war, but proclaiming a God of peace and reconciliation (Ezek 36).

Thus, George Edwards’ conclusion stands without refutation: in the 39 references to Sodom in the Hebrew Bible, the city is usually a symbol of the divine judgment of evil, without explaining any sins – and the few texts that mention a specific sin never speak of sexual sins. The New Testament (9 references) also reflects this use and when Jesus suggests a specific sin, it is inhospitality. Only → Judas 7 relates Sodom with a sexual sin, but makes it explicit that the sexual sin was the attempt to violate the two angels (“different flesh” <sup>61</sup>; see also Richard Bauckham, ignored by Gagnon). If the reference to Sodom’s abomination refers to a sexual sin, then, this sin takes its place as the culmination of a series of denunciations of sins of arrogance and oppression and must be interpreted as an example of sexual violation.

**“Sodom” in the Bible: Hebrew Bible 39x; New Testament 9x; Total 48x in the Bible**  
 (\*=general judgment, without specifying the sin)

1	Genesis	(J):	Table of the Nations, home of the Canaanite clans
	10:19		
2	13:10	(J, Lot):	prosperous region, like Eden
3	12	(P, Lot):	put his tent near Sodom
4	13	(J):	the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners

		against the Lord
5-12	14:2, 8, 10, 17, 21, 22;	King of Sodom (Bera), 7x; Lot lives in Sodom, v. 10
13-16 (J)	18:16, 20, 22, 26	Abraham's hospitality (1-15), who intercedes for Sodom
	(16-33)	v. 21 "cry" ( <i>za'aq</i> ) against Sodom's injustice
17-18 (J)	19:1	two angels arrive at Sodom; Lot seated at the city gate
19 (J)	4:	sin: try to sexually violate the visiting angels
20-21 (J)	24, 28:	destruction of Sodom
*22 Deut	29:23	(D): destruction of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim
*23	32:32	(E): Sodom and Israel's idolatry (15-21)
24-25 Isaiah	1:9-10	Jerusalem destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah (oppression, 17,23)
*26	3:9	Jerusalem and Judah destroyed, display their oppression (5, 12) like Sodom
*27	13:19	Babylon destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah (arrogance, v. 19)
*28 Jeremiah	23:14	Jerusalem destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah (adultery=idolatry, 14)
*29	49:18	Edom destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah (arrogance, v 16)
*30	50:40	Babylon destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah (oppression, v. 33)
*31 Lam	4:6	Jerusalem destroyed like Sodom
32 Ezekiel	16:46	Sodom, younger sister of Jerusalem (abominations, v. 47)
33	48	Jerusalem more sinful than Sodom
34	16:49	This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: (1) <i>arrogance</i> (2) excess of food (3) she and her sisters [other villages in their region] had apathy (4) but did not aid the poor ( <i>'ani</i> ) and the needy ( <i>'ebyon</i> ); (5) they were haughty (6) and did abominable things before me; [to <i>'eba</i> , singular], there I removed them when I saw it.
	50	

Cf. *to'eba* ("abominations") in Ezekiel 16:2, 22, 25 (verb), 36 (idols), 43 (+*zimmah*), 47, 50 (singular), 51, 52 (verb), 58 (+*zimmah*)

35	53	Sodom, Samaria and Jerusalem will be restored
36	55	Sodom, Samaria and Jerusalem will be restored
37	56	Jerusalem, in its epoch of arrogance, mocked Sodom

- \*38 Amos 4:11 Israel destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah (oppression, v 1)  
 \*39 Zephaniah 2:9 Moab destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah (arrogance, v 10)  
 (cf. \*Hosea 11:8, other cities, Admah and Zeboiim, destroyed like Sodom, see Deut 29:23)

Note: in the five texts, in the RV and other old version, *qedeshim* (“consecrated”) is badly translated as “sodomites” (Deut 23:17; 1 Kings 134:24; 15:22; 22:46; 1 Kings 13:7).

#### **New Testament (9 times)**

- 1 Matthew 10:15 // Luke 10:12, = Q lack of hospitality  
 \*2 11:23 Woes about the unrepentant cities, Sodom should have repented  
 \*3 24 on the day of judgment will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you  
 4 Luke 10:12 // Matthew 10:15 = Q, lack of hospitality  
 \*5 17:29 but on the day that Lot left Sodom...destruction  
 \*6 Romans 9:29 cites Isaiah 1:9: “we would have fared like Sodom...Gomorrah (total destruction)  
 7 Judas 7 Sodom and Gomorrah: sexual violation of angels (“other flesh”)  
 \*8 2 Peter 2:6 destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah  
 \*9 Revelations 11:8 “the great city [Jerusalem] that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt”

#### **Sodom in the bible (48 times) – Conclusions:**

1. In the Bible Sodom is always and only *a place* (city), never a sin (“sodomy”)
2. The sin of “sodomy” was invented by a medieval monk, Pedro Damian (ca. 1050A.D.), but it never received a clear definition (anal sex, anal sex between men, bestiality, any unapproved sexual practice).<sup>62</sup> Thus there has always been a lot of confusion with laws against “sodomy”.
3. Usually the Bible refers to the destruction of Sodom simply as an example of divine justice against evil, without specifying the sin (=\*; 12 times BH; 6 times NT).<sup>63</sup>
4. When the Hebrew Bible refers to the specific sins of Sodom, it never refers to sexual sins, but to arrogance, idolatry, oppression and violence (11 times; the only possible exception would be Ezek 16:49-50, where the emphasis is also on sins of pride and oppression). The “abomination of Sodom in Ezekiel 16:50 probably refers to idolatry, according to the dominant use in Ezekiel.<sup>64</sup>
5. In the NT also, Sodom mostly serves as a symbol of divine justice, without being related to any sexual sin (see divine justice in Romans 9:29, not associated with Romans 1:24-27).
6. Notably, the only text of Jesus that speaks of a sin of Sodom specifies the lack of hospitality, not a sexual sin (Luke 10 // Mat 10, from the primitive source Q).

7. The only text in the Bible that explicitly relates Sodom with a sexual sin (Judas 7) says that the sexual sin concerned the attempt to violate “other flesh”, meaning, of angels.

8. The apocryphal and pseudo epigraphic literature (ca. 200 B.C. – 100 A.D.) reflects more the homophobic prejudices of the Judaic culture (against the dominant Greco-Roman cultures) and begin to relate Sodom with sexual sins, especially anal sexual relations between men.<sup>65</sup>

**Abomination (*to`eba*) 116x HB, in Ezekiel: 45x: 39 plural; 4x singular (16:50; 18:12; 22:11; 33:26); +2x verb (16:25, 52); \*= explicit idolatry 25x, cf. Edwards (1984:53)**

Zimmerly I:190: “a comprehensive term for all sins of cultic impurity, to which the evils on the mountains of Israel belonged in a particular measure.”

1-2 5:9\* and 11\* (NVI “repugnant idols”)  
3-4 6:9\*, 11\* idolatry  
5-9 7:3-4, 8, 9, 20\* idolatry  
10-15 8:6\*, 6\*, 9\*, 13\*, 15\*, 17\* idolatry + violence  
16 9:4 (violence and injustice/filth v. 9)  
17-18 11:18\*, 21\* (“repugnant idols”)  
19 12:16 (non-specific in the immediate context)  
20 14:6\* idolatry

**21-31 16:2, 22, 25, [verb], 36\*, 43, 47, 50 [collective singular], 51, 52 [verb], 58, (idolatry, infant sacrifice; sg 50 “injustice”; HCSB note, 16:44-52)**

32-34 18:12\* (sg), 13\*, 24 idolatry + injustice  
35 20:4\*, [cf. 7-8, 30] idolatry, profaning of Saturday  
36-37 22:2\* idolatry, violence; 11 sg. adultery  
38 23:36\* idolatry (“prostitution...adultery”), violence, infant sacrifice, Saturdays  
39-40 33:26\* (sg), 29\* idolatry, eating and spilling of blood (v. 26)  
41 36:31\* idolatry (v. 25)  
42 43:8\* idolatry (v. 7)  
43-44 44:6-7 uncircumcised foreigners in the Temple (7-9)  
45 13\* idolatry (v. 10, 12)

#### **Abomination (singular) in Ezekiel (4 times)**

16:50 Arrogant Sodom, they did *abominable* things  
18:12(-13) a son who is violent...lifts up his eyes to the idols, commits abominations...  
13 all these abominable things  
22:11 One commits abomination with his neighbor’s wife (= adultery) + incest and violation of his sister (*zimmah*); see 22;6-16.  
33:26 You depend on your swords, you commit abominations, and each of you defiles his neighbor’s wife (= adultery; see 25026)

### **Abomination in Leviticus (6 times; all in the Holiness Code, Lev 16-27)**

- 1 Lev 18:22 (sg.) anal relations between males
- 2 26 pl. all the condemned Canaanite practices: 16 types of incest (6-18),
- 3 27 pl. relations with a menstruating woman (19), adultery (20),
- 4 29 pl. sacrifice of infants to Molech (21), anal relations between males (22),
- 5 30 pl. bestiality (23)
- 6 20:13 sg. anal relations between males

**Cf. abomination in Deut (17x: idolatry 11-13x; other cultic sins 2x; injustice 1x).**  
Ezekiel, focusing mainly on idolatry, follows Deuteronomy, not Leviticus.

### **“Abomination(s) in the Hebrew Bible (116x) and Ezekiel (45x) – Conclusions**

1. Of the 116 references in the Hebrew Bible, only twice does it refer to relations (anal) between two males (Lev 18:22; 20:13, singular). Even in Lev 18, it is used 4 times in a broader sense to refer to various repugnant sexual practices and once for an idolatrous practice (infant sacrifice).
2. Of 45 uses in Ezekiel, 42 refer to other practices: idolatry (24x), violence (10x), only twice to sexual sins, and those being heterosexual (adultery, prostitution).
3. Of the 45 references in Ezekiel, only one (16:50) could “conceivably” refer to anal relations between two males (the “abomination” of Lev 18:22 and 20:13) applied to the attempt made by two men from Sodom to sexually violate the two visiting angels (instead of showing them proper hospitality). If such was Ezekiel’s intention (highly improbable), very few of the listeners/readers would have grasped the meaning, since in two other of Ezekiel’s own oracles, “abomination” was always concerned with other concerns, mainly with idolatry.
4. Obviously, Ezekiel wanted to emphasize social injustice, and as Sodom oppressed the poor – did not explicitly refer to any sexual sin.<sup>66</sup>
5. “The context is a comparison of the ‘abominations’ of Jerusalem/Judah with those of her ‘sisters’ Samaria and Sodom. In ch. 16, Jerusalem’s ‘abominations’ are idolatrous actions (image making, child sacrifices, foreign alliances)...Thus, on the level of allegory, Jerusalem’s ‘abominations’ are sexual sins; on the level of reality, Jerusalem’s ‘abominations’ are idolatrous practices.”<sup>67</sup>
6. Instead of treating Sodom’s abomination (16:50) as a description of social injustice (16:49), Gagnon prefers to understand it as referring to a distinctly different sin, homosexual practice.
7. Still, Gagnon admits another alternative (citing Loader): that the Sodomites *sexual violence* is also an expression of oppression and social violence.<sup>68</sup> If we accept this interpretation, Gagnon seeks to qualify it thus: the “‘abomination’ may have in view the rape of defenseless visitors, sheltered by a resident alien, made doubly offensive by the inherent degradation of same-sex intercourse, as a particularly vivid instance of crimes against ‘the poor and the needy’”.<sup>69</sup>

Another text important for sexual minorities reflects well the limitations of Ezekiel's priestly theology, since it says that Levite priests, descendants of Zadok (44:15) that serve in the ideal Temple of the future: "They shall teach my people the difference between the holy and the common, and show them how to distinguish between the clean and the unclean" (44:23). John Boswell has pointed out that "abomination" is a priestly category that does not imply that an activity or conduct thus designated is always unacceptable.<sup>70</sup>

William Countryman has noted that in → Romans 1:24-27 Peter does not designate sexual activities as unjust (see 1:18, 29-32), but as "impure" (Rom 1:24, see also Daniel Helminiak<sup>71</sup>). And as Jesus has transcended the priestly categories of Leviticus by declaring all food clean (→ Mark 7:19), in Romans Peter does a type of deconstruction of the priestly categories of Romans 1:24-27, when he later insists, in the same letter, that "nothing is unclean in itself" (Rom 14:14), since "everything is indeed clean" (Rom 14→ Titus 1:15; → Acts 10-11). Even the majority of dispensationalist theologians and other fundamentalists conclude that, in the light of the teachings of →Hebrews, there will not be animal sacrifices in future cults, in spite of the teachings of Ezekiel (43:13-27; 44:9-16; 45:13-25; 46:11-15, 19-24). Robert Gagnon, conscious of these texts and arguments, attempts to maintain the authority of the priestly theology for today's church, but must deny that Jesus had made the declaration in Mark 7:19 that all food is clean (he explains it as Mark's commentary that Jesus had not accepted!).<sup>72</sup>

At any rate, Ezekiel anticipates the teachings of Jesus and Peter about purity of heart when he says of Israel:

I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. *I will put my spirit within you*, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people and I shall be your God (36:24-28, NVI; see 11:17-21; 18:31; Psalms 51:10; Isa 44:3).

This vision of personal renewal by the coming and the dwelling of the Spirit in each individual is the dialectic counterpoint to the project of renewal of the cult and society at the end of the book (Ezekiel 40-48). Ezekiel's promises about the spirit complement the divine promises of Jeremiah 31; 31-34 about the new covenant, with the provision to write God's Law (Torah) on the heart. Jeremiah is more explicit about the transformation of sexual roles in the promised future (31:22), but Ezekiel, with his strange symbolic behavior and his manner, also anticipates these transformations.

And even in his vision of the new Temple, where animals are again sacrificed (cf. Lev 1-7), in his prophecy concerning the great river that flows from the Temple (the place of the sacrifices), Ezekiel also foresees a state that transcends the traditional rites of Leviticus 1-7 (47:1-12; cf. Zach 14:8; Rev 22:1-2). The fruit trees on the river banks offer not only nourishment, but also leaves for curing illnesses (v. 12), which is of profound significance for the ecology of the modern world.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, in light of Jeremiah and the New

Testament, we can see that God promises to cleanse the sexual minorities of all sin (idolatry, injustice, oppression), but to never propose to change the color of the eyes, its preference for the left/right hand, or its sexual preference (since it is not a sickness, but a gift from God) – thus did God create us in the maternal womb (Psalm 139:1-6). Therefore, God does not cleanse us of our homosexuality, but is indeed cleansing the world of homophobia, racism and sexism – emotional illnesses that inspire so much violence. Ezekiel shows that God’s purpose (to cleanse and to heal) will triumph, like the great river (see Jesus: “...your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” Mat 6:10).

Also pertinent is Ezekiel’s call as sentinel/guard (3:16-21 // 33:1-9):

16 At the end of seven days, the word of the Lord came to me: 17 Mortal, I have made you a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. 18 If I say to the wicked, “You shall surely die,” and you give them no warning, or speak to warn the wicked from their wicked way, in order to save their life, those wicked persons shall die for their iniquity; but their blood I will require from your hand. 19 But if you warn the wicked, and they do not turn from their wickedness, or from their wicked way, they shall die for their iniquity; but you will have saved your life. 20 Again, if the righteous turn from their righteousness and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumbling block before them, they shall die; because you have not warned them, they shall die for their sin, and their righteous deeds that they have done will not be remembered; but their blood I will require at your hand. 21 If, however, you warn the righteous not to sin, and they do not sin, they shall surely live, because they took warning; and you will have saved your life.

1 The word of the Lord came to me: 2 O Mortal, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take one of their number as their sentinel; 3 and if the sentinel see the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people; 4 then if any who hear the sound of the trumpet do not take warning, and the sword comes and takes them away, their blood shall be upon their own heads. 5 They heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning; their blood shall be upon themselves. But if they had taken warning, they would have saved their lives. 6 But if the sentinel sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any of them, they are taken away in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at the sentinel’s hand.

7. So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. 8 If I say to the wicked, “O wicked ones, you shall surely die,” and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. 9 But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

Traditionally, it is used in the church to emphasize the urgency of the work of evangelizing, although such a use easily distorts Jesus' Good News for the poor and oppressed by making it more a notice of such bad news as the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Does God really want each Christian to dedicate himself to evangelizing with all the zeal of a Billy Graham? In Colossians Peter is portrayed as zealous to present everyone spiritually mature in the presence of Christ (Col 1:28), which implies a much more positive teaching than the cry of a sentinel warning of the approach of an enemy, a divine instrument of impending judgment. Still, there are always situations in which the voice of the sentinel is appropriate. If New York and Washington, D.C. had known of the approach of the terrorists on 11 September, 2001, the lives of almost three thousand people would have been saved. If the world had received more appropriate instruction about AIDS and practiced safer sex, 25 million people in Africa would be in better health instead of facing premature death. Before having sexual relations, many does not dare to fulfill their responsibility as sentinel for fear of offending – and therefore cases of AIDS are growing in numbers in many countries even among people well-informed on the subject. In such situations we cannot ask with irony as did Cain: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9) – since Ezekiel makes us remember that, in many situations, yes, we are. The life of brother/sister and our own people can depend on our willingness to accept, like Ezekiel, being in service as sentinel.

Another memorable text in Ezekiel is his vision of the valley of dry bones (37:1 -14), which represent the house of Israel destroyed in the Exile. A Negro spiritual song from the 19<sup>th</sup> century captures the power of this vision for a race as cruelly oppressed as the slaves, but with a hope and confidence in the power of God to transform a situation of suffering and death. Recently, the same text has inspired strong hope in the wake of the AIDS disaster.<sup>74</sup> A pastor in the ICM in San Francisco conducted more than 500 funeral services for sexual minorities, mostly youth, dead from AIDS. Ezekiel has always had bad press among the comfortable people living in happy situations. But the “hard-headed” prophet continues to be a source of inspiration for people who are going through grave crises.

**DRY BONES** (Negro Spiritual)

E-ze-kiel cried, "Dem dry bones!" E-ze-kiel cried, "Dem dry bones!"  
E-ze-kiel cried, "Dem dry bones!" Oh hear the word of the Lord.

The foot bone connected to the leg-bone,  
The leg bone connected to the knee bone,  
The knee bone connected to the thigh bone,  
The thigh bone connected to the back bone,  
The back bone connected to the neck bone  
The neck bone connected to the head bone  
Oh hear the word of the Lord!

Dem bones, dem bones gon-na walk a-roun' Dem bones, dem bones gon-na walk a-roun'  
Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk aroun' Oh hear the word of the Lord

The head-bone connected to the neck-bone,  
the neck-bone connected to the back-bone  
The backbone connected to the thigh-bone  
the thighbone connected to the knee-bone  
the knee-bone connected to the leg bone  
the leg bone connected to the foot bone  
Oh hear the word of the Lord

**LIKE A RIVER GLORIOUS**, Frances R. Havergal, 1878. (Ezek 47:1 - 12; Isaías 66:12),  
(Trinity Hymnal 587)

Like a river glorious, is God's perfect peace,  
Over all victorious, in its bright increase;  
Perfect, yet it floweth, fuller every day,  
Perfect, yet it groweth, deeper all the way.

Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest  
Finding, as He promised, perfect peace and rest.

Hidden in the hollow of His blessed hand,  
Never foe can follow, never traitor stand;  
Not a surge of worry, not a shade of care,  
Not a blast of hurry touch the spirit there.

Every joy or trial falleth from above,  
Traced upon our dial by the Sun of Love;  
We may trust Him fully all for us to do.  
They who trust Him wholly find Him wholly true.

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## End Notes

1. David Pleins 2001:320
2. Moshe Greenberg 1997:614-618, concerning this “invalid oracle against Tyre
3. Milton Schwantes 1977:128-136; David Pleins 2001:336-338
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5. Milton Schwantes 1977:132-134
6. Robert Gagnon 2001:117-120
7. David Block 1997:509
8. Daniel Block 1997:203
9. Kalinda Rose Stevenson 2001:181; concerning idolatry, see also John Kutsko 2000:120-125; E. Gerstenberger, *THAT*, 2:1051-55
10. David Pleins 1992 V:408; see 2001:337
11. David Pleins 2001:336
12. Milton Schwantes 1977:134-136
13. David Pleins 2001:331
14. Milton Schwantes 1977:129-131
15. David Pleins 334
16. David Pleins 2001:337
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18. Walter Zimmerly 1969/83:495
19. (Hanks 1982:141-151; 1983:109-119; Sharon Ringe 1985/95; Ross and Gloria Kinsler 999/2000; Christopher J. H. Wright 1992:1025-1030)
- 19<sup>a</sup> Norman Habel 2001:305-320
20. Kim 1981:42-43, 152-162
21. José Sicre 1984:395-401
22. Kim 1981:152-162
23. Walter Zimmerly 1982
24. Erhard Gerstenberger 1996:129-158
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26. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr 1992/98:192
27. Mary Shields 132-133; see 136
28. Mary Shields 136
29. Mary Shields 143, 134
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31. Corrine Patton 2000:221
32. Corrine Patton p. 224
33. Corrine Patton 2000:222
34. Corrine Patton pp. 227-228
35. Corrine Patton 2000:229
36. Corrine Patton 2000:228
37. Corrine Patton 2000:233-238
38. Corrine Patton 2000:232, 237
39. Corrine Patton 2000:232
40. Corrine Patton 2000:238
41. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr 1998:196-197
42. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr 1998:197

43. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr 1998:199
44. David Pleins 2000:327-329
45. Guy Hugenberg 1994/98:5-6
46. Countryman 1988:147-167
47. Donald Wold 1998:98-99, 107-114; James DeYoung 2000:43-45; Robert Gagnon 2001:79-87
48. George Edwards 1984:24-46; Martti Nissinen 1998:45-49
49. Robert Gagnon 2001:111-112, note 179
50. Robert Gagnon 2001:90
51. Robert Gagnon 2001:80
52. Robert Gagnon 2001:82-83
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55. Robert Gagnon 2001:80
56. Schökel 1994:221
57. Donald Wold 1998:88-89
58. Robert Gagnon 2001:81
59. Robert Gagnon 2001:84, following Greenberg, 1997:685 and 450
60. Patrick Miller 2001:750
61. Thomas Hanks 2000
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64. Robert Gagnon 2001:80
65. Robert Gagnon 2001:159-183; Peter Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Homosexuality*, London, SPCK, 1980:58-85; J. A. Loader, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1990:75-117; Westen W. Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah: History and Motif in Biblical Narrative*, JSOTSup 231; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997:155-184; Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998:89-102); James B. DeYoung, *Homosexuality*, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000:69-107. Michael Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth*. London: Equinox, 2004.
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74. Eric Rofes 1998

Editing notes:

Countryman is not in the Bibliography. (General)  
Habel make footnote 19a (2001:305-320)