

Homiletics Analysis: Ezekiel 23

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Ezekiel 23 presents an extended allegory in which the LORD depicts the two kingdoms of Israel — the northern kingdom (Samaria) and the southern kingdom (Judah) — as two sisters named Oholah and Oholibah. Both were the LORD's from their youth in Egypt, yet both prostituted themselves to the surrounding nations: Oholah to Assyria, and Oholibah to Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt in turn. The chapter moves through three narrative movements: the sin and judgment of Oholah (vv. 1–10), the sin and compounded judgment of Oholibah (vv. 11–35), and a concluding divine indictment that binds both sisters together under the same verdict (vv. 36–49). The allegory is graphic and sustained — the sexual imagery is not incidental but is the rhetorical instrument through which the LORD forces the reader to feel the moral texture of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness. The chapter closes with the declaration: “You will know that I am the Lord GOD” (v. 49), the governing formula of the entire book of Ezekiel.

This Text — Intent:

God is using this passage to produce in His people a felt sense of the obscenity of covenant unfaithfulness — not merely an intellectual acknowledgment that Israel sinned, but a visceral recognition that what they did was shameful, that judgment is both just and inevitable, and that the LORD's holiness cannot be mocked. The graphic nature of the allegory is intentional: God wants Israel (and every subsequent reader) to be unable to sanitize or minimize their spiritual adultery. The intent is not prurient but prosecutorial — God is presenting His case so that the verdict of judgment is acknowledged as righteous, and so that any who survive would turn from the idolatry that destroyed their sisters.

Subject Sentence:

The LORD indicts both kingdoms for covenant adultery — judgment is just, certain, and the LORD alone is God.

Primary Claim:

God uses the most confrontational imaginable language to strip away every excuse for spiritual adultery, demanding that His people feel the shame of their unfaithfulness and acknowledge His judgment as righteous.

Interpretive Evaluation

The graphic sexual imagery — license, offense, or instrument?

The most significant interpretive question in Ezekiel 23 is not historical but rhetorical: what is the function of the extended and explicit sexual allegory, and how should expositors handle it? Some readers in the history of interpretation — including early rabbinic tradition — expressed discomfort with public reading of this chapter, and certain feminist critics (notably Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes) have argued that the passage employs the objectification of female bodies in ways that are morally problematic regardless of its theological intent. This reading must be engaged honestly before being qualified.

The feminist critique correctly observes that the imagery is extreme and that the female figures are passive recipients of both desire and violence. However, this reading *qualifies* rather than *refutes* the passage's force: the very extremity that troubles the feminist reader is the instrument through which God is making His case. The passage is not depicting women — it is depicting Israel and Judah under an allegory in which the covenant relationship between God and His people is the analogue to marriage. The violence the sisters suffer is not endorsed but announced as the consequence of their own choices. The shock of the imagery is the point. God is not sanitizing the horror of what covenant infidelity brings — He is naming it at full volume.

The moralistic reading — illustration or indictment?

A second pitfall in interpretation is reducing the chapter to a historical illustration of Israel's political folly — the nation made bad foreign policy alliances and suffered for it. This reading is technically accurate but stops short. The allegory is not about geopolitics; it is about the worship of foreign gods, the seduction of other nations' religious identities, and the fundamental betrayal of exclusive covenant loyalty to the LORD. The political alliances are symptoms; the idol worship is the disease. Expositors must not reduce this to a lesson about the dangers of bad international relationships.

The Dispensational reading — Israel only?

Some dispensational interpreters treat Ezekiel 23 as exclusively addressing national Israel with no canonical application to the church. The Reformed reading acknowledges the historical specificity of the allegory (Oholah = Samaria, Oholibah = Judah) while insisting that the passage participates in the broader canonical pattern of covenant infidelity that applies to all of God's people in every age. The New Testament explicitly picks up the marriage/adultery metaphor for the church (2 Corinthians 11:2; James 4:4; Revelation 17-18). To confine Ezekiel 23 to ancient Israel is to refuse the very canonical telos the allegory is constructing.

Reformed verdict:

The Reformed reading receives the passage as a prophetic indictment in which God deploys maximum rhetorical force to produce maximum moral clarity about the nature and consequences of covenant unfaithfulness. The imagery is not to be spiritualized away, moralized into behavioral advice, or confined to historical Israel. It is God's prosecutorial case — designed to produce conviction, acknowledgment of righteous judgment, and repentance — and it applies wherever God's covenant people are found.

Key Canonical Support

- **Hosea 1–3** — The closest canonical parallel: God commands Hosea to marry an adulterous woman as a living allegory of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness, establishing that the marriage metaphor for the LORD/Israel relationship is not unique to Ezekiel but is a sustained prophetic instrument across the canon.
 - **Jeremiah 3:6–11** — Jeremiah employs the same two-sisters framework (Israel as the unfaithful northern sister, Judah as the treacherous southern sister who did not learn from her), providing direct canonical corroboration of Ezekiel 23's historical and theological framing.
 - **Deuteronomy 6:14–15; 32:15–22** — Moses warned that covenant infidelity would arouse the LORD's jealousy and bring devastating judgment; Ezekiel 23 is the prophetic announcement that Moses' warning has been fully earned and its consequences are now arriving.
 - **2 Corinthians 11:2–3** — Paul uses the same bridal/virginity imagery to warn the church at Corinth against being led astray from sincere devotion to Christ, establishing that the allegory of spiritual adultery is canonically alive in the new covenant community.
 - **Revelation 17–18** — The depiction of Babylon the Great as a prostitute who seduced the nations draws directly on Ezekiel's imagery, demonstrating that the allegory's canonical reach extends to eschatological judgment and that Ezekiel 23's pattern is not exhausted in the fall of Samaria and Jerusalem.
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Aim:

To expose the obscenity of spiritual adultery so plainly that every evasion is cut off, and to establish that the LORD's judgment of it is not harsh but righteous — the only possible response of a holy God to covenant betrayal.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–4	The LORD introduces the allegory: two sisters, Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem/Judah), both His wives from their youth in Egypt	“Oholah” = “her own tent” (perhaps referencing illicit worship sites); “Oholibah” = “my tent is in her” (the temple); the names signal the LORD’s ownership of both
5–8	Oholah’s adultery: she lusted after Assyria — soldiers, horsemen — and gave herself to them; she did not forsake the idols of Egypt	The prostitution began in Egypt (v. 8), not in Canaan; the sin has deep roots
9–10	Oholah’s judgment: the LORD handed her over to her Assyrian lovers, who exposed and destroyed her; she became a byword	Historical fulfillment: 722 BC, fall of Samaria to Assyria
11–13	Oholibah’s greater sin: she saw her sister’s fate and sinned more — she too lusted after Assyria	The greater condemnation: she had the warning of her sister’s destruction and still chose the same path
14–21	Oholibah’s lust intensified toward Babylon: she saw images of Babylonian officers on the wall and sent messengers to them; her idolatry escalated even to longing for the sins of her Egyptian youth	The compounding of sin is the theological burden of vv. 11–21: each new exposure to foreign powers did not sober her but inflamed her further
22–27	The LORD announces Oholibah’s judgment: her Babylonian lovers will turn against her, surround her with hostility, and strip her bare	“I will direct my jealousy against you” (v. 22) — the covenant formula; the judgment instrument is the very nations she pursued
28–31	The judgment elaborated: she will drink the cup her sister drank	The “cup of desolation and horror” — a key Ezekiel motif; judgment is not arbitrary but proportionate

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
32–34	The cup poem: a taunt-song describing the full depth of the cup Oholibah must drink	to the sin “You will be scorned and mocked” — public shame accompanies the judgment
35	Divine verdict summarized: because you have forgotten me and cast me behind your back, you must bear the consequences of your lewdness	“Cast me behind your back” — an act of deliberate contempt, not ignorance
36–45	The combined indictment: both sisters charged together with adultery, child sacrifice, and defiling the sanctuary on the same days they came to the temple	The profanation of the sanctuary is the theological climax — they brought their idolatry into the LORD’s house itself
46–49	The LORD summons an assembly against them; both will suffer the full consequence; the purpose statement closes the chapter	“You will know that I am the Lord GOD” (v. 49) — the governing formula of Ezekiel; judgment is revelation

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–10	Oholah: The Sin and Fall of the Northern Kingdom
2	11–35	Oholibah: The Greater Sin and Coming Fall of the Southern Kingdom
3	36–49	The Combined Indictment: Both Sisters Condemned Before the LORD

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD indicts both kingdoms for covenant adultery — judgment is just, certain, and the LORD alone is God.

Primary Claim: God uses the most confrontational imaginable language to strip away every excuse for spiritual adultery, demanding that His people feel the shame of their unfaithfulness and acknowledge His judgment as righteous.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] — Recognize that spiritual adultery is not a metaphor to be managed but a betrayal to be mourned. The graphic force of Ezekiel 23 is intentional. God does not use clinical language here because He does not want a clinical response. When you substitute something — anything — for wholehearted devotion to the LORD and find yourself drawn toward what the surrounding culture loves, worships, and orients itself around, that is not a minor drift or a phase: it is the pattern Oholah and Oholibah enacted. Name it that. The passage will not permit a softer label.

2. [Mind/Belief] — Understand that greater privilege amplifies, not diminishes, accountability. Oholibah's condemnation is explicitly worse than Oholah's because she had the warning of her sister's destruction before her and still chose the same path (v. 11). This is not incidental to the text — it is the theological hinge of the second movement. The more clearly you have seen what covenant faithlessness costs, the more God's temple is present in your life, the more you have received of grace and truth, the less ground you have for minimizing your own spiritual adultery. Privilege before God increases, not decreases, the weight of unfaithfulness.

3. [Affections/Worship] — Let the shame of the passage do its diagnostic work — ask what you are actually drawn to, longing for, and inflamed by. Oholibah's sin is described not merely as behavior but as longing: she *lusted* after images on the wall, she *sent messengers* to pursue what she desired, she *doted on* her lovers (vv. 16, 20). The passage diagnoses the affections before it names the actions. The diagnostic question this passage presses is not simply "what am I doing?" but "what am I drawn to? What do I find more compelling, more exciting, more satisfying than undivided devotion to the LORD?" The worship that corrupts begins in the affections long before it appears in behavior.

4. [Affections/Worship] — Receive the LORD's jealousy not as a flaw in God's character but as the measure of the covenant's worth. "I will direct my jealousy against you" (v. 22). Modern readers are often embarrassed by divine jealousy, treating it as a primitive anthropomorphism to be explained away. This passage will not permit that. The LORD's jealousy is the appropriate response of a covenant-making, covenant-sustaining God when the relationship He has established at cost and maintained in faithfulness is treated as disposable. His jealousy is not a character defect — it is the measure of how seriously He takes the covenant He has made with His people. Receive it as such. A God who did not care when His people abandoned Him would be a God who did not truly love them.

5. [Will/Behavior] — Identify and cut off the specific “Babylon” you have been sending messengers to — the thing you keep returning to despite knowing what it costs.

Oholibah does not stumble into sin — she actively sends messengers to her lovers (v. 16). She pursues. She returns to the sins of her Egyptian youth even after suffering for them (v. 21). The application is not generic avoidance of “bad things” — it is the specific, deliberate identification of what you keep initiating contact with, what you keep going back to, what you have watched harm you before and still pursue. Name it, cut it off, and do not send another messenger.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance:

Ezekiel 23 teaches that the LORD’s relationship to His covenant people is not merely administrative or contractual but is analogous to marriage — a relationship of exclusive loyalty, mutual belonging, and covenantal love. Because of this, unfaithfulness is not merely disobedience but a personal betrayal that wounds the One who entered the covenant. The chapter further establishes that God’s judgment is not capricious or excessive — it is the proportionate consequence of a people who received the fullness of covenant privilege and chose to despise it. The closing formula, “You will know that I am the Lord GOD” (v. 49), makes the theological purpose explicit: judgment is itself revelation. When the covenant curses arrive, the people will know — perhaps for the first time with full clarity — who it was they abandoned. The LORD’s holiness and His covenant faithfulness are not in tension in this passage; they are unified in the act of righteous judgment.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance:

Ezekiel 23 is a sustained demonstration of the Reformation principle that salvation is covenantal and that covenant infidelity is the root of all spiritual ruin. The Reformed tradition’s insistence on the exclusivity of grace — that the people of God have no standing before God except what He Himself has established and maintained — is precisely what Israel forfeited when she ran after the gods of the nations. The allegory exposes the idolatry beneath the surface of Israel’s political and religious compromises: she was not merely making pragmatic alliances but confessing, in effect, that the gods of Assyria and Babylon were more real, more powerful, more desirable than the LORD. The Reformed doctrine of total depravity is on full display here — the sin is not isolated or occasional but systemic, escalating, and self-deepening; Oholibah’s sin compounds despite warnings precisely because the unregenerate heart does not learn from judgment, it hardens under it. And the gospel answer this passage cries out for — visible only in canonical retrospect — is a new covenant in which God does not merely warn His people to remain faithful but comes

Himself in Christ to be the faithful covenant partner His people could never be, and sends His Spirit to write the law on the hearts that were, in Ezekiel's day, made of stone.

Main Takeaway

You are not permitted to feel neutral about your spiritual unfaithfulness, and God is not willing to be treated as one option among many. Ezekiel 23 exists to make sure you feel the full weight of what it means to belong to the LORD and then run after substitutes — to feel it as the obscenity it is, to see the judgment it produces as righteous rather than harsh, and to understand that the God who speaks this way is not overreacting but is revealing the infinite worth of the covenant His people have despised. Stop sending messengers to your lovers. Return to the One who has never abandoned you.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Avoiding or over-apologizing for the graphic content.** The most common homiletical failure with Ezekiel 23 is pre-emptive damage control — spending so much time explaining why the passage uses sexual imagery that the imagery never lands. The passage is graphic because it must be. Begin by receiving it as deliberate prophetic rhetoric, not as an embarrassment to manage. If the congregation is uncomfortable, that discomfort is the passage doing its work. Do not neutralize it.
- **Reducing the allegory to a history lesson about ancient Israel.** “This is about the fall of Samaria in 722 BC and the coming fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.” Historically accurate, homiletically inert. The allegory is not primarily a rehearsal of geopolitical history — it is a prosecutorial indictment of covenant infidelity that applies wherever God's covenant people are found. The historical referents are real and must be named, but they are not the destination.
- **Moralizing the applications (“be loyal to God, don't be like them”).** This is the Clowney anti-moralism warning at full force. “Be faithful, not unfaithful” is not a sermon; it is a truism. Applications must diagnose the specific form spiritual adultery takes in the contemporary congregation — what the affections are actually drawn toward, what specific substitutes are being pursued — not merely commend the obvious alternative.
- **Ignoring the escalation pattern.** Oholibah's condemnation is explicitly worse than Oholah's because she had the warning and did not learn from it. Failing to preach this escalation misses one of the passage's most pastorally urgent claims: that exposure to God's word and God's judgments without response does not leave a

person neutral — it deepens their accountability. This has direct application to congregants who have heard the gospel for years.

- **Failing to preach toward the gospel the passage requires.** Ezekiel 23 ends in judgment — there is no restoration promise in this chapter. But preached in canonical isolation, the passage produces despair rather than repentance. The expositor must hold the passage's full weight (do not lighten it prematurely) while also naming, clearly and at the close, the new covenant answer that Ezekiel 36–37 will announce and that Christ will accomplish: a faithfulness for His people that they could never provide for themselves. The passage does not supply this answer, but the expositor must know where it comes from and must point there — not to relieve the discomfort of the text too quickly, but to ensure the discomfort produces repentance rather than despair.
- **Treating the feminist critique as merely political and dismissing it without engagement.** The critical feminist reading of this passage (that the imagery is harmful regardless of theological intent) is not a straw man — it is a serious enough challenge that congregants will have encountered it, and dismissing it without engagement will read as obtuse. The expositor should briefly acknowledge what the critique correctly sees (the imagery is extreme and involves violence against women figures), name the category error in the critique (the figures are allegorical representations of covenant communities, not depictions of women), and then return to the text's actual purpose: not to model male violence but to indict covenant betrayal at the level of its full moral weight.