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“They Whored in Egypt” (Ezek 23:3)—When?

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Abstract

In this essay I make three arguments on Ezek 23:3–4: first, “in Egypt ... in their youth” (v. 3) does not refer to Israel’s time in Egypt before the exodus, but to the early political histories of Samaria and Jerusalem. Second, the statement וְתַהְיֶינָה לִי (v. 4) should not be rendered “and they *became* mine” (referring to the event of marriage), but rather “and they *were* mine” (referring to the fact of marriage). Third, the vocabulary used in vv. 3–4 functions at the local level within the argument of Ezek 23:1–27, but also on a larger level as part of the editorial coordination of Ezek 16 and 23. The allegory in Ezek 23:1–27 can therefore be understood as a coherent critique of Judahite foreign policy, without any reference to traditions of Israel’s origins in Egypt.

Keywords

Ezekiel 23 – allegory – Jerusalem – Samaria – Egypt

1 Introduction

Ezekiel 23:1–27 contains an extended metaphor describing the actions of two sisters. According to most commentators and translations, the beginning of their story is related thusly:

ותזנינה במצרים	3 They played the whore in Egypt;
בנעוריהן זנו	they played the whore in their youth;
שמה מעכו שדיהן ושם עשו דדי בתוליהן	there their breasts were pressed and their virgin bosoms handled.
ושמותן אהלה הגדולה ואהליבה אחותה	4 Oholah was the name of the elder and Oholibah the name of her sister.
ותהיינה לי ותלדנה בנים ובנות	They became mine, and they bore sons and daughters.
ושמותן שמרון אהלה וירושלם אהליבה	As for their names, Oholah is Samaria, and Oholibah is Jerusalem.

EZEK 23:3–4, NRSV

But when did the events described in v. 3 occur? In this essay I will make three arguments: first, “in Egypt ... in their youth” (Ezek 23:3) does not refer to Israel’s time in Egypt before the exodus, but to a later period. Second, the near-universal rendering of *ותהיינה לי* as “and they *became* mine” (v. 4) is incorrect; the phrase should instead be rendered “and they *were* mine.” Third, the reference to Egypt in v. 3 should not be understood in light of ch. 20. Rather, the choice of vocabulary in vv. 3–4 functions both at the local level (within the argument of Ezek 23:1–27) and at a larger level (as part of the editorial coordination of chs. 16 and 23).

2 When Were the Sisters in Egypt?

Almost all commentators assume that “they whored in Egypt ... in their youth” (Ezek 23:3) refers to Israel’s time in Egypt before the exodus, as described in Ezek 20:5–8.² This is understood as the time before Israel’s “moment of marriage” to Yhwh, described in 23:4 by the statement *ותהיינה לי*.³ This statement is

1 The Old Greek lacks an equivalent to *זנו* in v. 3aβ.

2 See Ewald, *Die Propheten*, 298; Smend, *Ezechiel*, 156; Jahn, *Ezechiel*, 160; Herrmann, *Ezechiel*, 144; Fohrer, *Ezechiel*, 132–133; Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 322; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 482; Hals, *Ezekiel*, 167; Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48*, 48; Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, 99–100; Galambush, *Jerusalem*, 110 n. 55; Dijk-Hemmes, “Metaphorization of Woman,” 166; Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 734; Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 488; Pohlmann, *Hesekiel 20–48*, 345; Sedlmeier, *Ezechiel 1–24*, 317; Kasher, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 460–461; Joyce, *Ezekiel*, 161; Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors*, 193–194.

3 See Ewald, *Die Propheten*, 298; Smend, *Ezechiel*, 156; Kraetzschmar, *Ezechiel*, 188; Jahn, *Ezechiel*, 160; Herrmann, *Ezechiel*, 144; Fohrer, *Ezechiel*, 133–134; Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 323; Krüger, *Geschichtskonzept im Ezechielbuch*, 158; Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 473–474; Galambush,

translated “and they became mine”/“sie wurden mein.”⁴ Thus vv. 3–4 describe temporally sequential events: the whoring of Israel in Egypt (v. 3), followed by her marriage to Yhwh (v. 4).⁵

The problem with this explanation is that it is based on the assumption that ch. 23 replicates elements from ch. 20 without introducing any variation. The difficulties this creates are obvious: if the story is about the two sister-cities, taking Ezek 23:4 as a reference to a marriage that did not previously exist in v. 3 results in a temporal event that is impossible to locate in Israel’s history. When did this wedding with Yhwh occur, and how could Samaria and Jerusalem be the heads of separate polities before this? If v. 4 refers to a moment of marriage equated either with Yhwh’s oath in Egypt (Ezek 20:5–6) or to the Sinai covenant (so Block),⁶ this results in the absurd image of Samaria and Jerusalem being enslaved together in Egypt.⁷ Some commentators actually acknowledge the absurdity: as Eichrodt remarks, “The inclusion of both partitioned kingdoms in the married life is, strictly speaking, inconsistent with the references to the sojourn in Egypt.”⁸

Commentators attempt to deal with the resulting absurdity in one of three ways. One strategy is to fully map the description of *Israel* “in Egypt”

Jerusalem, 110–111; Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 734; Darr, “Book of Ezekiel,” 1319; Sedlmeier, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 318; Kasher, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 460; Joyce, *Ezekiel*, 161–162. Ewald (*Die Propheten*, 298) situates this marriage after the entry into Canaan; Block (*Ezekiel 1–24*, 736) situates it at Sinai: “*They became mine (wattihyênâ lî)* summarizes in a single phrase the series of marriage ritual acts described in detail in 16:8–13. Because the declaration alludes to the Sinai covenant, Yahweh’s bigamy is all the more striking.”

4 So all commentators surveyed here (when they translate the clause) and all major Bible translations, with the exceptions of KJV and NIV (“they were mine”) and La Segond 21 (“elles étaient à moi”).

5 Thelle does not situate the description of the sisters in relation to Israel’s stay in Egypt, but nevertheless sees a shift from an unmarried to a married state: “in Ezekiel 23, Jerusalem and Samaria are lustful orphans. God chooses them anyway” (“Self As Other,” 118). However, the sisters in ch. 23 are not orphans!

6 See Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 736.

7 If the reference to two cities is taken seriously but v. 4 is still taken to refer to a wedding event, one might conceivably imagine a moment of marriage between Yhwh and Jerusalem (perhaps when Davidic rule was established, or when the Ark was brought into the city, or when the temple was built there). But one cannot imagine a comparable event that could be understood as a wedding between Yhwh and Samaria.

8 Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 322. See also Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors*, 193: “The implications of 23A are puzzling in the light of other biblical texts. This prophetic narrative seems to suggest that Israel/Samaria and Judah/Jerusalem are irredeemably tarnished by their time in Egypt. Yet this is a suggestion that flies in the face of the exodus story, echoing through other prophetic books and beyond as a tale of liberation, pervaded with hope for the future.”

(Ezek 20:5–8) onto the description of the *sisters* “in Egypt” (23:3).⁹ This is then explained as Ezekiel’s manipulation of history, either to depict Israel as sinful “from the beginning” (Fohrer; Blenkinsopp; Kasher),¹⁰ to depict the North and South as an idealized unity (Greenberg),¹¹ or to depict the sisters’ experiences as identical (Galambush; Darr).¹² Consequently, the reader is required to postulate a large temporal gap between v. 3 (supposedly depicting Israel’s slavery in Egypt) and vv. 5–27 (depicting Samaria’s and Jerusalem’s relationships with Assyria and other nations).¹³

A second strategy is to read v. 3 as both a repetition of the argument in Ezek 20:5–8 (which describes Israel’s idolatry in Egypt) and as a repetition of the imagery in Ezek 16:17 (where “whoring” is a metaphor for the worship of other gods).¹⁴ The problem with this interpretation is that it disregards 23:3b,

- 9 See, e.g., Pohlmann, *Hesekiel 20–48*, 345–346: “Der Argumentationsgang setzt ebenso wie Ez 20 mit einem Blick zurück auf die Anfänge Israels in Ägypten und sein dortiges Fehlverhalten ein; in Ez 20 ist Israel von Anfang an ein sich mit Ägyptens Götzen verunreinigendes Volk, nach 23,1–3 treiben die beiden Schwestern, die für die das Gesamtvolk repräsentierenden Größen Samaria und Jerusalem stehen, bereits in ihrer Jugend in Ägypten Hurerei”; Joyce, *Ezekiel*, 161: “‘They played the whore in Egypt’: as in 20:7–8, where (unlike in the Pentateuchal narratives) Israel sins even in Egypt ...”
- 10 See Fohrer, *Ezechiel*, 132: “Bereits zu Beginn ihres Lebens, in ihrer Jugend, zeigte sich ihr Hang zur ‘Hurerei’. Er reicht bis in die ersten Anfänge in Ägypten zurück (cf. 20:7f.). Diese in zeitlichen Kategorien sich vollziehende Denkweise, die dem Israeliten eigen ist, will nach unseren Begriffen etwas Grundsätzliches aussagen: Der Hang Israels zu Untreue und Verderbtheit sitzt bereits in seinen Wurzeln, in seiner Art und Natur. Es hat niemals etwas anderes gekannt”; see also Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, 99–100; Kasher, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 460–461.
- 11 See Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 488: “But defiance of historical reality is not confined to B [vv. 36–49]; A [vv. 1–34], too, ignores it when it represents the Egyptian sojourn, the time of Israel’s youth, as shared in by the two sisters—as though Samaria and Jerusalem existed from the beginning of national history. As often in Ezekiel, reality is subordinated to an ideal: Israel, in the prophet’s mind, is a single nation, whose monarchic components, represented by Samaria and Jerusalem, were present at its birth ...”
- 12 See Galambush, *Jerusalem*, 110 n. 55: “The goal of describing the ‘parallel lives’ of the two sisters affects Ezekiel’s depiction of the sisters’ origins. First, the capital cities, rather than the nation, are said to have been in Egypt, and second, Ezekiel anachronistically retrojects the division of Israel onto the pre-exodus period”; Darr, “Book of Ezekiel,” 1320: “Here, however, the prophet places both Samaria and Jerusalem in Egypt. This rhetorical strategy makes sense only when one realizes that the two cities actually represent all of Israel from the earliest days of its existence.”
- 13 See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 484; Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, 99–100; Pohlmann, *Hesekiel 20–48*, 345–346.
- 14 So already the Targum: וטעא במצרים בתר פולחן טעותהון טעא תמן פלחא לטעותא עובדיהון ותמן קלקילא עובדיהון. Later commentators who see a reference to idolatry here include Ewald, *Die Propheten*, 298; Keil, *Ezechiel*, 198; Smend, *Ezechiel*, 156; Kraetzschmar, *Ezechiel*, 188; Jahn, *Ezechiel*, 160–161; Fohrer, *Ezechiel*, 132–133; Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 323. Note

8, 21, where “whoring” is described (at least in part) as involving what the Egyptians *did to* the sisters.¹⁵ The interpretation of “whoring” in v. 3 as idolatry is therefore now largely abandoned; modern commentators point out that the term is used in Ezek 23:1–35 to refer to political alliances rather than to idolatry.¹⁶ And while there are references to idols in vv. 7b, 30b (which are instances of editorial coordination with ch. 16),¹⁷ these verses make a lexical distinction between the sisters’ “whoring” with *nations* (ותתן תזנותיה עליהם, v. 7; ובנותך אחרי גוים, v. 30) and their “defilement” with *idols* (בכל־גלוליהם נטמאה, v. 7; נטמאת בגלולהם, v. 30).

A third (even less common) strategy is to interpret “whoring” as the patriarchs’ interactions with Egyptians (so Cooke) or as Israel’s longings for Egypt in the wilderness (so Block).¹⁸ But this ignores the fact that the *sisters* Samaria and Jerusalem are being spoken of, not the patriarchs or Israel as a people. Given the resulting incongruity, it is understandable that both Cooke and Block wish to dismiss the reference to “whoring in Egypt” in v. 3 as unhistorical.¹⁹

All of these problems can be avoided if “they whored in Egypt” (v. 3) is understood as referring to the dispatch of diplomatic messengers from Samaria and Jerusalem to Egypt²⁰ to establish political alliances (for Samaritan alliances with Egypt, see 2 Kgs 17:4; Hos 7:11; 12:2b; cf. 2 Kgs 7:6; for Jerusalemite alliances with Egypt, see 1 Kgs 9:16; Isa 20:5; 30:2–3; 31:1; 35:6, 9; Jer 2:8, 36; 12:2; Ezek 17:15; 29:16; see also Lachish Ostrakon 3, lines 13–18). The phrase “in their youth”

that Kraetzschmar correctly links Ezek 23:3 to Ezek 16:26, but incorrectly understands Ezek 16:26 to be about idolatry rather than political alliances.

15 See Galambush, *Jerusalem*, 110–111 n. 56.

16 So Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 482, 483; Hals, *Ezekiel*, 168; Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48*, 48; Pohlmann, *Hesekiel 20–48*, 340. See already the comments by Rashi on Ezek 23:5, 8 in Cohen, *Miqra’ot Gedolot*, 148, 150.

17 On Ezek 23:7b, 30b (and on vv. 36–49), see Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 485, 490–491; Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48*, 50–51.

18 See Cooke, *Ezekiel*, 249: “There is no record of any attempt to make alliance with Egypt in the days of Israel’s youth; the prophet may be generalizing about the time when the tribes sojourned in Egypt under friendly conditions, Gen. 45:10; 46:2–5 E, 47:1–4, 6b J; Ex. 1:8 E”; Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 734: “But Yahweh may be putting a political spin on the Israelites’ declaration that they would rather serve the Egyptians than die in the wilderness (Exod 14:12), or their frequent backward glances during their wilderness wanderings (Exod 16:3; 17:3; Num 11:5, 18, 20; 14:2–3).”

19 See Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 734: “In any case, attempts to search for the historical basis for this comment are fruitless; the present concern is rhetorical, not historical.” Cf. Cooke, *Ezekiel*, 249: “but, as in 20:8 ... the language is rhetorical.”

20 The statement במצרים ותזונה in v. 3 could be rendered “and they whored *with* Egypt.” However, v. 19 emphasizes the location of Jerusalem’s actions (זנתה בארץ מצרים), so the focus in v. 3 may be the same.

(v. 3)²¹ depicts these alliances as part of the early political histories of Samaria and Judah.²² While this is an exaggeration, it has at least some basis in history given the frequent interactions between Israel/Judah and Egypt.²³ The choice to describe the sisters' initial political contacts as alliances with Egypt in v. 3 and to explain it as the motivation for later Jerusalemite foreign policy (vv. 19, 21) is not motivated by a desire to depict Egypt as the locus of Israel's "original sin."²⁴ Rather, it is part of a wider critique of Judah's reliance on Egyptian military aid (Ezek 17:15, 17; 23:27; 29:6–7, 16).²⁵

3 The Translation of וַתְּהִינָה לִי (v. 4)

As I noted above, almost all commentators assume that the statement וַתְּהִינָה לִי (Ezek 23:4) refers to the moment of Yhwh's "marriage" (i.e., covenant) with Israel, and thus means "and they *became* mine." This is in part due to the reading of v. 3 as a reference to Israel's stay in Egypt before the exodus, but it is

21 *Contra* Galambush (*Jerusalem*, 110 n. 56) and Block (*Ezekiel 1–24*, 734), it cannot be assumed that the phrase "in their youth" must refer to Israel's slavery in Egypt. While some texts that speak of "youth" (נְעוּרִים) do refer to Israel's time in Egypt (Hos 2:17) or in the wilderness (Jer 2:2), others make no such references (Jer 3:24, 25; 22:21; Ezek 16:22, 60; 23:3, 8, 19, 21). The phrase "in/from youth" is also used to depict the long-term past actions or experiences of other nations: Babylon's occupation with magic and divination (Isa 47:12, 15), and Moab's being at ease (Jer 48:11).

22 Wevers' interpretation of v. 3 departs from those described above: "What he means by such relations with Egypt in the time of her youth is not clear. It may be a reference to Solomon's marriage alliance with Egypt (cf. 1 Kg. 3:1); then the time of her youth would be the period before the kingdoms parted after Solomon's death" (*Ezekiel*, 179). Of all the commentators surveyed here, this comes closest to what I am proposing.

23 For evidence of the contact between Israel/Judah and Egypt, see Görg, *Israel und Ägypten*; Schipper, *Israel und Ägypten*.

24 So Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, 99–100: "Their promiscuity in Egypt is in line with Ezekiel's radical view of Israel's history as having gone wrong from the beginning. Israel's 'original sin' in Egypt returns to haunt her throughout the history."

25 See also Day, "Yahweh's Broken Marriages," 234–235. Some scholars have offered other explanations for the "two sisters" imagery in Ezek 23: Morse sees expressed in Ezek 23 "the particular sexual anxiety Ezekiel appears to have developed over the ethnic threat to Israelite and Judahite identity posed by potential unions between the women of Samaria and Jerusalem, and invading male forces" ("Judgment Was Executed," 133), and Kalmanofsky argues that the chapter reflects Ezekiel's anxieties about bonds between sisters ("Dangerous Sisters," 305). Marzouk agrees that political alliances with Egypt are in view, but argues that Ezekiel's imagery goes beyond this: Egypt is depicted as Israel's "monstrous double" because it "represents the threat of religious assimilation" (*Egypt as a Monster*, 117–118; see further 33–44, 115–153).

also influenced by the syntactic similarity of ותהיינה לי (Ezek 23:4) to ותהיי לי (Ezek 16:8), which *does* describe Yhwh’s “marriage” to Jerusalem.²⁶ The translation of ותהיי לי in Ezek 16:8 as “And you became mine” is unproblematic; the sequence of narrated events depicts Jerusalem moving from an unmarried state to a married state. Similar examples can easily be adduced: Gen 24:67; Judg 14:20; Ruth 4:13.

But does the construction הִיא לְ always have the same function everywhere it occurs? Wilson notes that “It has been established in grammars of CH that the verb *hyh* plus the inseparable preposition *lamed* prefixed to the complement indicates the inchoative aspect of *becoming*.”²⁷ But there are actually *two* factors to account for in this construction: first, the fact that הִיא can be used to refer to a state of being as well as to the onset of a state of being; and second, the fact that the לְ preposition can be used to indicate possession as well as transition into a state. So while the statement ויהיו לתנינם (Exod 7:12) means “and they became snakes,” the statement ותהיי לי (Ezek 16:8) does not mean “and you became me”; it means “and you entered into a state of belonging to me.” Moreover, the verb הִיא can be used to refer to states of being without reference to their onset, and in such cases the לְ preposition can be used to designate possession rather than transition.²⁸ For example, ולוֹרֵהִיא בֶן (1 Sam 9:2) refers to the fact that Kish had a son named Saul, not to the inception of the state of fatherhood. The statement לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים (Exod 20:3) prohibits the condition of having deities other than Yhwh; it does not refer to the inception of an event in which other deities are adopted. Similarly, ויהיוֹ שְׁלֹשִׁים בָּנִים (Judg 10:4) refers to the fact that Jair had thirty sons (since it seems unlikely that one could beget thirty sons at a single point in time). And ותהינה לְצִלְפַּחַד (1 Chr 7:15) refers to the fact that daughters belonged to Zelophehad, not to the onset of his state of fatherhood.

What this means for the analysis of Ezek 23:4 is that ותהיינה לי can mean “and they *were* mine” (referring to the fact of the sisters’ married state) rather than “and they *became* mine” (referring to the onset of their married state). But if this is the sense, and if Ezek 23:3 does not refer to Israel’s stay in Egypt before the exodus but to Samaria’s and Jerusalem’s diplomatic negotiations in Egypt, then there is no reason to regard the contents of v. 3 and v. 4 as temporally

26 This “marriage” (the date of which is not specified in the context) is identified by Allen as the election of Jerusalem under David; see Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 238.

27 Wilson, *Copular Sentences*, 82. See also Blau, *Biblical Hebrew*, 90: “If *hāyā* does not denote mere being, but rather becoming, the predicate may be introduced by *lā*”; cf. BDB s.v. הִיא II.2.h.

28 See BDB s.v. הִיא III.4.d(c).

sequential events.²⁹ If there is a temporal sequence at all, it is between v. 2 (in which the reference to “one mother” and her “two daughters” recalls the rise of two polities in the North and South) and v. 3 (the immediate attempts by these polities to secure alliances with Egypt).

4 The Choice of Vocabulary in Ezek 23:3–4

At this point one might ask: why would the phrase “in Egypt” in Ezek 23:3 have a different temporal reference than the phrase “in the land of Egypt” in Ezek 20:5? What is the logic dictating the choice of words in Ezek 23:3–4? It seems to me that in this case the selection of locutions in Ezek 23:3–4 is motivated by multiple strategies.

The first strategy has to do with the development of the argument at the local level in Ezek 23:1–27. The statement “they whored in Egypt” (v. 3) is essential for introducing the critique of current Judahite foreign policy (vv. 17–21, 27; cf. Ezek 17:15; 29:6–7, 16). The reference to “their youth” (v. 3) is needed on the one hand to depict the sisters as vulnerable to exploitation by the more politically experienced Egyptian empire, and on the other hand to depict the sisters’ continuous desire for foreign alliances as a lifestyle of inappropriate behaviour (vv. 8, 19, 21). The statement “they were mine” (v. 4) is necessary to depict the sisters’ “whoring” as unfaithfulness to Yhwh; this is used to justify Yhwh’s harsh responses (vv. 9, 13, 18, 22, 24, 25, 27). Finally, the statement “they bore sons and daughters” (v. 4) is juxtaposed to the preceding clause to suggest that these children were metaphorically “begotten” on the sisters by Yhwh. These “sons and daughters” are the citizens of the two cities—a detail picked up in vv. 10, 25 in the descriptions of the deportations when the cities were invaded.

The second strategy behind the selection of vocabulary in vv. 3–4 is part of a larger technique of repetition (often with variation) in the book of Ezekiel. We can see this technique in, e.g., the repeated descriptions of Jerusalem as a pot (כִּיר, Ezek 11:3, 7, 11; 24:3–6, 11), an image used variously to depict the city as a habitation for the social elite, as a receptacle for victims of murder, and as a locus of judgment. Another example is the repetition of the word מִשְׁפָּטִים in Ezek 5:6–8, which occurs in rapid succession referring first to Yhwh’s legal decrees (v. 6, 7a), then to the customs of other nations (v. 7b), and then to the punishments that Yhwh would send on Jerusalem (v. 8). This repetition with

29 Understanding these verses as temporally sequential events leads Greenberg to claim that “they whored in Egypt” (v. 3) “does not entail breach of faith, since the girls are yet unmarried” (*Ezekiel 21–37*, 473).

variation encourages the reader to identify similarities and differences in arguments. On the one hand, chs. 20 and 23 are similar in that they both describe patterns of repeated unfaithful actions that begin in Egypt. On the other hand, the repeated references to “Egypt” in chs. 20 and 23 serve very different functions: in ch. 20 they are used to describe a “failed exodus” from Egypt and to create hope for a future successful “exodus” from Babylon, while in ch. 23 they are used to critique Jerusalem’s reliance on Egyptian military aid and describe an end to such reliance.

But the technique of repetition in Ezekiel also operates at the structural level, where it often serves to link adjacent or non-adjacent text-segments.³⁰ In this particular case, there are numerous locutions that occur in both chs. 16 and 23, some of which are the result of editorial coordination linking the chapters together.³¹ So the statement “they whored in Egypt” (ותזנינה במצרים, 23:3) not only has a function within ch. 23, but also serves as a link to Ezek 16:26 (ותזנין (אל-בני-מצרים), part of a section describing Jerusalem’s foreign alliances (16:23–29). The phrase “in their youth” (23:3) and the related statement “remembering the days of her youth” (23:19; cf. vv. 21, 27) recall the statement in 16:22, 43 that Jerusalem “did not remember the days of her youth.” The statement “and they were mine” (ותהיינה לי) in 23:4 is lexically similar to the statement “and you became mine” (ותהיי לי) in 16:8. Finally, the statement “and they bore sons and daughters” (23:4) recalls the statement in 16:20 about Jerusalem’s “sons and daughters, which you bore to me.” These are only a few examples of the connections between chs. 16 and 23.³²

5 Conclusion

In this essay I have made three arguments on Ezek 23:3–4: first, “in Egypt ... in their youth” (v. 3) does not refer to Israel’s time in Egypt before the exodus, but to the early stages of Samaria’s and Jerusalem’s political histories, when (according to Ezekiel) they entered into diplomatic negotiations with Egypt. Second, the statement ותהיינה לי (v. 4) should not be rendered “and they *became* mine” (referring to the event of marriage), but rather “and they *were* mine” (referring to the fact of marriage). Third, the reference to Egypt in v. 3 should

30 See Van Dyke Parunak, “Structural Studies.”

31 See Van Dyke Parunak, “Structural Studies,” 141–145; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 334, 480, 489.

32 Much of the language describing the invasion and violence against Jerusalem in ch. 23 also occurs in ch. 16 (v. 22 // 16:37; v. 24 // 16:41; v. 25 // 16:38, 42; v. 26 // 16:39; v. 27 // 16:41). Ezek 23:26 in particular has no antecedent in the earlier descriptions of the two sisters; it is taken verbatim from 16:39, and serves as a coordinating link to that chapter.

not be understood in light of ch. 20. Rather, the vocabulary used in vv. 3–4 has a function at the local level within the argument of Ezek 23:1–27, and also operates on a larger level as part of the editorial coordination of Ezek 16 and 23. The allegory in Ezek 23:1–27 can therefore be understood as a coherent critique of Judahite foreign policy, without any reference to traditions of Israel's origins in Egypt. The assumption that Ezek 23:3 simply repeats the sentiments of Ezek 20:5–8 cannot be sustained.

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