

The harlotry of Israel

The cities of Jerusalem and Samaria are metaphorically referred to as a harlots in the OT, is this language transferrable to the nation as a whole? This article hopes to demonstrate that the nation as a whole, as well as her constituent parts, can be described as a harlot.

The calling of Israel

The nation of Israel was delivered from Egypt and a covenant relationship was established at Sinai. This covenant relationship was akin to “marriage” and Yahweh says that he was a “husband” to them (Jer. 31:32). However, even before the “honeymoon” was over the nation committed adultery with the golden calf. Moses ground the calf to dust and made the nation drink the remains (Deut.9:21) in imitation of the “waters of jealousy” the test proscribed in the law for an unfaithful wife (Num.5:26). So from the very beginning the nation was adulterous; but can she be described as a harlot? The first woman is unfaithful to her husband and the second offers sex for hire.

The verb *zānā* and its related cognates (*zōnā*, “harlot”; *zēnūnim*, *zēnūt*, “harlotry”) refer to all forms of illicit sex between a man and a woman, whether that be professional prostitution (Tamar; Gen 38:15), freely offered sex outside marriage (Moabite women; Num 25:1) or marital unfaithfulness as in the metaphorical use of Israel “whoring after” other gods though betrothed to Yahweh (Ex 34:15-16; Lev 20:5-6; Deut 31:16).¹ Gary Hall states; “The most common and important usage of the root *znh* is metaphorical. Since it referred to illicit sex, especially in violation of a covenantal relationship (betrothal or marriage) it could be used to refer to covenantal unfaithfulness on Israel’s part, since this covenant came to be viewed as marriage (Hos. 2). This occurs in legal texts (Exod 34:15, 16; Lev 20:5), historical narrative (Judg 2:17; 8:27, 33; 1 Chron 5:25), and the Ps (73:27; 106:39). The prophets Hos, Jer, and Ezek exploit it to the fullest. The distinction between illicit sex and sex for hire is not clear in the metaphorical usage. The promiscuous wife (fornicator) is little different from the one who sells sex for a price. The promiscuous idolatry of Israel and Judah was like both, Israel was controlled by a promiscuous spirit (Hos 4:12; 5:4). She had sold sex for hire (2:5[7]). Judah was no better, waiting like a prostitute for her lovers along the road (Jer 3:1-3). The idolatry being attacked was the Canaanite cult that Israel and Judah had adopted. If the cult included sacred sex, then the power of the metaphor was grounded in real sexual misconduct as well (Hos 4:13-14)”²

Israel had therefore committed adultery and harlotry as becomes clear from the experiences of the prophet Hosea, who was instructed to marry a wife who was also a harlot.

The lewdness of Israel's youth

The prophet Ezekiel mentions “the lewdness of your youth” in connection with Egypt; “Yet she multiplied her harlotry in calling to remembrance the days of her youth, when she had played the harlot in the land of Egypt (v.19).... Thus you called to remembrance the lewdness of your

¹ J.M. Sprinkle, Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch, (eds., T. Desmond Alexander, David W. Baker, InterVarsity Press, Dowers Grove, Illinois; Leicester, England,2003),749

² Gary H. Hall, 2388 *znh* (harlot), in NIDOTTE vol. 1, (ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, paternoster press,1997: 1122-1125),1123

youth, When the Egyptians pressed your bosom because of your youthful breasts”. (Ezek.23:19, 21)

In this chapter (Ezek 23), the two capital cities of the nation are called harlots. Jerusalem was the capital of the southern tribes and Samaria of the northern tribes. The cities are called “sisters”; “Son of man, there were two women, the daughters of one mother. They committed harlotry in Egypt, they committed harlotry in their youth...” (Ezek 23:2-3). They are the “daughters of one mother” - - this allegory has the matriarchs of Israel in mind (Rachael and Leah) who were sisters and gave birth to the twelve tribes who “went down to Egypt”. It is quite obvious that the “cities” of Israel (Jerusalem/Samaria) had never gone down to Egypt...however, the forebears of the citizens of those cities...had come from Egypt....and committed harlotry in Egypt....and their descendants were still committing harlotry.

Christopher Berg sums it up succinctly when he says, “Ezekiel’s words disclose an overwhelming pessimism concerning the people’s capacity ever to choose rightly. For him, unlike Hosea (3.15) and Jeremiah (2.2-3), there never was a honeymoon period in Israel’s relation to Yahweh. Already during her time in Egypt (16.26; 20.8), as well as ever since, Israel has consistently chosen other gods in preference to Yahweh. Judah learned nothing from Yahweh’s punishment of the northern kingdom, only redoubling her own idolatry in the face of that experience (23.11)”.³ Erlandsson comments; “Once again it is emphasized how the Israelites were already playing the harlot in Egypt (*zānāh*, v.3), i.e., even before the marriage/covenant”.⁴

A wife of harlotry and children of harlotry

The prophet Hosea was instructed to act out an allegorical parable by marrying a prostitute. It seems that his wife continued her trade even while she was married thus conceiving “children of harlotry”. She was guilty of adultery *and* harlotry and became a fitting type of the nation who although redeemed from harlotry and made respectable⁵, continued to ply her trade and therefore added adultery to her sin.

It is sometimes argued that Hosea was only concerned with the northern tribes and Samaria and therefore the parable is not a commentary on the whole nation, but Francis I. Andersen observes; “Hosea’s messages mostly attack the northern kingdom (1.4), but Judah is frequently mentioned side by side with Ephraim and similarly condemned, especially in the all-important chps.4-8. Some scholars wish to delete the references to Judah as secondary additions, but such a revision would seriously injure the fabric of the whole book. The references to Jacob in the latter part of the book secure a complementary historical perspective that shows a concern for all Israel as the covenant people. It reaches deeply into the past and Judah could hardly be excluded from Jacob’s descendants. The reference to David in 3.5 likewise recalls the original unity of the people, and looks forward to its future restoration”.⁶

³ Christopher T. Berg, “Ezekiel” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, (ed., Bruce M. Metzger, Michael D. Coogan, Oxford University Press, 1993), 219

⁴ Erlandsson in *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, Volume IV*, (eds., G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry, W. B. Eerdmans, 1980 reprint 1997), 103

⁵ It is not unheard of for a harlot to marry and become a respectable wife. The example that springs to mind is that of faithful Rahab (Josh. 2:1; Matt.1:5). God was willing to overlook the nation’s youthful indiscretion but she did not mend her ways.

⁶ Francis I. Andersen, “Hosea” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, (eds., Bruce M. Metzger, Michael D. Coogan, Oxford University Press, 1993), 291

Jerusalem the OT harlot par excellence

There can be no doubt that the prophets (and therefore Yahweh) viewed the nation *as a whole* as a harlot. However, within this paradigm the city of Jerusalem held a special place. The reason for this is because she was the city chosen as Yahweh's dwelling place. The Temple was built in Jerusalem and the cult and the monarchy were centralised in that city. She was the capital of a united nation under a Davidic king. After succession Jerusalem still held a privileged position and faithful northern pilgrims would travel to Jerusalem for the feasts. Even the calf-idols of Jeroboam could not completely break the influence of Jerusalem on the political and religious life of the northern tribes.

Prior to the captivity of Judah the prophet Isaiah declared of Jerusalem; "How the faithful city has become a harlot! It was full of justice; Righteousness lodged in it, but now murderers" (Isa.1:21). The city of Jerusalem came from lowly origins (Ezek.16:3) but was elevated by Yahweh who made a covenant with her and cleansed her, yet she played the harlot (Ezek.16:15) and became spiritually like her 'sister' Sodom (vv. 46, 48, 49, 53, 55, 56). The description of the woman in Ezekiel 16 is based on the tabernacle in the wilderness. Yahweh clothed the city with badger skins (Ezek.16: 10; Ex.25: 5) a beautiful crown was put on her forehead (Ezek.28:36-38; Ezek.16:12).⁷ The linen curtains of the tabernacle were embroidered with blue, purple and scarlet (Ex.26: 1), the linen priestly garments, "*for glory and beauty*" were also embroidered with gold, blue, purple and scarlet (Ex.28: 2-5; Ezek.16: 13). The priests were "*decked with ornaments*" (the breastplate Ex.28: 15-29; Ezek.16: 11). In turn the wilderness tabernacle formed the template for the Sanctuary built by Solomon at Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is depicted as a woman clothed with finery bearing a priestly crown on her head, yet she commits fornication with the surrounding nations. Her fornication was not only syncretistic but political. The city of Jerusalem is therefore particularly singled out for opprobrium because of her special status as Yahweh's dwelling place. A sexually loose daughter of a priest was subject to being "burned with fire" (Lev.21:9 cf. Gen. 38:24; Judg. 15:6) because her uncleanness defiled her father. The city of Jerusalem suffered this fate twice in her history in BC 586 (Jer.52:13) and in AD 70 (cf. Matt.22:17; 2 Pet.3:10).⁸

Jerusalem in the NT

The city of Jerusalem is roundly condemned for her unfaithfulness by Christ; "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under *her* wings, but you were not willing! (Matt.23:37). Jesus encouraged the current Jerusalem generation to, "Fill up...the measure of your fathers' guilt" (v.32) and predicted that they would persecute and kill the NT prophets, wise men and scribes that he would send to them (v.34). Indeed we know of the death of Stephen, the martyrdom of James and the general persecution of the early ecclesia.

⁷ This "beautiful crown" bore the words HOLINESS TO THE LORD, and "*it shall be always upon his (Aaron's) forehead.*"

⁸ *War* 7.1 indicates that Titus gave orders for "the whole city and the temple to be razed to the ground." in *Ant* 20.250 Josephus states plainly that "Titus captured and set fire to the temple".

In the wilderness

After the fall of Judah and the burning of Jerusalem, the inhabitants were condemned, once again, to wandering in the “wilderness”. This was fitting because when Yahweh had brought them out of Egypt their rebelliousness had caused them to wander in the wilderness (Ezek.20:13). Yahweh would bring them into the “wilderness of the peoples” (Ezek.20:35) and they would experience banishment from the land and from the Sanctuary. The nation fulfilled the type of the scapegoat sent into the wilderness on the Day of Atonement.⁹ The glory of Yahweh had departed from the Sanctuary only to return in the person of Christ. However, this did not prevent the Jews from establishing their own glory. The prophet Zechariah received a vision of two unclean women (Jerusalem/Samaria) with the wings of storks carrying a basket containing a woman called “wickedness/lawlessness” to Shinar.¹⁰ The picture presented here is a parody of the Ark of the Covenant – instead of two “ox-faced” cherubim with the spirit in their eagle wings we have two women (representing Israel and Judah) with the ‘wind’¹¹ in their unclean stork wings. Instead of the gold covered mercy seat a lead weight, instead of the glory of God dwelling between the cherubim, a wicked woman called “lawlessness” in the “midst.” Moreover, the description vouchsafed to Zechariah is similar to Ezekiel, “He said moreover, this is their resemblance (Heb., *ayin* lit. ‘eye’) through all the earth.” (5:6 c.f. Ezek.10: 12; “and their wings, and the wheels, were full of eyes round about”) The two women are based on the matriarchs Rachel and Leah, “which two did build the house of Israel” (Ruth 4: 11), except now a different kind of house was being prepared.¹² The “base” that was established in Babylon would rival Yahweh’s Sanctuary - - for it was in Babylon of the first and second centuries AD that legalistic Judaism emerged, and it was there that the “oral law” was codified and the Babylonian Talmud written.

However, the wilderness was not only occupied by the generation of the wicked, it was also a place where the faithful were preserved. The faithful were Joshua and Caleb and the youngsters of that rebellious generation, they were the “good figs” of Jeremiah (24:5) - - so both good and bad shared the same initial fate. The wilderness became a place of banishment but also a place of preservation and hope.

Conclusion

Although Israel was a harlot in Egypt (from her youth), nevertheless Yahweh “married” her in the wilderness. She continued to play the harlot both in the wilderness and subsequently in the land. The city where Yahweh chose to dwell excelled at harlotry and persecuted and killed all

⁹ See the articles, The Scapegoat, Scapegoat Typology, The day of Atonement in *The Christadelphian eJournal of Biblical Interpretation*, Vol 1, No. 3, Third quarter 2007, (eds., A. Perry, P. Wyns, T. Gaston, J. Adey, D. Burke, Willow Publications, 2007)

¹⁰ See the article, “Wickedness in Shinar” in *The Christadelphian eJournal of Biblical Interpretation*, Vol 4, No. 1, First quarter 2010, (eds., A. Perry, P. Wyns, T. Gaston, J. Adey, D. Burke, Willow Publications, 2010)

¹¹ The meaning of the Hebrew word *ruwach* is to be deduced from the context. The main idea running through all the passages is that of invisible force. It is variously translated as either wind or spirit.

¹² The “two sisters” (based on Rachel and Leah) form the archetype for Ezekiel (Ezek 23: 1-3). Contrast the removal of iniquity in Zechariah with the removal of the glory in Ezekiel: “Then the glory of the LORD departed from off the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubims” (Ezek.10: 18). Rachel and Leah “built the house of Israel” (Ruth 4:11).

who were sent to warn her. For this reason she was consigned once again to the “wilderness” a place of punishment for the wicked and preservation for a faithful remnant (this remnant accepted the New Covenant when Christ appeared). However, the wicked were not repentant and established a “base” in the wilderness (Babylon). Jesus warned; “When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none (the scapegoat released in the wilderness on the Day of Atonement). Then he says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when he comes, he finds *it* empty, swept, and put in order (Jewish homes were swept clean at Passover - - Jesus cleansed the Temple at Passover). Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last *state* of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation.”

The Jews returned from their exile in “dry places” (Babylon) but despite Yahweh/Jesus cleansing the ‘house’ they committed even greater harlotry which caused them to be sent away yet again (AD 70) into the “wilderness of the peoples”. Once again, after harsh treatment and an even longer exile, they have been regathered to the land, and yet the chosen nation continues to play the harlot; “How degenerate is your heart!” says the Lord GOD, “seeing you do all these *things*, the deeds of a brazen harlot”. (Ezek.16:30)